

1 SCREAMS AGAINST SILENCE

SILENCE HELD SWAY OVER the Halls of the Dead. It extended from the pomegranate groves that welcomed all travelers, living or dead, all the way to the fields of asphodel beyond the palace proper. When it was broken—which was more rarely than most people would assume—it was quick to cover the cracks, restoring them to perfect quiet.

But despite the silence, and despite the name the place had chosen for itself, the Halls of the Dead were very much alive. The trees in the pomegranate groves put forth green leaves and new fruit, and they never bowed their heads to winter; instead, they were somehow caught in an endless cycle of growth and harvest, flowers budding even as the ripe pomegranates fell to the grass and scattered garnet seeds in all directions. If anything, they were more alive than their counterparts in the supposedly realer worlds from which their travelers came, and their fruits were tartly sweet in a way that left no need for augmentation or accessory. One of their pomegranates was a full meal unto itself, and could satisfy any hunger.

The flowers in the fields of asphodel were much the same. They blossomed and withered, only to be immediately replaced by fresh, sweet-scented buds, their petals forever straining to reach the sky. Their perfume could cure any mortal ill, heal any wound, and the physicians of a thousand worlds would kill for a single petal. The Halls of the Dead

were bursting with so much life that it seemed they must split their seams, overflow their foundations, and pour through the Doors to every world that was.

Most damning in the eyes of the unfamiliar, however, were the living statues who attended on the Lord and Lady of the Dead—for make no mistake, all the life that filled the Halls did not cancel out the presence of the dead, who were a constant reminder that all life must one day end, and all flesh must one day decay. In the parts of the Halls most favored by the Lord and Lady, in the grounds where they walked together, the living statues stood.

They were the children of the Doors, the ones who had been lured to a place that masked its endless, teeming life in a shell of silence and serenity, and the Halls had given them the gift of stillness. Those who managed to make a home for themselves in the Halls did so by becoming so motionless that they appeared to have been carved from marble, assuming beautiful poses and holding them so absolutely that their very cells forgot the process of growing older. The living statues breathed perhaps once an hour, and this was twice as frequent as the beating of their hearts. When they ate, it was wafers of sugar slipped between their lips by attendants, or sponges soaked in pomegranate juice pressed to their mouths until the juice trickled down their throats without the need to swallow. When they slept, it was in elegant poses draped like lace around the bases of marble plinths, their arms and legs akimbo.

Some of the statues had been there for centuries, refining the art of their motionlessness. The Halls of the Dead had no real dangers, not the way some worlds did: no dragons to fight, no evil empires to bring low. What they had was time, and peace, and a place to be silent and still while you thought

your way through all the troubles of your life. Their greatest cruelty was also their greatest kindness, for many, when they finished thinking their way through everything that needed to be considered, would find that the lives they had left behind were decades in the past, their names added to the rolls of those lost to the danger of the Doors.

Nancy had been in the Halls of the Dead for years. She could hold herself so exquisitely still that her blood slowed in her veins, her breath stopped in her throat, and only her mind was left to race ahead, thinking as quickly as it ever had. She was one of the Lord of the Dead's most beloved statues, for she bent herself into beautiful shapes whenever she was given the word to move, finding new ways to angle her chin, to lift her arms, until she looked like she truly *was* carved of flawless marble, created by some unknown artisan's hand.

She had no regrets. Even in the moments when her mind trended toward the melancholy and memories of the friends she'd left behind in her world of origin, she had no regrets. Her time before the Halls had been fast and frantic, filled with people who wanted things from her that she was ill-equipped to give. Here, she had the time to consider the world in more depth, to truly understand herself, and she treasured that. In time, she thought, she might tire of it, and seek to go back to where she'd come from. Everyone she'd ever known would be long dead of old age by that point, and she would still be herself, exactly as she was now.

Somehow that thought was exhilarating, rather than terrifying. They had been so sure that she was dreaming of death when she said she wanted to go home, when she'd been dreaming of living all along. Living the better part of forever, unmoving and unbroken. Perfect, forever.

She was standing on her daytime plinth, one foot kicked

back so that only her toes touched the marble, the other foot flat and stable, giving her a firm base to rest upon. She had her eyes tilted toward the heavens, her chin canted ever so slightly upward, and her arms were raised as if she were going to embrace some descending companion, holding them close and safe when finally they reached her. She had been in that position for six hours, and would hold it for another four before the bell rang for evening positions and she adjusted herself into the appropriate pose.

Nancy had been contemplating her evening position for the last several hours. The evening position was the shortest of the poses, held for barely four hours. Evening was the time to try new things, experimental things, without the fear of overbalancing that could attend on trying new positions during the day. Most daytime positions began as evening experiments, tested in the short term before they were adopted in the long term. Nancy was very proud of the fact that three of her evening poses had spread through the other statues, becoming common sights during the day.

She did wonder, sometimes, what her friends back at school would think if they could walk the Halls and see the living statues bending themselves into silent mirrors of their own posture. Would Sumi recognize herself in the position that looked like the statue was tensing to jump, weight precariously balanced on toe tips and counterweighted by the long, elegant stretch of the arms? Would Jack know her own stiff, unyielding posture when it was divorced from her clever hands and sharp tongue?

Would it matter if they did? She was never going to see them again. Practicing and releasing their echoes was the closest she could come, and that would have to be good enough, because she had no regrets. None at all. She was sure, and she



would remain sure, for as long as the pomegranates fell, as long as the asphodel bloomed.

It would have been natural, when a scream split the silent air and echoed through the Halls, to turn toward the sound. The statues were preternaturally still and composed, but they were still human—most of them, the ones who had been human to begin with—and they could still have their attention caught by the unexpected. From her position atop the plinth, Nancy saw several of the statues wince or tense, the sudden tightness of their jaws and shoulders betraying their weakness.

Only the older statues remained perfectly composed, as if the sound of screaming were no more unusual than the bell for change of posture. Nancy was proud to count herself among their number, even as she felt her heart beat twice, all out of sync with what she had worked so hard to achieve.

The screaming was followed by the sound of running footsteps, bare flesh against marble floors, and Nancy wondered who was running, whether they were worried about falling, whether they feared attracting the attention of the ghosts who haunted the Halls.

The statues hadn't come about to please the Lord and Lady's whims. The practice had evolved, beginning with the first child whose Door had led them to the Halls, as a form of camouflage and self-protection. Because the Halls of the Dead were filled with life and the living, yes, but their name came from their original occupants.

The dead. Ghosts from a hundred worlds flowed through the Doors to haunt the Halls. Some of them were at peace with what had happened to them, silent shades who went voluntarily to cloistered chambers full of endless darkness stolen from the end of all things. They manifested there as dancing

motes of silver light, and lingered for a time, before they went back through the Doors to be reborn in some other world, some other time and place. Very few of those silver specks chose life on the same world twice in a row, and according to some of the oldest statues, if Nancy held her peace for long enough, she would see the same dancing motes over and over again, lost children who couldn't resist the call to adventure even long enough to rest. Those ghosts were harmless. They avoided contact with the living, and lingered only long enough to decide their next destinations.

But there were other ghosts. Angry ghosts who resented what had become of them, who thought they still belonged among the living—who hungered to return to what they had once been. They were mostly corralled, contained in special rooms carved not from void, but from the explosive birth of stars. In that crucible of birth and destruction, they could be reforged into something kinder, something less all-consuming.

When those ghosts ran free, the living died. They were attracted to life, heat . . . motion. All the things possessed by the living, all those things tamed and controlled by the statues, who had trained their bodies to mimic not death but inanimation.

The first statue had been a traveler who, when they saw their companions cut down and devoured by the dead, had frozen rather than fleeing for their own life. The dead had swept over and around that long-gone guest in the Halls of the Dead, leaving them unharmed, and the Lord and Lady had seen a way to protect the children who stumbled through the Doors and into their care. To protect them, and to honor their need for the quiet of the Halls, the pair taught the children who followed to embrace the stillness. They became

sculptors of living statues, shaping and encouraging them, making their silence a barrier against the angry dead.

But now there was screaming in the Halls. It began with a single scream, rising to a terrible crescendo before it was cut abruptly off. There was a wet sound, a squelching horror, and the silence returned. Where it had been a warm, comfortable silence before, it was now echoing and terrible, like the pause before some great beast attacked.

Nancy reached for the stillness, forcing it through herself until her recalcitrant heart calmed and returned to its customary tempo, beating so slowly that any doctor would have declared her dead and gone. But she lived, as she had always lived, and she was not going to allow that condition to change, not if she had anything to say about it. She calmed herself, even as another scream rang out in the distance, and another after that, and another, until she could hear the rushing of an impossible wind in the pauses between the screaming, the susurrations of a million ghosts rushing through unsealed chambers.

The statue across from her slipped.

Not much; not enough to fall. His heel simply turned out of true, and he stumbled. He recovered his composure quickly, but the damage had been done, and as sweat broke out on his temples, the rushing sound drew closer, skirling around him like the autumn wind. Like the autumn wind, it was tinted with frost and with decay. It wrapped tight, and Nancy watched, absolutely still, as it brushed against his skin.

He screamed. The rushing grew louder, and he came apart in the impossible wind, dissolving into a fine mist of skin, blood, and bone that stained the white chiton he'd been wearing in an instant, leaving the now-tattered garment to drop discarded to the floor. Surprisingly little of the red mist fell

alongside it; most of the cloud that had been a living statue was carried away by the wind, whisked into the depths of the Halls.

Nancy watched the chiton fall, and did not move. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, and she did not move. One broke free and ran down her cheek, and for a moment, Nancy felt the phantom lick of the wind upon her own cheek. Then the sensation was gone, and the tear was falling, and she was alone.

Endlessly, absolutely alone.

2 WHEN WE'RE GONE

THE FIRST TIME NANCY had discovered the Door into the Halls of the Dead, it had been in the basement of the small suburban home she shared with her parents, tucked behind the washing machine, in a space that should have held only cobwebs and dust. She had pried it open with shaking fingers, sure that she was going to see nothing but the packed earth beneath the house, or possibly a long-forgotten root cellar—although that wouldn't explain how the door could appear out of nowhere, would it? Doors didn't simply snap into existence where they hadn't been the day before—and equally sure that if she didn't look, she would regret it forever.

But that door had opened on a grove of pomegranate trees, the grass lush around them and dotted with the jeweled husks of fallen fruit. Nancy had stepped through at once, and she'd been most of the way to the Halls proper before she heard the sound of a door closing far behind her.

When her conviction had later wavered, when she'd been less *sure* than her citizenship demanded, she had found herself stumbling through that same door, returned to the basement, returned to the silence beneath a house that had been feeling less like a home with every passing year, where she was expected to be a rainbow when what she wanted was to be elegant, and silent, and still. She had whirled around immediately, only to find the door was gone: there was only smooth concrete wall where it should have been.

She had started to scream at once, all her years of stillness falling away in the face of such impossible horror, and her parents had come thundering down the stairs, ready to confront the intruder in their basement. Only to discover their missing daughter in the middle of a meltdown, hysterical at first, then near-catatonic.

From there she had been sent off to what they called a boarding school but she knew was really just a glorified mental hospital for people who swore impossible things and refused to be swayed away from them. She'd been terrified when that happened, convinced that leaving the basement behind would mean she could never find her way home again.

But the school had turned out to be the best thing that could possibly have happened to her in a world of hot, fast creatures who moved like movement didn't matter, like it was something to be spent without thinking twice. At the school she had met other people who'd traveled the way she had, to worlds equally fantastic and impossible, and if none of them had truly appreciated the value of stillness, at least they'd been able to understand that it had mattered to *her*. At the school, she had found true friends and companions, and through the contrasts between her stories and theirs, she had been able to find her certainty. When the Door had opened again, this time in the basement beneath the school itself, she had been truly sure. She had been confident in her convictions, and she had never expected to come back.

No one else had been expecting her to return either, and her room had been given away with the start of the next term, becoming a comfortable home for a boy named Christopher Flores. He was stretched out on the bed with an anatomy textbook, idly twirling a bone flute between his fingers as he read. His eyes skimmed the pages with far more focus and

fascination than most people would have expected from a boy of his age, barely able to look away from the illustrations.

He was so focused that he didn't even seem to notice when a door opened out of a flat stretch of wall and Nancy stepped through. She froze when she saw him, going utterly still. The doorknob slipped through her fingers, allowing the door to slide smoothly closed.

The soft click of the door closing caught his attention enough that he glanced up. Catching sight of Nancy, he yelped and scrambled further upright on the bed, heels digging at the covers in his quest for traction. Both book and flute went flying, leaving him empty-handed and staring at her.

This is what Christopher saw: she was tall, thin, and achingly pale, the kind of pale that skirted the line between "natural" and "spectral." She was wearing a knee-length white chitoniskos, belted at the waist with a braided cord of white, silver, and pomegranate crimson. Her hair, which was braided severely back, was white except for five black streaks, like the echo of fingers, and a red ribbon that matched her belt was clasped around her throat. She looked at him, and she didn't move, not even enough to look like she was breathing.

His own breath caught in his throat like a stone, Christopher pushed himself fully upright before carefully swinging his feet around to the floor and standing up. He took a step toward her, clearly unsure whether she was really there or just an apparition come to interrupt his reading.

"Nancy?" he said, and his voice was soft and careful, the kind of voice he might have used on a frightened animal.

After a pause so long that he began to question whether or not he had actually spoken, Nancy nodded. It was barely a twitch, but compared to her previous stillness, it was everything.

Christopher took another step forward. “Nancy! I didn’t think— What are you doing— Why are you *here*?”

Nancy licked her lips—she had forgotten how *dry* the world could be, when you left the cool, comfortable Halls of the Dead—and answered, in a soft voice, “They were all dying. The Lady told me to run, and so I ran. I need help, Christopher, please.”

Christopher listened with absolute solemnity, only taking another step when she was finished. “Of course we’ll help you, Nancy. You’re always welcome here.”

This is what Nancy saw: a tall, skinny Latino boy with messy black hair and clear brown skin, wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and socks, having been raised too well to wear shoes in the bed. His long-fingered hands were empty, which she knew even after her long absence was wrong, making him seem incomplete. Indeed, as soon as her gaze flicked to his hands, his cheeks reddened and he hurried to retrieve his bone flute from the floor where it had fallen, caressing it in silent fingerings of songs no living soul could hear.

“I . . . How long has it been for you?”

“Long enough,” said Christopher, demurring slightly. “Hard to say with all the questing we’re not supposed to have been doing all this time. How long’s it been for you?”

“Years.” More than a decade spent standing in frozen contemplation of the universe. But from her last trip to the Halls of the Dead, Nancy knew that a year in that world would generally correspond to a month or less in this one. Time didn’t always run smoothly between realities, and that was before accounting for the way becoming a statue slowed and stopped a person’s rate of aging.

“Years,” he echoed. “And yet you came right back here. Were you that sure we’d all be waiting?” There was a challenge

in his tone, a regretful twist that told her how hurt he was that she'd assumed none of them would find their Doors back to their own far-flung homes.

"No," said Nancy. "I wasn't sure at all, only sure the school would still be here. That Miss West would still be teaching—or if she wasn't, that she would have found a successor. Someone who could keep the fires burning. A place like this . . . it feels like forever. And besides, I didn't have a choice. This was where the door I took to get back to the Halls of the Dead opened, so this is where the door that let me leave would be. If I get to go home again after this, then that would change where any future doors back to this world open. It's in and out at the same place, no matter where I am in the Halls when I step through."

"Huh," he said. "Efficient, I guess, although—didn't you tell me some of the statues stay there for hundreds of years? What would happen if you came back, and the Door was underground, or in the foundations of a building, or underwater?"

"I guess I'd be crushed, or I'd drown," said Nancy.

"Brutal," said Christopher approvingly.

Nancy didn't say anything, just waited for his next question. It was strange, being back in a world where people said what they thought as soon as they thought it. In the Halls of the Dead, a thought had to linger for weeks or even months before it would be judged worthy of sharing, in hushed tones after the evening bell had rung and they had all sunk into their night poses to sleep and refresh themselves for the day to come.

People thought it must be lonely, to be a statue, but it wasn't, oh, it was so far from loneliness. There was connection when the lights were out and the silence broke into a

hundred whispered conversations, everyone exchanging ideas that had matured enough to be worth loosing on the world. Nancy had found true friends in those nighttime whispers, people she would sorely miss if she never made it home again.

People she was no longer sure would survive long enough for her to return. It was fear for their well-being that put fire in her blood, that made it possible for her to move quickly enough for Christopher to see as she turned her head toward the stairs, looking to the door at their top, and asked, “Is Miss West still in charge?”

“Eleanor?” asked Christopher—needlessly, because they both knew who she meant. “She still pays the bills, yeah, but Kade manages most of the day-to-day operations anymore. She’s been stepping back a lot the last year or so, and he’s been stepping up.”

Nancy blinked, eyes flicking over Christopher. “I thought Kade was your age?”

“He is,” said Christopher. “I think he’s like eight months older, but that doesn’t really matter. No, we’re the same age, and he shouldn’t be doing any of this. He should be thinking about his future, what he wants to do, where he wants to go from here, but all his focus is on the school. It’s like he can’t let himself imagine anything else.”

“That’s not right.”

Nancy turned to face the stairs, the most she had moved since arriving in the basement. Christopher blinked, resisting the urge to rub his eyes. Watching her move was like watching some strange stop-motion film: there was something *wrong* about it. She wasn’t fluid or jerky, she was just . . . staccato, like she was made up of a million snapshots of motion rather than one smooth, continuous action.

It would fade with time. All the gifts of the Doors faded

with time, although some would always remain. Christopher's flute was a gift of the Doors, and he knew that if it ever lost its power, he would die in short order. Maybe Nancy's new way of moving was the same way. He didn't think so, though. Something about it felt more temporary than that, more like the afterimage left by a bright light shining in your eyes than an actual, material change.

"I should let her know what's happened," said Nancy. "I'm sorry to have interrupted you."

"Don't be," said Christopher. "I'm glad to see you, Nancy. I always liked you."

Not as much as Kade had liked her, and he wanted to be there to watch when the mild, often-taciturn older boy got his first look at the returned Nancy. It was fairly common knowledge among the older students that Kade had had a massive crush on Nancy by the time she'd vanished from the school—a crush that had been at least somewhat reciprocated.

He'd gotten over it, something that had to be easier to do when you knew that the girl of your dreams was off in another world with no intention of coming back. Christopher wouldn't know. The girl of *his* dreams was in another world, waiting for him to come home and join her forever. There had never been a moment's doubt in his mind that his Skeleton Girl would stay as faithful as he had, that she would know he'd find his way back to her. What was the point of crushes when you had perfection just on the other side of a Door?

The fact that once he went back to Mariposa, returning to *this* world would no longer be an option didn't really matter much to him. It was mostly other people who were bothered by the fact that once he found his Door, he intended to shed his skin as quickly as possible before he

could be banished again. To them, cutting his flesh away in order to exist as a living skeleton was a strange sort of suicide. To him, the word “living” was all that mattered.

Still, for the moment, he followed Nancy up the stairs to the hallway, watching her strangely disjointed motions with a critical air. How long would it take for this world to sand her rough edges away? Had she moved like this the first time she'd returned, or was this a function of how much longer she'd been gone this time, how much more practice she'd had at holding herself so still that even age couldn't catch her?

And would having the answers change anything?

Nancy reached the door at the top of the stairs, opened it, and stepped through, pausing to wait for Christopher to catch up with her. He did, smiling reassuringly as he eased the door to what was now his bedroom closed again.

He had a feeling the rule against quests was about to be broken once again.