



Nightcurse



Emma Hinds



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd., 1st Floor, The Liffey
Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 YC43

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Printed in the United States of America. For information, address
St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman

Family tree courtesy of Usborne Publishing

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Hinds, Emma author

Title: Nightcurse / Emma Hinds.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2026.

Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 13–18

Identifiers: LCCN 2026021957 | ISBN 9781250369550 hardcover

ISBN 9781250369567 ebook

Subjects: CYAC: Spirits | Shapeshifting | Blessing and cursing

Mystery and detective stories | Romance stories | LCGFT:

Romance fiction | Paranormal fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H568 Ni 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026021957>

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First Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

A decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, swirling lines that curve upwards and then downwards, resembling a stylized leaf or a calligraphic flourish.

The question they always ask is: *Do you remember it? Do you remember your last gasp of life and the first lurch of living death?* They imagine, I expect, the cinematic widening of eyes the moment air leaves the lungs or the violent reawakening inside a sealed coffin. Or perhaps the panicked scream of resurrection deep underground, the tumultuous battle to dig my way out of the earth.

Maybe they're right and that's exactly how it happened, but I don't recall. It's unusual for people like me not to remember, so I never tell anybody that. This is what I do remember.

The last lived day I remember was a normal one. It shines inside my head, that morning, full of the banality of existence: my mother cooking, my baby sister and I bickering, and all of Manchester on our doorstep. Spread out with its mills spewing their smoke up to the rain-gray sky and canal boats honking their horns. I was seventeen years old. I had a job to go to, a book to finish, a plan to go out to the river on the weekend with my friend Michael. I ate my breakfast looking out the small, smoky windows, hoping the weather would turn so when the weekend came, Michael and I could fish all day. I remember thinking of Michael.

My next remembrance is not of my death or the coffin, or

the earth or the scream underneath it. I was standing on top of my own grave under a ripe moon on Easter morning, my burial clothes muddy and splinters under my fingernails, trying to vomit up arsenic solution from my aching stomach.

They always ask if I remember my resurrection, but they never ask if it hurt. I have no pulse nor need for breath, so perhaps it's easier for them to assume that the walking dead no longer have to trouble ourselves with pain or heartbreak either.

I have been a revenant for 157 years and it has been my experience, dear reader, that this assumption is full of crap.

One



Time marks differently after death. That's the other one people are always asking about. *You don't need anything now that you're dead, so why do you eat? Why do you sleep?*

Sometimes, I want to say: *Why are you so nosy?*

It's like people imagine that as soon as you climbed out of the grave, you left your entire barometer for sensitivity behind. I can still tell when people are being invasive, thanks. As for the real answer . . . Well, it's more boring than people like it to be: it's habit. The ritual of tea, of biscuits, of lying down when the world is quiet, of groaning when the alarm goes off. It's habit that takes me out from my room, whistling my way down to the shared dining hall at NeverEnd for breakfast on a Monday morning in September.

The next thing they ask is: *Well, where do you live? What do you do all day, for eternity?* People are never more interested in your time than when you can no longer waste it. I live in a residential library called NeverEnd, located in Hope Valley in the Peak District. If I were in a fairy tale, it would be a magical library with moving bookshelves that never need dusting, but NeverEnd is

actually just a library *of* magic, run by the Merlin Foundation, who are in charge of all education for magic users (witches and shapeshifters) in the UK. Let's be clear: We don't *teach* magic here, there's no *witchcraft* going on (unless some students are doing it for a lark in the courtyard while vaping). Just loads and loads of books *about* magic and magical communities around the world—the spells, the history, the theory, the sociology—what is called witchlore. NeverEnd was built at the start of the twentieth century to house both the magical archives of the north and the northern revenants, of which I am one. Originally, we'd just look after the books and be a resource for the Merlin Foundation, but in this century we are connected to actual witchcraft colleges too. So we have witch student visitors, residential researchers, and staff members during term time.

I live here full-time with five other revenants, maintaining the library. This is what it means to be a revenant in our country. We're a pretty rare sort, about thirty of us spread out over the UK across the magical libraries. We are the protectors of witchlore, the archivists of magic. But NeverEnd isn't just my purpose, it's my home. NeverEnd is the only northern magical library and I've lived here since it was first built. It was decided this would be where I would be looked after by my mentor Barnabas and his wife Esther. For years before the library was brought into the magical colleges system, it was just the three of us, piles of books, and all that fresh red-brick facing. I know every nook and cranny; every dodgy back stair and creaky door is dear to my heart. Even if I had any choice in the matter, I can't think of a better place in which to spend eternity.

But as I rush down the stairs, I do have an unusual spring in my step. Today, I might be on the cusp of a new chapter that I am

extremely excited about. It's the first time in decades that I have looked forward to the first day of term.

Are they all like you, the other revenants? That's a question we eventually arrive at, usually accompanied by a dismissive glance over my suspenders and trousers, my gangly limbs and general dead-Victorian white-boy vibe. *What kind of people get resurrected?* Well, here the NeverEnd revenants are, having breakfast together on the first official day of term, a vastly different group of people all eager to avoid these uncomfortable questions.

"You're buoyant today, Emrys," Barnabas says to me as I slide into the seat next to my best friend, Tommy, who is dropping the first of three sugar cubes into his morning coffee.

"Yeah, suspiciously so," Tommy says. He knows I prefer Never-End during the holidays, when I'm not pestered by teenagers trying to understand the Dewey Decimal System. But this term, I'm hoping for something different.

"Just excited for the new manuscript," I say, which is a lie, but we *do* have a new manuscript in today. It seems to placate both Barnabas and Tommy. Barnabas Quaid is the head librarian at Never-End. He was nearly fifty lived years old, now he's nearly four *hundred* perished years old. He's from Yorkshire, was a Catholic cavalier, very devout and, I suspect, killed in one of the civil war skirmishes. But it's rude to ask a revenant how they died, so I'm not sure. He's white-skinned, gray-bearded, and sitting next to his wife, Esther, the archivist. She's about forty lived years old and about three hundred perished years; also Catholic and from Preston. She's got reddish-brown hair and permanently flushed pink cheeks. She and Barnabas are "married," or as married as two dead people can legally be. She shows affection through baked goods when we're feeling down.

The two of them supervise my bunch: the night children, the child revenants, eternal bloody teenagers. My best friend, Tommy Waddell (eighteen lived years, seventy-seven perished), a Black GI from New England who died in London in the Second World War. He still wears his hair in that military crew cut and has a magnificent smile. Because he's eighteen and technically an adult, he's the student support officer. Unlike Madeline and me, who can only be volunteers, he gets a salary and everything. Madeline Fallon (nearly eighteen lived years, 103 perished) is a deeply Caucasian Irish former nun. She wears her hair in a neat yellow bob and has an anxious ferrety face. Then there's me, Emrys Swift, barely seventeen lived years, 157 perished, born and died in Manchester, the youngest ever recorded British revenant. At least, I was, until June.

Sosa is on my other side, sixteen years old and only dead *three months*. Her dark brown hair is tied up in a haphazard ponytail that makes me think she's not slept. She usually likes to "do" her hair and face before coming to breakfast, but her light brown cheeks don't have any of that normal dusky glitter. This is not a good start to the day, and I wordlessly reach for the coffee, pouring her a cup. I've started to get the hang of her habits since July when she first arrived at NeverEnd and I was told my new responsibility was to induct her into our world. There hasn't been a child revenant resurrected since Madeline in 1918, and that was more than one hundred years ago. It's been quite a shake-up, let me tell you. I've been tasked with teaching Sosa all the witchlore she needs to know to be useful in the revenant community. I've never had to do it before. I've already put countless hours into it over the summer, but it's also the reason for my excitement today.

After decades of only being a poxy volunteer at the library, I've suggested to Barnabas that I could at least get a new title to go alongside my new responsibility. *New Revenant Tutor* has a nice ring to it. As a child revenant, there's really no career development open to me at NeverEnd. I can't get a degree and become a residential researcher. I can't have Tommy's job. It's volunteer or nothing. But now Sosa's arrived and there's *finally* a chance to be taken a little bit more seriously. Barnabas told me he'd let me know if I'm the new revenant tutor by the start of term. I throw him a sidelong glance, wondering if he'll make the announcement over breakfast, but his face is placid, watching Esther place a plate piled high with toasted crumpets in the middle of the table. Immediately, Madeline and Tommy dive forward but Tommy is quickest, nabbing the piping hot one first.

"The first shall be last." Madeline glares at him.

"And have the best crumpet," Tommy says, shoving it into his mouth. Jostling with Madeline is his daily entertainment, whereas she's my daily irritation.

"Eat slower, Tommy, the dead may still keep their manners," Esther says.

Tommy rolls his eyes and swallows resentfully while Madeline looks pleased with herself. She is what Esther calls "a devout young woman." Which is code for: She is the kind of person who tells you that putting too much syrup on your pancakes is gluttony. Sosa hasn't taken a crumpet.

"Will you eat some breakfast?" I ask, hoping for a big brotherly tone. She and I are still finding our footing, a balance between me being accidentally too bossy so she yells at me or being such a wimp that she walks all over me, as Tommy says. But I do like her, which is unusual for me. I find it hard to make friends, but she's

funny and irreverent. It's a nice change, finally having someone younger than me in the building.

"What will happen to me if I don't? What does it even mean for a *dead body* to starve?"

Her tone is heavy and sarcastic. Unfortunately, Barnabas has missed it and is taking her at her word.

"Your body does not *need* food to continue to exist, but food is about community, sharing time with one another, celebrating the fact that as revenants, we have been resurrected from the most extreme of demises," he says.

"I remember," Sosa mutters under her breath.

Unlike me, Sosa is haunted by her death. At the start of this year, she wandered out of the sea after she and her family died crossing the channel to seek asylum from Syria. I cannot imagine being Sosa. Getting resurrected is hard enough, but realizing that everyone you loved died and you somehow will continue to exist without them? It is unendurable. Most revenants have years and years to come to terms with their families aging and dying. Sosa lost everything in one fell swoop. She's so different from me and Tommy and Madeline, but she's one of the night children, so NeverEnd is where the Merlin Foundation have sent her. I *am* closer in lived years to her than any other revenant in the country, but I often feel like my experiences are completely irrelevant to her. I'm determined to be a good friend to her, at the very least.

"Maybe we should take our breakfast outside . . ." I suggest. She looks like a lecture from Barnabas is the last thing she needs.

"Madeline told me yesterday that we're revenants because it's God's will," Sosa announces to the table. I glare at Madeline, who is eating her toast like a superior little squirrel. Madeline has been noticeably sniffy about the fact I was picked to look after Sosa;

after all, she and I both died at seventeen. Perhaps it's also her background in holy orders but she has a very strong opinion that Sosa should be mentored by another girl. Clearly, she's decided it's her role to interfere.

"Did she?" I say, glaring at her. "What do you think, Sosa?"

Sosa comes from a Syrian Orthodox Christian family. Maybe Madeline expected to find agreement in Sosa for her views, but clearly not.

"I think it's *horrible*. Why would God choose *me* to be resurrected rather than my parents? How does anything I was brought up to believe make sense in this world? I grew up thinking magical creatures were for fairy stories. Then I walk out of the sea and it's not just a different country and different people. It's a *different reality*." As she speaks, Sosa's voice is becoming quieter, more tremulous. "Ghosts and hellhounds and selkies and *shapeshifters* . . ."

She bites her lip, tears threatening to fall. I'm furious with Madeline's lack of tact. Sosa's feelings are totally justified.

If you died and crawled out of your grave tomorrow, here's what you'd be most surprised by (aside from the actual bizarre fact of unexpected life after death). Firstly, that witches are the tip of the bloody iceberg. You'll have died in a world where witchcraft was a minor religion; unfashionable and laughable. When you think of British magic, you'll think of weird schools for people with shiny rings they say produce magic that mostly seems like funny little tricks better achieved with a practical gadget or a scientific method. Even in my time, witchcraft was seen as meager or passé. It was people twisting fingers into old spells that can barely light a candle, unable to stand up to the colossal, roaring industrial push of the scientific revolution. Like I did, you'll think that stories of shapeshifters and ghosts and revenants are for Halloween or

the Renaissance fair. You'll have died in a world where you know what is history and what is myth.

Then you will wake up in a world where magical creatures are not only real, but you are considered one of them. Even though you've known no other universe, no other way of being, you'll be told you're no longer human. Suddenly, you'll have to hide and live in the shadows. You'll be prevented from seeing your family or even telling them that you still exist because humans *can't* know that there's this whole secret system of unusual creatures. You'll be hidden away by the Merlin Foundation, a government group that not only accredits all the witch schools but also has oversight of all magical creatures; a national conspiracy that goes far beyond witches and now includes you too. If you're under eighteen when you're resurrected, you'll be watched. Because now you will never grow up, you will never be independent, you will always be a child. The people who ask us questions—*Do you remember it, why do you eat, who gets resurrected and why?*—they're magical already, they don't understand that, for us, the most pressing question is: *How in the hell was all this hidden from me for so long? How do I get out of this parallel universe and back into the one I remember?*

"I'm sorry. I'm not hungry," Sosa mumbles. She pushes back her chair. Barnabas is looking at me pointedly and I know he's expecting me to step up, to console Sosa in the same way he consoled me all those years ago when these same wretched questions fell from my own lips. Perhaps it's even a nonverbal hint that if I want a different role I might have to prove myself first. I excuse myself and catch up with her at the canteen door.

"Sosa, wait." I seize hold of her arm. "You're right. It's downright horrible to wake up in a parallel world with new systems and a new history to learn, and there's no *scientific* reason why

some humans are resurrected and not others. There's nothing you could have done to . . . to save them."

She nods, jaw tight, pulling her cuffs over her hands and folding her arms defensively. It amazes me that someone as spiritual as Madeline could be so bloody insensitive.

"I just . . . I want to understand it all, but it feels so random. I want to trust in the faith I know, but it all feels so distant and I'm stuck in this *dump*," Sosa mumbles, leaning her head against the door frame wearily. I'm hurt to hear her describing my home this way, but I try to be understanding. Though it makes me nervous that Sosa doesn't seem to be enjoying NeverEnd. I honestly don't know what will happen to her or where the Merlin Foundation will send her if she resists assimilating into a new life here. I don't even think anyone's considered that she might. Barnabas expects me to settle her in just like he settled me in here, but I *love* books. I always have done. So does Madeline (as long as they're religious) and Tommy is content feeling like he's part of an institution where he can make a difference. There's never been a revenant like Sosa here before, so modern and youthful and dissatisfied. Sosa was going to be a tennis player, she wanted to be an international star; it's one of the reasons she worked so hard on her English. What can a library offer her?

"I had an entire life and now it's gone. No, it's worse than gone," Sosa goes on. "It's *wasted*. I'm stuck here, I'll never grow up, I'll never play Wimbledon, I'll never get married, I'll never be any other version of myself but *this*."

It's something the adult revenants can't understand. Being stuck forever with all this unused potential. The Merlin Foundation calls us *night children* officially, but witches have their own names for us: *cursed children*, *nightcursed*.

"I know how you feel, but there will be other things," I say. "Different things."

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" She glares at me. "I'm not like *you*, Emrys. An eternal existence as part of a glorified zombie teen book club isn't going to be enough for me."

"Okay, keep your voice down," I say, nervously looking over my shoulder back toward Barnabas. I don't want him to think that I'm not looking after Sosa properly. He might change his mind and make Madeline the new revenant tutor. However, the problem isn't behind me, it's in front of me.

"Hey, Zombie Boy," calls a familiar, thoroughly irritating voice. "Miss me?"

Walking down the corridor toward us is my least favorite person to ever set foot in NeverEnd. Shapeshifter, necromancy researcher, and teenage nightmare Aubrey Vale.

It is probably inappropriate to respond with: *No, I did not miss you. I wish you had fallen down a hole to the center of the Earth.*

"Good morning," I say, and step aside to let him pass. Irritatingly, he pauses in the doorway, grinning at me. He is beautiful and it vexes me. He has dark wavy hair that hangs around jaw length and gives him a soft, troubled look when combined with the tall, lanky posture, the stubble on his olive-toned jaw, and a fashion sense that favors black leather and screams rebellious loner. In actual fact, he's an entitled posh boy from London who uses his shapeshifting powers to mess with me and loves nothing more than making me feel inferior.

"You didn't say if you missed me," he says.

I want to sigh and roll my eyes, but I hold it in. I have to at least try to be professional, especially with Barnabas close by.

"Oh, every single *second*," I say. "What do you want?"

He reaches into the pocket of his leather jacket, handing me a piece of paper.

"These books are all missing from the shelves," he says. "It's a problem."

He never says please, preferring to treat me like an amusing, pitiable intern. I glance at the titles: *Dead Bodie Divinity*, *Necromancie and Discoveries of Darkness*, and *Le Mort Magique*. Vale is only nineteen, which is much too young for a postdoctoral researcher from the Merlin Foundation, but apparently he's some kind of prodigy who finished his degree before his voice dropped. It makes him insufferable and I'm nearly 100 percent sure the books *are* on the shelves; he just hasn't looked properly.

"I'll see if they're in the archives," I say, sliding the paper in the pocket of my waistcoat. Sosa is staring between Vale and me, the most interested and engaged she has been all breakfast. I know she's waiting for me to introduce her, especially because I have definitely talked shit about him to her, but Vale beats me to it.

"Hi, I'm Aubrey Vale," he says, offering Sosa his hand. "You must be Sosa. I've heard so much about you."

"You *have*?" Sosa has lit up at this and I'm very annoyed that she might be—God forbid—*charmed* by Vale. What kind of spell do those hazel eyes cast that no one else is capable of seeing what a wanker he truly is?

"I have. I'm really looking forward to getting to know you this term."

I absolutely do not want Vale getting to know Sosa. What if they become friends and I have to spend time with him? Besides, being a necromancy researcher makes Vale impertinent. He's always bothering me with jokes and questions about being dead. It's crude at best and bloody enraging at worst.

“Sosa doesn’t need to know about necromancy,” I say. “I’m teaching her everything relevant to her as a revenant.”

I hope it’s a veiled enough *piss off* that he’ll disappear into the canteen but Vale’s grin just gets wider. The way it only does before he is certain he is going to do or say something that will incense me and delight him. I feel a swell of trepidation.

“That’s not what I heard. Maybe they haven’t told you yet,” he says. “I’m taking over Sosa’s lessons in witchlore this term. I’m the new revenant tutor.”

Two



“What?”

I shriek the word so loudly that all the talk in the canteen immediately stops. Both Barnabas and Esther are frowning, but I don’t seem to be able to modulate my voice: “What do you mean?”

“Do I need to spell it out?” He lifts his lanyard and points at the words printed there: *New Revenant Tutor*.

I cannot believe it. I don’t understand how this has happened, only that I have been betrayed. A rational person would perhaps go to Barnabas and begin polite inquiries into the potential change in their responsibilities. Regrettably, my rationality flees.

“You’re the new nothing of assholes!” I yell. “What are they *thinking*? I wouldn’t put you in charge of a bloody goldfish.”

“Emrys!” Sosa gapes at me, but her shock only pushes me on.

“*You*, a revenant tutor? What will you teach her? How to look down her nose at people and steal their tea?”

“Tea?” Sosa asks blankly.

“He stole my tea from the staff kitchen last year and then lied about it.”

“Nothing was ever proven,” says Vale with a smug grin.

“Emrys?” Barnabas has hurried over to us. “What on earth is going on?”

His bafflement merely adds fuel to the fire. How could he imagine, even for a second, that I would take any of this lying down? That I would simply accept him allowing the role I had suggested for myself to go to Vale?

“You know what’s going on. You’ve let *him*—” I point a shaky finger at Vale who merely raises his hand, a sardonic look on his face, as if he’s just been called on in a classroom—“take over Sosa’s lessons. That’s *my* job. You promised me.”

He didn’t promise me, in fact, but Barnabas *knows* how desperately I’ve longed to get away from being the volunteer who tidies up after annoying students and fills requests for snooty academics. The new revenant tutor role was *my* idea, my chance to have a new worthwhile position. And he’s given it to someone else.

“All right. We clearly need to have a discussion,” Barnabas says. “Come along to my office in five minutes. Will you join us, Aubrey?”

“Sure, let me grab a coffee. Got to fuel up. Big day, new job,” he says, waving his lanyard in front of my face. I fight the urge to choke him with it. Barnabas bustles away to his office and Vale swans off into the canteen, chuckling to himself.

“This isn’t happening,” I call after him. Everyone is staring at me. Tommy is giving me *What the hell?* eyebrows and I turn away, my cheeks reddening painfully.

“So *that’s* Aubrey Vale?” Sosa gives me a significant look, eyes boggling, that has become our shorthand for the outrageous in the last few months. “*Emrys*.”

“What?” I try to sound nonchalant, setting a quick pace along

the corridor toward Barnabas's office. "He's exactly as I described: petty, superior—"

"Um, *gorgeous*." She giggles. "Come on, don't lie, I'm not blind, you've got something going on with that guy, haven't you?"

"*Him?*" I choke out. "No, I *hate* him. I told you that."

"Yeah, but it *can't* all be about some stolen teabags. Why do you hate him so much?"

I could give so many answers but really, my hatred was fixed from our very first meeting. He turned up one year ago and our introduction pretty much went the worst it could possibly go.

"I'm Emrys Swift," I said, holding out a hand for him to shake. I'd been excited to learn that there was a prodigy coming to NeverEnd as a residential researcher from the Merlin Foundation. The older researchers always looked down on me as a child. The students who visited from colleges were barely better; they were closer to my age but immature and rude, always asking nasty questions about being dead. I had hoped that, perhaps, in Aubrey Vale, I might have an academic friend close enough to my age to enjoy my company, but mature enough to value me. As much as I loved Tommy, he didn't love learning about the history of witchlore the way I did. So I tried to be impressive. "I hear you will be researching ancient necromantic practices. That's fascinating."

He looked at my hand and grinned. He didn't take it, and I felt a flush of humiliation.

"You're the dead twelve-year-old," he said. "Harper said they let you help out up here. Cute."

"I am not cute," I snapped. "Nor am I twelve. I have been dead for one hundred and fifty-seven years."

"Sucks for you. That's a bloody long time not to be able to order a pint." He laughed. "And stuck in this backwater too."

I realized then that Aubrey Vale was a bitter combination of the worst

things about the people who visited NeverEnd. He had all the impropriety of the college students and all the superiority of the older researchers. He wasn't going to be my friend. He was going to be another person to dismiss me.

"NeverEnd isn't a backwater," I said coldly. "It's my home."

"Then I've got a secret for you." He leaned closer so his whisper ghosted my face. "Your home's shit."

I had never met anyone I hated more.

I can't recount this entirely to Sosa, so I settle for something more vague.

"He just . . . he's unkind to me."

Cruel nicknames—*Zombie Boy, Nosferatu, Vampire, the Walking Dead*—coupled with gloating remarks about how *important* his necromancy research is, has lit a fire of potent rage and envy inside me that will never burn out. Aubrey Vale has everything in life I might want. His postdoctoral research has "unlimited" funding, so he gets to spend his life reading and researching and being treated like a professional, despite his youth. Every living person I've ever met treats me like a joke.

"It seems like you give as good as you get," Sosa says. "You were *so* rude to him. I didn't even know you could be that rude. You're always so . . . controlled."

It's true that there is something about Aubrey Vale that lights a unique, furious blaze inside of me. Being belittled turns me into a porcupine.

"He started it," I say as we stop outside Barnabas's office. "*And* he took my job; a job he's done nothing to earn."

"Starting without me, are you?" Vale interrupts, striding along with a cup of coffee in hand. "At least save the declarations that I'm a wastrel or a cad for my face."

"What's a wastrel?" Sosa asks.

“No idea, but it’s the kind of insults dead Victorians use. Quick, slap me with a glove. Declare a duel.” He grins at me over the top of his coffee cup.

“I’m going to slap you with more than a glove, just you wait,” I declare.

The door to Barnabas’s office opens, but it’s not Barnabas standing in the doorway. It’s Harper, frowning at us. Clearly, there are going to be more staff at this meeting than I anticipated. I flush as red as a beetroot, because Harper is *intimidating*. He’s not an academic; he’s an administrator who was appointed by the Merlin Foundation about five years ago when they created the role Chancellor of NeverEnd. It seems like a fancy title for what presents itself as unending phone calls to the Foundation and trips to London. Harper is also a shapeshifter. This is something Sosa is still wrapping her head around—that witches who use their magic rings and intricate hand movements to create small spells and live in covens are *not* the only human magic users in the country. There are also shapeshifters, with whom witches have an ancient rivalry and a lot of prejudice against. Right now, Harper is moving his hands in a sequence, silver light emanating from his skin, so the post that has been left in his pigeonhole by the door flies into the office behind him like birds. Unlike witches, shapeshifters don’t need rings as conduits for their power; it leaks out of their skin, giving them the ability to cast spells with more power *and* assume other forms. This gives Harper an air of mystery and haughty authority that suits his job title. It’s difficult to tell how old he is, but his resting form seems to be around fifty years old, his light brown skin only creased a little around piercing gray eyes that flash from behind neat, black spectacles. His hairline has receded, but the hair itself is still thick and jaw length, dark brown speckled with gray.

“Mr. Swift, Aubrey,” he says. “Why don’t you both join us?”

“Good luck,” Sosa tells me before walking off back toward the canteen. I notice, however, that she shoots Vale a big smile as she leaves. *Traitor*.

Vale and I shuffle into the office, elbowing one another for space, and I’m surprised to find Doctor Toppings, the Head of Research, already inside. She’s a witch from Manchester. Beside me, I hear Vale’s slight exhalation of annoyance. He and Doctor Toppings did not make friends last year. I vindictively hope that she skewers him. Right on cue, she looks between Vale and Harper and says:

“Why is Mr. Vale being placed in a teaching role? He is a researcher, and this is a research institution, not a teaching college. Why is he getting involved when the revenants have always managed themselves?” She frowns, and I agree, nodding heartily.

“Sosa is the youngest revenant in Great Britain for over one hundred years, and it has been decided by the Merlin Foundation that some *current* youthful oversight is needed,” says Harper. I bristle at the word *current*.

“Youthful oversight is right; he is not even twenty years old,” Doctor Toppings protests. “I had misgivings about accepting him as a researcher here, but it was insisted upon—”

“You know that Aubrey was reallocated,” Harper corrects gently. That’s a pretty fancy way to say all of London got sick of him, which is what I have privately always assumed happened.

“*Reallocated*,” Doctor Toppings scoffs. “Reckless shapeshifters should not be around vulnerable young people, living or dead.”

Her voice breaks on the last word. Her daughter was killed over the summer in a magical accident with a young shapeshifter.

She seems to have decided that this is the fault of all young shape-shifters, making her hate Aubrey Vale with a visceral prejudice beyond my own venomous annoyance.

“Barnabas and I have agreed that Aubrey is the appropriate choice,” says Harper. Barnabas’s expression is slightly guarded as he catches my eye. I decide to direct my protestations at him.

“You chose me to look after her for a reason. It’s not like he can teach her witchcraft. Revenants can’t *do* magic, and I can teach Sosa any witchlore Vale can.”

“Yeah, but I have an actual degree,” Vale sneers. “And I was born in this century.”

Since I have no comeback for the latter, I’m left to protest the former.

“So? I’ve learned enough in my death for a dozen Demdike degrees. And the role was *my* idea in the first place.”

I expect Barnabas or Harper to check me; I’m surprised when it’s Doctor Toppings who gives me a withering look.

“You have been dead a long time, but you still act like a child, because you will never stop being a child. You have not finished maturing, and never will. You are not adequately equipped to teach others—and neither is a teenage shapeshifter.”

Witches like Doctor Toppings always seem ready to dole out judgment against nonwitches. I accept that my body will never change now; that I’m stuck forever in a mid-puberty which means I will never grow a damn beard and always have hair that leans toward too greasy, but I find it very hard to accept that these are the things that make all my experiences inadequate compared to Aubrey Vale. Doctor Toppings gets to her feet and brushes down her skirt before giving Harper a frustrated look.

"I know it is outside of my purview, but this is lunacy. Children are not teachers, and that little girl should be sent back to her own country."

I suck in my breath. The idea of sending Sosa back to the country her parents risked their lives to flee, with no family and no one to guide her into an unknown magical society, strikes me as profoundly cruel. Unlike witches who interact with the human world and often share knowledge across countries, revenants live in isolated, secretive communities. We wouldn't even know what Sosa was being sent back to. Barnabas stands up and says coldly:

"Your views are noted. Now, if everyone does not mind, I would like to speak with Emrys. Alone."

I know I'm in for it now. Barnabas dislikes airing dirty linen in public, as Esther calls it. I stare at the carpet until everyone has left and Barnabas has sat down in his big chair.

"I wish thou wouldst not have done that," Barnabas says.

Whenever we're alone, Barnabas talks to me like this, with the cadence of his voice from centuries ago, the familiar Yorkshire thees and thous that still exist in certain parts of the north today but remind me of the same voice he had when we first met. It usually makes me feel homey. Not today.

I want to respond: *I wish you'd stood up for me*, but instead I say:

"I wish you hadn't asked Vale to take over *my* responsibilities."

I refuse to let my voice slip into those warm cadences of speech. Barnabas's expression doesn't even flicker, but when he speaks, he's back to talking as if the others are still in the room.

"I was ready to give you the title and the responsibility. None of this was my choice; it came from the Merlin Foundation yesterday." Barnabas's voice is clipped. "But if someone else is taking over responsibility for Sosa, I'm glad it's Vale."

“Why? He knows *nothing* about our world.”

“Aubrey Vale comes from a family that is generationally entrenched in the Merlin Foundation. His influence could help us, and we may need help.” Barnabas touches a book on his desk and I see how much it hurts him to say this. “Harper has told me they are considering changing the use of NeverEnd. Making it a full-time residential college for postgraduate students, an extension of Demdike. Minimizing the revenant presence.”

This is not what I expected to hear when I came down to breakfast an hour ago. Helplessness spills down my body like a cold shower as I imagine being put in a car and driven away from NeverEnd forever, the same way I was driven away from Manchester after my resurrection. Taking my silence for acquiescence, Barnabas goes on.

“You wish to be treated as an adult, so here is the truth: Our place is not secure. Sosa’s arrival has been unprecedented. The last night-child resurrection in this country was Madeline, over one hundred years ago. You are all so rare and it has been so long, no one expected it. There are questions surrounding the suitability of our setup here to accommodate a modern night child and . . . Doctor Toppings’s views are shared by others.”

“They can’t seriously be thinking about sending her back?”

Barnabas shakes his head.

“It is more a critique of resources. In all my years here, no one has doubted the role we revenants have played at NeverEnd. Now I am being asked if running a foster home for ‘dead teenagers’ is really the best use of a magical library.”

The wave of disgust is so strong I can almost taste it. There are ten magical libraries in the UK staffed by revenants, but NeverEnd is the only library that was built with a *child* revenant in mind: me.

NeverEnd is one of a kind. Nowhere else would take all of us night children together; we'd be split up. The thought is like a splinter of wood thrust under my ribs.

"It's not a foster home, it's my only home. I've never even left the north. I don't *want* to be anywhere but here, with you. We're a family."

I can't stop the crack in my voice, but it's like a fissure running down the middle of me. Barnabas was the one who looked after me when I was resurrected. He was the one who persuaded a wealthy northern shapeshifter, Mr. Lander, to build NeverEnd out here in Hope Valley. He was the one who brought me here in 1904 and told me that NeverEnd would be a sanctuary for the revenants of the north of England, that it would be my home, forever. I never resented the idea that more revenants would come, even when they're like Madeline and drive me up the bloody wall. I willingly adapted when, in 1955, the library was accredited by the Merlin Foundation and the students started arriving and strangers filled the halls. Because Barnabas has always been here, with me. I never had a father in my lived years, but I've had the best possible substitute in my perished ones. The idea of losing the family I've built makes me breathless.

"Is there anything we can do to stop it?" I ask.

"We can impress the Merlin Foundation with our ability to adapt and embrace Sosa. You could generously work with Aubrey Vale to create a collaboration system in which our input is indispensable."

"So I'd be . . . his *assistant*?"

I feel like I want to vomit. I can't tell if it's because of the news I might be losing my home or the idea of Aubrey Vale bossing me around.

"You'd support him," Barnabas corrects, and I'm relieved; at least I don't have to run around after Vale's every whim. "If Harper can send a report at Christmas testifying to how successful your collaboration has been . . . Well, that will go a long way to securing a positive future for us all."

"So if I do that, they'll keep NeverEnd as it is? As our house?"

"It is what I pray for."

It's not a promise, and that breaks me, a little. It feels like we are careening toward a version of the future that is almost inevitable and this collaboration scheme is a hopelessly wild shot. But I have to try, don't I? NeverEnd is the only true home I've ever had.

"Okay. I'll do anything to save our home." I sniff back a tickling feeling in my throat, feeling like I am agreeing to jump off a cliff without a parachute. "I'll work with Aubrey Vale."

Barnabas's face is filled with such raw, open gratitude that I can't actually look at him. Barnabas is not a needy person. Barnabas is the one with all the answers. I stare at my boots.

"Thou art an answer to prayer, lad," he says. "Thank thee, dilly-down."

Barnabas is a careful man. I know he tries not to show favoritism or particular affection in front of Madeline and Tommy. I might have been the first child revenant under his care, but I haven't been the last. Yet I'm the only one he has a nickname for. The old term of endearment pains me, suddenly, as if my skin has been stripped off and I'm a hundred years younger. Just as scared and terrified of the future as I was when I clambered out of my grave. It's a sensation I have not missed, and I can't help my mind jumping to one angry, if irrational, conclusion: *This is all Aubrey Vale's fault.*