Deadhill

Rowena gazed into the valley, her arms folded and the shadow of her house falling around her. She watched a circle of four figures gathered outside the tavern, unable to hear their conversation. The largest form belonged to Overseer Witherall, but of the three he detained, only one was Rowena's lover. Even from this distance, Rowena could see Persephone's eyes spread wide. Every gesture of her slender hands pleaded innocence. From time to time, she looked to Charles or Roberr, but mostly she stared into the unmoving face of the overseer. Rowena did not understand what had happened, but it was serious. Persephone's face, usually a milky shade of lilac, had paled to a glowing bluish white. Her fear, constantly creeping toward terror, kept Rowena watching.

The deep, textured voice that slithered over her shoulder was even more unwelcome than usual. "Good evening, Miss Necroden."

Rowena's muscles tightened against her bones as Netheniel Corpsegame stepped up to her side. Her jaw slowly loosened enough to speak. "Good evening."

"I see you've noticed what's unfolding."

Rowena glanced at Netheniel. He hid his smugness well except for the curving corners of his lips. "I'm sure you've come to tell me the details."

"You don't want to know?"

Rowena remained silent. She didn't mind knowing unfortunate truths, but she preferred Netheniel leave her alone.

Netheniel stayed close and folded his arms as Rowena had. He joined her at gazing into the valley. "There was a fight at the bar." Netheniel paused and craned his neck to catch Rowena's reaction. "Temethy Bonebreak is dead."

Netheniel's movements were so purposeful and calculated. Rowena knew he had relished the thought of coming to talk to her. She gave the smallest reaction she could, smoothing her forehead and keeping her breathing even. She tried not to picture how young Temethy had been or what his family might suffer without him. In a feather-light monotone, she asked, "What was Persephone's part in this?"

Netheniel's eyebrows shot up, and Rowena realized her mistake. She should've asked about the Bonebreaks first, if they knew about Temethy's death and how they were coping with their loss. Instead, Rowena's preoccupation, even discussed so passively, fueled Netheniel's power over them all. He pounced with dripping sarcasm. "So you do care about her."

Rowena's chest ached, constricting her throat. If one of the two women cared less about the other, Persephone was the apathetic one, not her. "Who was responsible for Temethy's death?"

Netheniel wagged a dry, scarred finger at her. "Don't change your question. I'll answer the first one first. Persephone was merely a witness."

Rowena felt slight comfort in this but wished she didn't. She waited for a harder blow.

"Of course," Netheniel amended, "I mean she was merely a witness to the crime. That was the extent of her involvement as far as the overseer is concerned. The wind has it that Temethy was killed arguing with Charles Rottinggame for her."

Rowena betrayed herself, showing teeth at Netheniel's suggestion that Persephone was available to be argued for.

Netheniel rounded his mouth in feigned apology. "Did I say *for* her? Everybody knows she's taken by you. Perhaps it was simply an argument *about* her."

Rowena tried to concentrate on the group in the valley, but Netheniel's presence persisted. "Why did you come here? I would've learned what happened sooner or later."

"It's your duty to know. At the very least, the Bonebreaks will need comforting, and you'll be expected to keep peace. Unless you think you'll be too busy comforting the shaken Persephone."

Rowena snapped at him more sharply than she intended. "I always do my duty to this community."

Netheniel's smirk settled into satisfied grooves. He had finally gotten the reaction he was looking for. "I'm glad we can depend on you. I'll remind the Bonebreaks of that fact when I give them my condolences."