

THE NIGHT AFTER I LOST YOU

Do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you – Emily Brontë

Ash started at the sound of a step in the hall as if it was a gunshot fired. He had been sitting at his mother's bedside for more than an hour, hoping she would wake up and tell him what to do and fearing that she would wake up and tell him to get out.

His mother was lying with her face turned away from him. Her pale profile made her look like wax, like the graven image of someone already dead.

Dad had always said that she would understand, that a few deaths were a small price to pay for the greater good, that he and Ash together would help her understand, that she'd see it was all for the best and be proud.

Dad had said they would come back to the town they had left, bring the old ways of sorcerers given sacrifices as tribute, and rule it wisely.

His mother had certainly not understood that his father had killed one girl from Sorry-in-the-Vale, and that Ash had almost killed another before he chickened out. She'd lunged at his dad, and his dad had hit her, and she was... she hadn't woken up yet. But she would.

Ash did not know if he was hoping for her to wake up or dreading her waking up more. For now, though, she was helpless and he had to protect her. He went out to see who was coming toward his mother's bedroom.

Angela Montgomery was in the hall, shadows and her own long black hair wrapping around her. All that Ash could see was her face, which gave the

impression that she was a beautiful human Cheshire Cat, come not to smile but to look deeply disdainful of everything.

“Where are the others?” Ash asked.

“Holly’s still asleep,” Angela replied. “I assume your aunt and your mother are as well, but I haven’t checked because I don’t care. Your father has sneaked off somewhere, no doubt to plan further how to take over the town by murdering some of its inhabitants and getting superpowers. Can’t wait for the murdering or the evil superpowers, obviously. I don’t know where Kami is. I don’t know where Jared is. So I presume they are off somewhere doing romance, or deep emotional talks, or playing table tennis. I don’t want to inquire because I find their entire relationship weird and uncomfortable.”

“Oh,” said Ash. “Okay.”

“You and I are here standing in a hallway,” Angela proceeded remorselessly. “And I wanted to say that I don’t want you to think that we have some kind of special bond because you rescued me. I know I owe you, and I’ll pay you back, but you would not believe how totally uninterested I am in being your damsel in distress.”

“It’s me who owes you,” Ash said. “And you rescued yourself.”

In truth, Ash hadn’t thought about Angela that way, not since he walked into the room that Kami called their newspaper headquarters searching for the girl his dad had told him to watch. He’d thought Angela, stretched out on the sofa like a grouchy centrefold, was Kami Glass for one breathless instant.

Then he’d been insulted before he even had time to regroup and take a breath, and he’d thought that oh no, he was going to let his father down. And

after that Angela had turned out not to be Angela, and he'd looked toward Kami's sweet, ready smile.

After that first moment... no.

Angela was a knockout who would knock you out for saying so. Ash had always wanted someone who would be kind to him, because kindness felt like approval or something close to it. Someone who would smile when they saw him, be easily pleased by him because he was so tired of people being disappointed. Someone who would be glad he was there.

Angela blinked as if she had been expecting him to say something else. Then she smiled as if conceding a great favor, and Ash found himself smiling back.

"But this doesn't mean that I want to be friends," Angela added. "I'm not going to forgive you for what you did to Kami."

What did I do to Kami? Ash found himself wondering, and then he remembered.

They had not even been at Aurimere yet. They had been in a hotel room in San Francisco with his strange new aunt and the cousin who looked at him like an enemy. He and his dad had been standing out on the balcony. Ash had been staring out at the bright dips and swoops of the bridge, the shapes suggesting birds made of light.

When he turned to the sound of his father's voice he saw his dad: his dad's big shoulders outlined against the night, in the faint light. His dad always looked as if he could be relied upon, as if he could bear anything.

“There’s a girl,” his father said. “Her last name’s Glass. Your aunt has got us all into a world of trouble, and accidentally got your cousin linked up with a source. I want you to find her, and find out everything you can about her. ”

A source. It was a word from old, old stories: when sorcerers like them had connected to living humans and had their power amplified ten times over, mirrored from the human and back to the sorcerer and back again a thousand times, like light.

Ash knew it was bad, because the same old stories told that sources were the ones in control. His mom had taught him to use the resources of nature instead: the weather, water and earth, anything that grew. His dad had taught him that one of the resources of nature was death: the death of animals and even the deaths of humans, those who were not sorcerers, who were lesser and born to serve.

At the same it was thrilling to hear the words. They were going back to Sorry-in-the-Vale, and all the old stories were coming true. There was a faint chill in the thought that Ash wasn’t the one the old stories were coming true for, that Ash was not the one who had more magic than anyone else.

“I know you’re always a big hit with the ladies,” said his dad, clapping a hand on his back and laughing as if they were friends, as if they were partners. “You can do it, right?”

But no, Jared didn’t have magic he could use or keep, Jared didn’t have anything special. Jared had a problem, and his father had chosen Ash to solve it.

“Of course I can.”

His dad had clapped him on the back and said: “Knew I could count on you, sport.”

Ash had felt pride burning in his chest so hot it seemed like he must be glowing. "Any time."

It had seemed worth it, then. It had seemed true, then.

But then he'd met Kami and Angela and Holly. They had treated him like a friend. Kami cared about doing what was right, and protecting other people, and she had never doubted that his interest in her was sincere, that he was a good person who could be trusted.

Ash had heard an expression once, 'fallen between two stools.' He'd fallen between two sides. He'd let absolutely everybody down.

Nobody was going to forgive him.

For Angela the dealbreaker was what he had done to Kami, and for Kami he suspected it would be what he had done to Angela.

He wondered what it would be like, to have someone who was always on your side. His parents always expected him to be on their side, and only Ash really knew that they were on different sides.

He looked at Angela walking away from him down the hall, and he couldn't silence the small voice that said: If you had just killed her, like your father wanted, everything would be all right, we would still be a family.

If you had just killed her. But he didn't wish that she was gone, or that he had hurt her. Somehow he wanted to have killed her, and have her be alive afterward.

He didn't want to be left alone. He hurried after Angela.

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Angela stopped dead in the hall and Ash almost plowed into her back. He caught himself, a hand on the stair rail, and looked at Angela, who was standing looking at Holly, who was standing looking at Angela. They seemed like a tableau in a play. Ash felt kind of like the guy who did lights, who nobody even realized was there.

“Oh, you’re awake,” said Angela. Her voice was a bit flat.

“Yes,” said Holly.

Angela was silent for four minutes. Ash looked at his watch and checked.

“Hi,” said Holly.

“Also hi,” said Angela.

“Did you guys have a fight?” Ash asked. “Not that it’s any of my business.”

“You’re right about that,” Angela snapped.

“Sorry,” said Ash.

Whatever was bothering the two of them, whatever either of them had done, he was sure that it would be all right between them soon. Angela really liked Holly, anybody could see that, and Angela hardly liked anybody. He doubted that anyone had tried to sacrifice anyone else. That was the sort of evil only he would commit. Any mistakes that any of them had made seemed like nothing in comparison.

“I’ve just remembered that I forgot something at home,” Holly announced.

“What’d you forget?”

“That I—have to go home,” said Holly, and she turned and departed abruptly, in a flurry of curls like a blond blizzard.

Ash thought it was weird and then dismissed it. Maybe Holly just didn’t want to be in Aurimere House any longer, with any of the murderous Lynburns

for a moment longer. Ash could hardly blame her. He wouldn't have wanted to be here if he had anywhere else to go, if he could escape his home and his family and his own stupid struggling self.

"Well, I have to find Kami and then... I kill your cousin with my bare hands," said Angela, with sudden unholy calm.

Ash turned around and looked in the same direction Angela was staring. Kami was walking from the library, her walk slow as if she was carrying something heavy, her small hands tucked into her sleeves as if she was cold.

It was he and Angela now who stood in a tableau, not facing but mirroring each other. Ash didn't have to look at Angela to know she was as stunned and disbelieving as he was.

Kami looked as he had never seen her look before. She had been crying, that much was clear: her face was swollen, tear tracks dried on her puffy cheeks, but her lip was set instead of wobbling. Her face was set, cold and determined. Her eyes were distant and hard when he was used to them dancing. She looked defeated, a castle stormed, torn down, and with no-one living inside. She looked like a hollowed out creature, only shell and no soul.

He wasn't vain enough to think that look on Kami's face had anything to do with him. He couldn't have hurt her like that. He knew who had.

His dumb cousin, who didn't know about being a sorcerer or even which fork to use, who had been held back a year at school, who could barely talk around the scar on his face. His cousin who Kami had turned him down flat for, as if she was able to see to Ash's heart and found him as utterly wanting as he had always feared he was.

Ash started toward her but Angela got there first, crossing the floor in two steps and grabbing Kami's hands. "Kami, oh my God. What did he do to you?"

"Who?" Kami said unconvincingly, putting her hand to her mouth as if reminding herself not to tell secrets. "Like, R-Rob, he didn't—he didn't do any worse to me than he did to you. You're the one—"

Her hands were shaking in Angela's, like paper birds shaken by every breath of air. Angela folded them carefully up against her own body, against the cashmere over her stomach.

"No, not Rob, obviously I meant the ruler of the mole people who welcomed you with honors to their underground kingdom," Angela sneered. "Or Jared. What did he do, what did he say, never mind you're not going to tell me and I've just remembered that I don't care." She bent and kissed Kami's cheek. The loving little gesture lost some of its sweetness when she straightened up and said: "Now let me just go rip Jared's head off and bury it in the flowerbeds, leaving his decapitated corpse to rot on the lawn, and we'll be gone."

"You have no business ripping off anybody's head," said Kami.

"Oh, it wouldn't be business," Angela murmured. "It would be a pleasure."

Kami smiled at that, tearstained cheek dimpling, and the smile seemed to give her strength.

"Jared's just been a jerk, he's not evil. We need to save your powers for battling evil some more. But for now, and I can't believe I'm actually telling you this, you need to rest. Come on, Madame Guillotine," said Kami. "Let's go home."

She slipped one hand free of Angela's and took Angela's other hand more firmly, swinging by her side so they would walk linked. She made for the door, and as she did she cut Ash a glance. He saw her half raise her hand, fingers

curled, as if to wave to him, and then she looked back to Angela. Her hand dropped.

Ash knew it was despicable of him to go for her weakness, but he had already done so much wrong and he was so desperate not to be alone. "Is there any message you want me to give to anyone?" he called after her.

Angela did not look around. Kami did, on the threshold of Aurimere House, the lights of the town below like starshine sieved in the night-darkness of her hair.

"Yes," said Kami. "You can tell Jared that if he wants to apologize he knows where to find me. If he doesn't want to apologize then he shouldn't bother."

She hesitated, and Ash realized suddenly that she had taken his offer for kindness. She gave him a smile which was too much effort for her to make and too much generosity for him to deserve, and waved to him after all. Ash wanted to keep the smile, press it in a book like a girl might with a flower, to take out and think of her beloved and remember how sweet it had once smelled. He wanted to ask Kami for another chance, and promise that he would not hurt her again. Even if that was an empty promise, in a world where it seemed everyone hurt everybody else.

The girls turned away, walking at the same pace for once, though Angela's long loose lazy stride and Kami's short quick energetic steps rarely matched up. Except for when it mattered, perhaps.

Ash saw Kami square her shoulders as she went, and knew if she was destroyed she would rebuild herself.

If his father knew how much he envied someone who was not a sorcerer in that moment, he would've been even more disappointed than he already was.

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He wasn't just envious. He felt inspired. He found himself leaving the hall, leaving the door the girls had all left through open, and walking up the steps, slowly at first and then starting to walk faster, to his cousin's room. They couldn't be Angela and Kami, couldn't have the bond they had built from years of mutual support, but they were both alone and perhaps they could be something to each other.

Jared had not wanted to be on Rob's side, any more than Ash had. They were both sorcerers, and neither of them had a source any longer. Neither of them had anyone, not really.

Ash went to Jared's room. He tapped on the door, and when there was no answer—Jared possibly hadn't heard about knocking on doors, he seemed ill informed about manners in general—he pushed gently and let the door swing open.

The room was as dark as a cave, the curtains drawn. Jared was crouched on his bed: Ash could barely see him, only the shape of him, looking about to spring, and his strange watchful eyes.

"So you found out Mom's gone," said Jared in a toneless voice.

"Gone! Gone where?"

The instant he said Ash realized how stupid it sounded, how naïve and utterly vulnerable. That was why he usually watched every word carefully.

Words were like bad lovers in it for the thrill: you either used words or they betrayed you.

Jared didn't say, 'to your father,' or, 'I'm sorry.' He did nothing to soften the blow, which proved that showing you were vulnerable never helped.

He looked at Ash and sneered: "Where d'you think?"

Ash looked away, not able to bear the weight of shame and his scorn, and then swallowed and looked back.

"I wanted to talk," said Ash.

"I don't want to talk," said Jared. "And I won't want to talk. Ever."

"Can we just—"

"Talk?" Jared asked. "All right, if you insist. Let's talk about the many definitions of the word no."

Jared was always mean and usually icy around Ash. A few times he had relented, still mean but smirking in a way that made him look more like a boy and less like a monster, or looking to Kami for approval and confirmation that he had not gone too far.

His fury did not feel boyish or even cold now. Ash felt, with Jared's eyes on him, as if he was balancing on a rope stretched over a fire, and fraying in the intense heat.

"Is this about Kami?" Ash asked.

Jared drew up one leg, leaned his arm against his knee and his head on his arm, as if he could not bear his own weight and had to have a moment's surcease, even if that meant showing weakness.

"Shut up," Jared said, muffled against his own arm.

“The girls are gone,” said Ash. “Guess they didn’t want to hang out with us anymore. Guess I can’t blame them.”

Jared lifted his head and glared. The whole room was so dark: the only thing that was clear were Jared’s cold, pale eyes, staring at Ash from out of the gloom. It felt like stumbling on some kind of creature, crouched in the shadows, and finding its eyes already fixed on you.

“Ash,” he said. “I’m begging you to *shut up*.”

“No—” said Ash, and drew his fingers through his hair and drew in a deep breath.

Jared uncurled from the bed, standing on the mattress, framed by red velvet curtains and snarling. “*Yes*.”

“I’m saying everything wrong,” said Ash. “I should-”

Rain began suddenly, rattling against the hidden windowpanes like stones abruptly thrown at them. Ash flinched. He was prepared to bet the rain came out of a clear sky.

“You don’t have unlimited magic anymore,” Ash said, hoping Jared had not seen him flinch. “If you use too much, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Good!” Jared shouted. “I want to be hurt. I want to be in so much pain I can’t think and I can’t remember why. That’s what I want. That’s all I want.”

Behind the curtains, red velvet like the ones on Jared’s bed, Ash heard the slam of the windows bursting open, heard them crack as they were flung out into the wind. The curtains billowed like sails in a storm at sea, sucked into the window and then flaring out into the room in a splash of sudden color, red banners lit by unearthly lightning that was not followed by thunder.

“Now get out.”

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Ash went back to his mother's bedroom because it seemed like there was nowhere else to go.

She was not there.

Ash froze for a moment, staring at the dented pillow, the moonlight lying where she had lain. Then he bolted for the first place he knew she would have gone when she woke up.

He could not stop himself thinking, the words tumbling over each other like children running too fast and falling down and into each other: what if she had gone to Dad, too? What if Dad had been right and once she'd had a chance to think about it she had understood, had known that sorcerers should rule the town as they were born to do, that a few deaths

The force of his own dread shocked him. He would have thought that if his mother had chosen to go with his father, the choice would've seemed clear. But Ash still couldn't be what his father wanted. He still didn't want--

His mother was standing in his Aunt Rosalind's room. Aunt Rosalind had made the bed before leaving, had smoothed her pillow. She had not taken all her clothes: the wardrobe door stood half open, well-worn long dresses peeking out from behind the door like timid ghosts. She had taken her jewelry, the perfume bottle she had kept on her dresser, and the heirloom golden combs inlaid with a pattern of leaves and bearing jewels for fruit that his mother had given her. Ash realized, and swallowed against the sickness the thought brought, that she'd

brought her pretty things, her best things, the things that women wanted when they had a man to impress. She had not left a note.

His mother had not flung herself on the bed sobbing. She had not even sat down. She was simply standing there, taking it all in. Her feet were bare, her blouse ruffled. Her clipped-up hair was coming down in little fair wisps around her face.

He wanted to say: "Mom, you're all right," wanted to be happy she was safe, but the look she gave him said very clearly that she did not want his affection or his concern, and that there was no chance of happiness for either of them tonight.

"She's gone again," Mom said.

Ash nodded mutely.

She had not looked at Ash for long. She looked to all the relics her sister had left behind her, eyes travelling over them, cataloguing them, as if she could find the place where she and her sister had gone wrong.

Ash had not met his aunt until he was seventeen, but he and his parents had spent his whole life searching for her across America. His aunt Rosalind had always symbolized a return to home, had been an image of hope and happiness. And now she was gone.

"When she left the first time, ran off with some man to have her baby in a foreign land far away from love, it took me so long to find her, because I kept looking in places where nature flourished. But she put herself in a city with tall towers where she could not see the sky, and metal to form a cage. She wanted to poison herself, and strip herself of power. She hates herself so much she wants to

crush herself out of existence, and she thinks that Rob is the one man who can do it. That's why she's gone to him."

His mother, Lillian Lynburn of a long line of Lynburn leaders, always spoke as if she was giving orders to an army. Her voice was clear, cold and her words once spoken seemed as if they were cut into the stone, made obvious truth forever. What she said was true, and those who she judged were condemned.

His mother fixed a steady gaze on him.

"You and I led my sister back into her first and last trap. The difference between us is that you knew what he was."

Ash opened his mouth, but that was when they heard the crashing, like thunder indoors.

His mother was in the hallway in a whisper of magic, standing in front of Ash with her hand on his wrist, warning, protective. She looked down the dark hallway, and Ash looked where she was looking.

There had been a black-framed mirror on the wall in the stone hall. It was broken, the pieces lying across the floor like shining crazy paving.

Thunder was still ringing through the house.

Lillian went running, her white bare feet over fragments of mirror that held the lethal shine of knives. She was not powerful enough, in her weakened state, to stop herself from being hurt, but she was still the sorcerer of Sorry-in-the-Vale, the ruler of Aurimere. He watched the long red gashes open along her skin and close as neatly as doors shutting, leaving only bloody footprints and the shards of mirror disturbed like shale on the beach. Ash's mother never let herself be hurt for long.

Ash ran after her, toward Jared's room with her.

The door stood open. Ash could see the open windows again, and he could see the broken glass from more mirrors than he had known were in Jared's room. They carpeted the room, carpeted the bed, in a dangerously glittering silver ocean.

Jared had learned from Ash's attempt to talk to him. Even as Mom rushed toward his door, the door slammed with a bang that echoed through the house. Mom fumbled with the handle and could not open the door.

Lillian laid her hand against the door, and then her cheek, as if she wanted to press her cheek against Jared's and this was the closest she could get. "Jared," she called. "Jared, come out. It's your Aunt Lillian. I know your mother's gone but I'm here, I won't go, I will stay with you always, and I'm—I'm so sorry. Jared, sweetheart, please."

There was no response.

"What is he doing in there?" Ash whispered.

Lillian wheeled on him. "He's getting things out of his system. He's fine."

"He's crazy!" Ash said.

"He broke some mirrors," said his mother. "He hasn't hurt anyone. You of all people should not judge him. All that time, I thought it was him killing girls, killing people in my town—in my town! But it was you and your father, creeping around and attacking my people, laughing at me behind my back."

"I wasn't laughing!"

"You've always thought you were above him," Lillian said to her son and heir, and her voice was ice. "But you've proved yourself wrong. Haven't you?"

“It’s not—” Ash said, and bit back the words ‘my fault,’ because he knew it was his fault. He had not been the victim. He had been the one with the knife.

“The way you talked about the people in Sorry-in-the-Vale, my people—you think you’re better than them, just like Dad does.

“Oh, so this is my fault?” his mother demanded. “I taught you to kill? Did I ever say anything like that to you in all my life?”

She hadn’t taught him to kill. Ash did not know quite how to say: you talked about people as if they were livestock, and that meant when Dad talked about killing them for our use it seemed reasonable.

“There is no excuse for what you did,” his mother said. “Please stop trying to make them.”

Ash thought but did not quite know how to say that there might be no excuses but there were explanations: that she did not have to act as if what he had done came out of nowhere, came from nothing but his own inherent weakness.

It sounded like another excuse, even in his head, so he did not say it.

His mother’s face was turned away from him, and after a time waiting outside Jared’s door she walked away, back to her own room. He heard the soft click of her door closing. Even though it was such a small sound, it seemed so final: like a full stop at the end of a sentence, the end of the story Ash had always told himself about his family.

Ash bent down and picked up something glittering at his feet, like unearthed treasure. It was not treasure, of course. It was a huge remnant of a mirror, savagely sharp. He had to handle it with care or he would have cut himself.

The sharp silver thing in his hand did not suit him any more than the golden knife he had held this morning. He put it down. He did not know, did not let himself know, why he had picked it up.

He slunk away. When he came back, because he kept coming back even when people had made it clear they didn't want him, the door was open and Ash felt a sudden burst of hope.

Jared was not in his room. Ash's mother was there, curled up on Jared's bed, a pillow in her arms. She was crying into it, crying so hard her shoulders shook, but Ash knew that she was using the pillow deliberately to silence herself. She had not come to his room. He knew that his sympathy would not be welcome.

He left, walking on the broken remains of mirrors as softly as he could. He passed a window and saw, outlined against the rain-slashed black sky, the silhouette of his cousin standing in the arched window of their golden bell-tower.

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Ash had gone out into the rain many times. During a rainstorm or a summer heatwave, his mother and father used to take him, each of them holding one hand, outside. They would all stand there and consume the excess power, laughing like rivers, dancing like the wind. Ash had always felt grateful to magic for the best part of his childhood.

There was power to be gained from everything natural: the wind in the trees, the falling rain, the unfurling of leaves in the sunlight. They could even

encourage the extremes of weather, help to create what strengthened them, but this was different.

This was rain summoned by magic, not a gift from the world but something savagely wrenched from the world by a sorcerer's power. This cost power, and would not give it.

Without magic, rain felt so cold. Ash dashed through the garden and into the belltower, and he was shivering violently as he climbed the stairs, stumbling in the darkness.

The rain was so heavy it reminded Ash of the destruction Jared had wreaked in the house below. Great silver shards seemed to be falling out of the dark, as if thousands of mirrors were being broken in the sky.

It was rain, it was nothing but rain. Jared could not do much else. He didn't have a source, and that meant he did not have any more power than Ash did himself. Ash steeled himself and refused to let himself flinch again.

"You're so lonely that you're even prepared to reach out to *me*," said Jared, spitting out the word 'me' as if he was talking about Ash touching. "That's pathetic."

"Is it as pathetic as talking about yourself as if you're the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone?"

"I could be the worst thing that ever happened to you," said Jared, and it sounded like a promise. "Just try me."

"I didn't come here to fight with you," Ash said. "I wanted to help you."

Jared looked at him then, and Ash was shocked by his expression: the enraged bewilderment on his face. He had the look of a wild animal in a trap,

who had never had help before and could not recognize it now as anything but another attack. He had the look of an animal who would die in that trap.

“It’s—nice that you pity me,” said Jared, chest shuddering with his deep despairing breaths, as if they were taken by a drowning man who had only briefly surfaced and expected not to surface again. “But it’s useless.”

His whole body was a tense line, poised on the very edge of the stone floor. Ash was scared for a moment. But Jared just stood there, hair a wet tangle of gold, looking off into the silver-streaked night.

“You can’t help me,” he said. “But don’t take it personally. Nobody can.”

Ash retreated then, to a safer distance. He felt as if had spent the entire night having people walk away from him or being forced to leave them, so he didn’t leave Jared.

He went and sat in the doorway to the belltower, at the top of the steps. It was dry there. He hugged his knees to his chest and he sat on the stone, and he waited for the rain to cease and for Jared to come home and sleep.

It was going to take a long time. It would give Ash plenty of time to think.

He was not the crazy Lynburn: he hadn’t been acting on impulse, he had worried about everything he had done, every step of the way.

He kept remembering bits and pieces, fragmented like all the broken mirrors. Angela chained by his father, presented to him as if she was a princess and he was a dragon. The weight and dull shine of the golden knife in his hand, his inheritance, the legacy left to him by all his ancestors. He had been born in red and gold, as royalty was born in purple.

But he hadn’t lifted the knife. He had not wanted to, and every time he thought about it and wanted to hate himself for his own weakness in not being

able to do it, he still had not brought himself to want it: not the knife back in his hand, not the death. He had felt so torn, wanted so many contradictory and conflicting things, but he didn't any more.

He was still sorry for all he'd done, but he wasn't sorry for what he hadn't done.

The realization didn't make Ash any less unhappy, but it calmed him. He felt as if there was a way forward. Since he knew what he wanted and what he didn't want, perhaps there was a chance to get back what he'd had. He could go to Kami perhaps, after he gave them a little time. Kami and her friends might forgive him. He was not going to be Jared, raging blindly and hurting everything and everyone, including himself. She was more likely to forgive than Lillian. He had charmed her once. He might be able to do it again.

Perhaps. But not tonight.

Ash shivered, chin on his arms, arms locked over his knees. There was no warmth or comfort to be found from the stone, or in his family. All he could do was fold in on himself.

Winter seemed to have fallen, as suddenly and finally as night sometimes did. And the three of them were all alone, every one of them alone, in this echoing manor with the cold rain coming down.