

“Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave

Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;

Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.

I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.”

~ from “Dirge Without Music” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

“To die will be an awfully big adventure.”

~J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Molly's Reaper Diary

Holy Crap, What Happened to My Life?

So, my ... um, friend gave me a diary for my sixteenth birthday because, apparently, it's a necromancer tradition. I guess he did some internet research and found an archaic reference, which is kinda cool. It's nice that he wanted to give me something meaningful, even if it was a book with a bunch of blank pages in it.

Anyway.

I'm glad he gave it to me. Because I want my life to mean something, and it's so weird now! The night I turned sixteen, everything changed. Big-time. And you know what? If this kind of crap happens to anyone else (and it will) then I figured they might need a real guidebook ... it's sorta like *Reaping for Dummies*.

Yeah. Reaping.

We'll get to that. But first, you gotta understand how everything started.

Here's a little history...

It is said that the Anubis fought a great earth-shattering battle with his uncle Set, the God of Chaos. Anubis's legacy was to rule the underworld and Set was all, "Nuh-huh. I want to rule the underworld."

So they had this huge freaking war. Set stole some of the reapers that Anubis was the boss of – and wow, did that piss him off! So then, the reapers were fighting each other and the humans were all, "What is this crap? Reapers suck!" And there were plagues and famine and people dying for no reason, and the reapers were too busy blasting each other to do their jobs.

It was a mondo-ick mess.

Finally, Anubis went deep into the underworld and got some bad-ass magic. We're talking magic so ancient and powerful, it wasn't supposed to leave the world of the gods, like, *ever*.

But he got it anyway and used it to capture Set. He imprisoned the god in the bowels (Seriously? Ew!) of the underworld, and then he banished all the disloyal reapers into this place that was like limbo, I guess, only way, way worse. And no one but Anubis can get there. Or something like that.

Anyway, Anubis was so upset about what went down, and he felt so bad about all the humans who'd been hurt, that he changed the rules about death and reaping and junk. (That's a god for you.)

He was like, "Sorry, humans, my bad. Here's some magic." Okay, it was *sorta* like that. He was worried that his reapers might get more ideas about mutiny or

whatever, so he split a reaper's power into five magical abilities, which matched the five parts of the soul. (Did you know there were five parts to a soul? Heka 101, peeps.)

And he bestowed these five *heka* gifts upon some fancy schmancy nobles because Anubis is a snob. Most gods are totally noses up, you know? That's what being immortal and all-powerful gets you.

So, he's like, "Hey, I'm giving each of you one of these gifts, and you can use them to control parts of being dead." It was like an end-of-the-war party gift for all the survivors. Here's the down-low:

Ka Heka - Re-animates dead bodies using a teeny tiny part of the soul called the *ka*.

(Pretty common ability these days.)

Ren Heka - Calls forth and communicates with earth-bound spirits. (Lots of necros can do this one, too.)

Sheut Heka - Creates and commands soul shadows. A soul shadow is sorta like peeling away the top layer of the soul. (This power is rare, and a total no-no. Anyone unlucky enough to be born with this ability is whisked away by the government. Well, that's what the Internet says, so it must be true.)

Ba Heka - Supposedly, *ba heka* necromancers can bind souls and keep them from entering the afterlife. (No one in modern times is known to have this gift. Or maybe they're hanging out with the *sheut hekas* in a government lab.)

Ib Heka - Sees into the heart of the soul, and knows the person's true worth.

(Necromancers who have this ability usually go crazy, or become hermits, or sometimes, they start cults. A few have been serial killers.) Very, very, veeeeery rarely, a

necro is born who has two gifts. The last one recorded was Leonardo Da Vinci. Explains a lot, right? No known human has ever had all five gifts. It's almost impossible, because a human with that kind of power couldn't handle it. They'd implode, or something.

Supposedly, Anubis watches all the humans who are born with *heka* gifts, and if they use their magic well and don't act like douchebags, then he offers them a reaper job after they die. It's like anyone who's born with death magic is training to be a reaper in the afterlife.

Just so we're clear, reapers are dead.

At least, they're supposed to be.

No one really knows how the whole reaper thing works, this is just the stuff they make us learn in *The History of Necromancy*, and it's called "theory" or "mythology" or "wasting an hour of my life every day."

These days, people use reaper powers to enslave ghosts, make zombies, and basically cash in. If Anubis doesn't like what humans ended up doing with those gifts ... well, he hasn't done anything about it. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he's down in the underworld having parties with gods and souls, and is all like, "Humans? What humans?"

Oh. And there's this really, really, *really* old wall relief in some temple in Egypt dedicated to Set that says, "He will break his bonds and rise again to take his revenge. Death will come to the world and the living will be no more."

Total suckitude.

“Necromancy has existed for as long as we have. Most historians agree, however, that it was the Egyptians who perfected the art of raising the dead. No other culture can boast that their zombies built such magnificent monuments. Consider the Temple of Karnak, the Sphinx, and the pyramids at Giza. All gifts from the children of Anubis.”

~History of Necromancy, Volume II

Chapter 1

“This is the third time!” groused Mrs. Woodbine. She slapped the arm onto the counter with a meaty thunk. I looked at the flabby, gray-skinned limb with its sausage-like fingers then at the jowl-faced woman who squinted at me through her bifocals. She wore a purple jogging suit that was too tight and amplified her chunky form. The top jacket was unzipped, revealing old-lady cleavage, which made me want to yark. Seriously. Wrinkled boobs were not pretty.

“Hello, Mrs. Woodbine,” I said. *Must. Resist. Sarcasm.* “I see Mr. Woodbine has lost another limb.”

Another Friday afternoon in hell, thank you. As usual, I’d come to work straight from school, which was only a couple blocks away on the other side of Warm Springs Road. Our house wasn’t too far away, either. We lived in a typical Las Vegas house (think beige, Spanish tiles, and zero-scaping) on Grimsby Avenue (ironic, right?), which

was on the other side of Green Valley High School. I worked for my dad, every afternoon and on the weekends. I got paid, which was good. But I also had less of social life than most girls my age. Try *no* social life.

Except for tomorrow. Finally, it was my sixteenth birthday, and I was having a big party. At least I hoped so. Lots of people had RSVPed, including Rick Widdenstock. Even though he was just a sophomore like me, he was the quarterback for the Green Valley High School Gators. Did I mention Rick's hotness? We'd been flirting for the last couple of weeks; yesterday *and* today, he sat with me at lunch. Gena and Becks, my two best friends, found other things to do, even though we always eat lunch together. That's why they're my best friends – because they know when to bail. And they don't even mind about all the zombie stuff. Most normal people are weirded out by my necro powers. Necros are all over the place, you know? But there's only a handful who attend my high school, and most of them are too dark and angsty for my taste. Plus, I don't look good with Kohl on my eyes and my nose is too cute to be pierced.

Mrs. Woodbine jerked on the leash she held in her free hand, which was attached to the neck of her husband, Mortimer. He shuffled to the counter, his empty gaze on the floor. Like most zombies, he looked gray and hollow-eyed. His clothes hung loosely on his thin frame. His gray hair stood up in stiff tufts and his skin was flaking. His lips were crusty; his teeth blackened. Had Mrs. Woodbine even bothered to skim the state-issued guide *The Care and Feeding of Your Zombie*? No wonder parts of her husband kept falling off. Sheesh!

We were required to give every new zombie owner the guide at the end of the four-hour course. Hmph. *The Moron's Guide to Not Getting Eaten by Your Zombie* might've suited Mrs. Woodbine better. Zombies required care. You had to comb their hair, cut their nails, oil their skin, brush their teeth, and give them weather-appropriate clothing and shoes. Even though I was a *ka heka* (zombie maker) in training and I knew zombies weren't really people (sorry, but they're not), I still felt a lurch of pity for the thing that used to be Mortimer Woodbine.

"It's the same limb," Mrs. Woodbine said. "Frankly, I'm tired of having to bring him down here. Big Al's low, low prices certainly don't translate to *quality* work."

I bristled. My dad, Alfonso Bartolucci, was what you call larger-than-life (though that's not the description some people would use). He owned and operates Big Al's Zomporium, and despite the cheesy name and Mrs. Woodbine's opinion, we were a decent operation. My mom had been a *ka heka*, too. She'd walked out on us when I was ten. After she left, Dad hired a guy named Demetrius to be the Zomporium's *ka heka*, and he was teaching me and Ally. Demetrius was a cool dude. He was as black as coffee grounds, old as dirt, and he still had a smear of Jamaican accent. I liked him a lot.

But the zombie-abusing Mrs. Woodbine? Not so much.

"Hel-lo!" Mrs. Woodbine screeched, snapping her fingers in front of my face. I blinked, my thoughts skittering, and resisted the urge to slap her hand away.

"Teenagers today! I swear to God! You're all worthless." She huffed at me, turkey neck quivering, as she poked the arm. "Did you hear me? This is the third time his damn arm has fallen off."

It ka-illlled me, but I smiled. "Let me see what we can do for you."

"I want a discount," she said, her flat brown gaze flashing with triumph. "A big one. You're lucky I don't call the Zombie Safety and Inspection Service on this place!"

You're lucky I don't whap your big stupid mouth with Mortimer's arm. I slid the pathetic limb off the counter then picked up the phone. I buzzed the cell of my sister, Ally, who was supposed to be organizing the storage room, but was probably making picket signs for Citizens for Zombie Rights. Ally and her friends had created the group last year after watching a Dateline exposé on zombie abuse.

She's such a dork.

"What?" she hissed.

Ally didn't care much about social graces, diplomacy, or keeping her mouth shut. That was why I was manning the customer care center and she was stuck rearranging all the crap in storage. I didn't necessarily like everyone who walked through the doors, but I knew how to be polite. Most of the time.

Ally sighed in that dramatic, *you're-making-my-brain-melt-with-your-stupidity* way that always drove me nuts. I wanted to ride her about making idiotic protest signs instead of stacking toilet paper, but I didn't dare misbehave in front of a customer. Not even cranky, gnarly ol' Mrs. Woodbine. Nona Gina had ears like a reaper and a rolling pin we called "lightning fury." Our grandmother was unafraid of whacking our butts with it. That was how she'd raised our dad, and he was *still* afraid of the rolling pin.

"Mrs. Woodbine has an issue with her zombie," I finally said. "Would you mind keeping her company while I take care of Mortimer?"

“That hag is back again?”

I smiled at the hag. “Yes. So, can you come up?”

“Gawd!” She snapped her phone shut.

A moment later she stomped out of the door situated behind the customer care desk. Her scowl zeroed in on Mrs. Woodbine. Ally was fourteen, tall and gangly, still flat-chested, and had braces, too. She had the best hair – long, silky chestnut waves with auburn highlights, but did she care? No. She also liked to wear baggy clothes in blah colors. Even though I would never admit it to her (not ever), one day she’d be gorgeous. Y’know, after she lost the metalwork, got some boobs, and developed some fashion sense.

“Mrs. Woodbine,” she said. Her voice held a hint of accusation. “Would you like some tea while Molly takes Mortimer for repairs?”

The woman was caught between reacting to my sister’s less-than-friendly tone and the seemingly polite question. Finally, Mrs. Woodbine nodded. “I would love some tea. Did your grandmother make any cookies?”

Sometimes I wondered if she broke Mortimer’s arm on purpose so she could chow down on the almond biscotti Nona baked fresh every day for customers. Luckily, my grandmother saved the *buccellati*--fig cookies--for us.

Ally gestured toward the seating area and Mrs. Woodbine hurried toward the side table that held dispensers filled with three kinds of herbal tea and two large platters of Nona’s treats.

I rounded the desk, holding poor Mortimer's arm, and then grasped the hand of the arm still attached. It was like gripping crusted leather. I felt another surge of anger at Mrs. Woodbine's poor zombie management skills. "C'mon, z-man. Let's get you fixed up."

We entered the same door my sister had flown out of, and she sent me a glare, and hissed, "Hurry!"

"Do you want to take the zombie to Demetrius?" I asked.

Ally eyed Mortimer, and I got the distinct feeling she was imagining some kind of jailbreak. Knowing her and her nutso friends, they probably had a plan for that kind of thing. "Never mind," I said. "I don't want to get grounded because you're planning zombie intervention."

"Whatevs. Just go already." She looked down her nose at me, and then she perched on the stool behind the customer care desk. Her glare tracked Mrs. Woodbine as the woman filled a plate with cookies.

I kinda hoped Ally would do something mean to Mrs. Woodbine, but even Ally had her limits on rudeness. Probably.

I took Mortimer down the hallway, which had one door on the left (employee bathroom), two on the right (supplies, storage), and one at the end (*sahnetjar*).

Sahnetjar was the ancient Egyptian name for the place where they made mummies and zombies. Necromancers still used the term today, probably because it sounded all fancy and mysterious.

As I led the zombie to the *sahnetjar*, I felt another pang of pity. I don't know why Mortimer hadn't put an Advance Zombification Directive into place. Lots of people had an AZD – and sometimes, their relatives would still try to zombify them. Dad read anyone the riot act who tried to circumvent an AZD – and sadly, a lot of people tried.

A memory pattered me like cold rain. I was in the lobby watching Ally color because I'd been directed to, "Look after your sister." Seemed like I was always watching her, and I was always caught between feeling protective and resentful. Pretty much the way I felt about my sister now.

Dad and Mom were arguing about a customer.

"You shouldn't have done that, Cyn. You know how I feel about AZDs."

"But he offered a fortune! And his wife's dead. Zombies don't have feelings, Al. She doesn't care."

"I do! We honor the wishes of the dying. You give his money back and you de-animate Mrs. Lettinger."

"You're such an asshole, Al!"

I missed my Mom. I probably shouldn't, given that she basically gave us all the finger and took off. What kind of mother abandoned her family? When I was ten, I figured it was something I had done. Something I said or did. I cried and cried, and so did Ally. Dad did everything he could to make us feel better. And then Nona left New York and came to live with us. Eventually, life got better.

Anyway.

I know my parents tried to keep their fighting away from us, but ... yeah, that didn't exactly work out. I remember that things were always tense, especially right before Mom left. So, I don't really miss what Ally calls the Angry Times.

Still. The thing that I remembered most about my mom was that she was spontaneous. I think my dad would call it irresponsible, but he's a lot on the serious side. Being a single dad is hard on him. He worries. Mom didn't let stuff bother her. She laughed a lot. And she'd do silly stuff like break out into random dancing, or a game of chase around the house, or sometimes, after I'd gone to bed, she'd crawl under the covers and wrap her arms around me and sing softly.

I don't know why she left. Dad didn't exactly know, either, so what could he tell two grieving daughters who'd been abruptly, inexplicably, abandoned?

Well, you know. Not that Dad doesn't crack a smile, or anything, he totally does. It's just different, I guess. Dad raised me and Ally – well, he and Nona did. It was good life, maybe a little stifling with all the rules about curfew, homework, job, and boys. Still. Dad taught me to whisper my prayers to the dead every night, whether they were zombies or not. Some souls choose to move into the next plane of existence, but some don't, you know. Souls can get trapped in this world. If you die, and you don't move on, then your soul remains bound to this plane and your spirit can be ... er, acquired.

Yeah. You can be attached to a SEER machine, which FYI, is way worse than being a zombie. Zombies are just animated corpses. We need only one teeny tiny part of the soul, the *ka*, to make that happen. A soul doesn't need the *ka*. It's like a spleen, or an appendix, or wisdom teeth. But if you're attached to a SEER machine, then your spirit

energy belongs eternally to whoever owns it. And if you think people are mean to zombies, you should see some of the stuff spirit slaves have to do. The worst part is that they're sentient energy. They know what's being asked of them, and they have to do it. At least zombies don't know when someone is demeaning them. Spirits have about the same kind of rights as zombies – as in, none. Courts keep ruling that death negates the civil rights of the previously alive. That goes for spirits and for corpses.

Any jerk can have a SEER machine and spirit slaves. But there's something worse than being stuck to a SEER. You could end up a soul shadow. I totally read about this on the Internet. A *sheut heka* can trap the soul, peel off the *sheut*, and ... ew, I know, right? A *sheut* is the darkest, most awful part of you, sliced away from morals, conscience, and empathy. So you're like zero-calorie evil, you know? That's why it's illegal. I don't know why there are laws and junk about it nowadays, because as far as I know, there aren't *sheut hekas* around. There haven't been for, like, *centuries*. I've never seen a *sheut*, but Dem says some exist. Leftovers from way back when there were *sheut hekas* all over the place. And he says that *sheuts* can only manifest in the darkness. *Shadows need shadows, Molly. Dark needs dark.*

Sometimes, Dem is weird.

Anyway ... like I said, a lot of people opted for an AZD and chose cremation. Signing a piece of paper saying you didn't want your corpse zombified didn't mean thieves wouldn't steal your freshly buried body. Black-market zombification was big business. Bodies were stolen, shipped off to crappy zombie-making factories, and then

sold to people who did not read literature regarding the humane care of the walking dead.

Zombies didn't have souls. Okay, *most* zombies didn't have souls. Every so often during a transition, a deadling would wake up with its memories, personality, and humanity intact. Probably because the *ka heka* messed up and put the whole soul back in, or something. Only, a dead body is still a dead body, you know what I mean? Yeah. Gives me the shivers, too. Even though necromancy has been around since forever, it was really the ancient Egyptians who figured out how to separate the soul into the *ib*, *sheut*, *ren*, *ba*, and *ka*. To make a zombie, you kept the *ka* inside the body and released the other parts to the afterlife. Only the *ka* was needed for re-animation.

It's kinda complicated.

Zombies work mundane jobs and understand simple commands; they don't need to sleep or to eat, either. Okay. They don't *need* to eat, but they love sticking things down their craw. They have unceasing hunger even though they don't require food. Part of raising the dead includes creating an appetite suppressant. That costs extra, and you gotta re-energize the magic annually, which was why some people choose zombie supplements instead of necro-incantations.

Not feeding a zombie isn't like not feeding your cat. He. Will. Eat. You. And your cat. People who forget to pick a case of Ghoul-AID sometimes don't live to regret it.

Capiché?

Finally! I reached the end of the hallway, which took forever because Mortimer wasn't exactly good at the walking thing. I unlocked the door, waited sixty years for the

zombie to shuffle inside, and locked the door again. When you're dealing with zombies, security is important.

We were standing in a tiny foyer. Calling it a foyer was stupid. It was just a little white room with a couple of plastic chairs. I let go of Mortimer's hand. This was the only way to get to the *sahnetjar*, and I still had another door to unlock.

"Stay here."

Zombies don't often respond, but when they do, they groan. I've never met one that can actually talk, although Demetrius says they exist. Sometimes, I think he likes yanking my chain. A talking zombie? For real? Yeah, right.

Mortimer stared at the ground, looking like the most pathetic zombie ever. I sighed as I headed toward the door at the other end of the room. I wasn't much for my sister's whole save-the-zombies effort, but I have to admit I wouldn't mind seeing Mortimer put to rest. I'd bet his wife ran him just as ragged when he was alive. At least now, he didn't know it.

I tucked poor Mortimer's leathery limb under the crook of my arm, pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the door that led to *sahnetjar*.

I heard a noise behind me. Startled, I turned and found Mortimer three inches away, his jaw cracking as his mouth opened impossibly wide. I dropped the keys (duh), backed against the door, and held out his severed arm like an old, bent sword.

Then Mortimer tried to eat me.