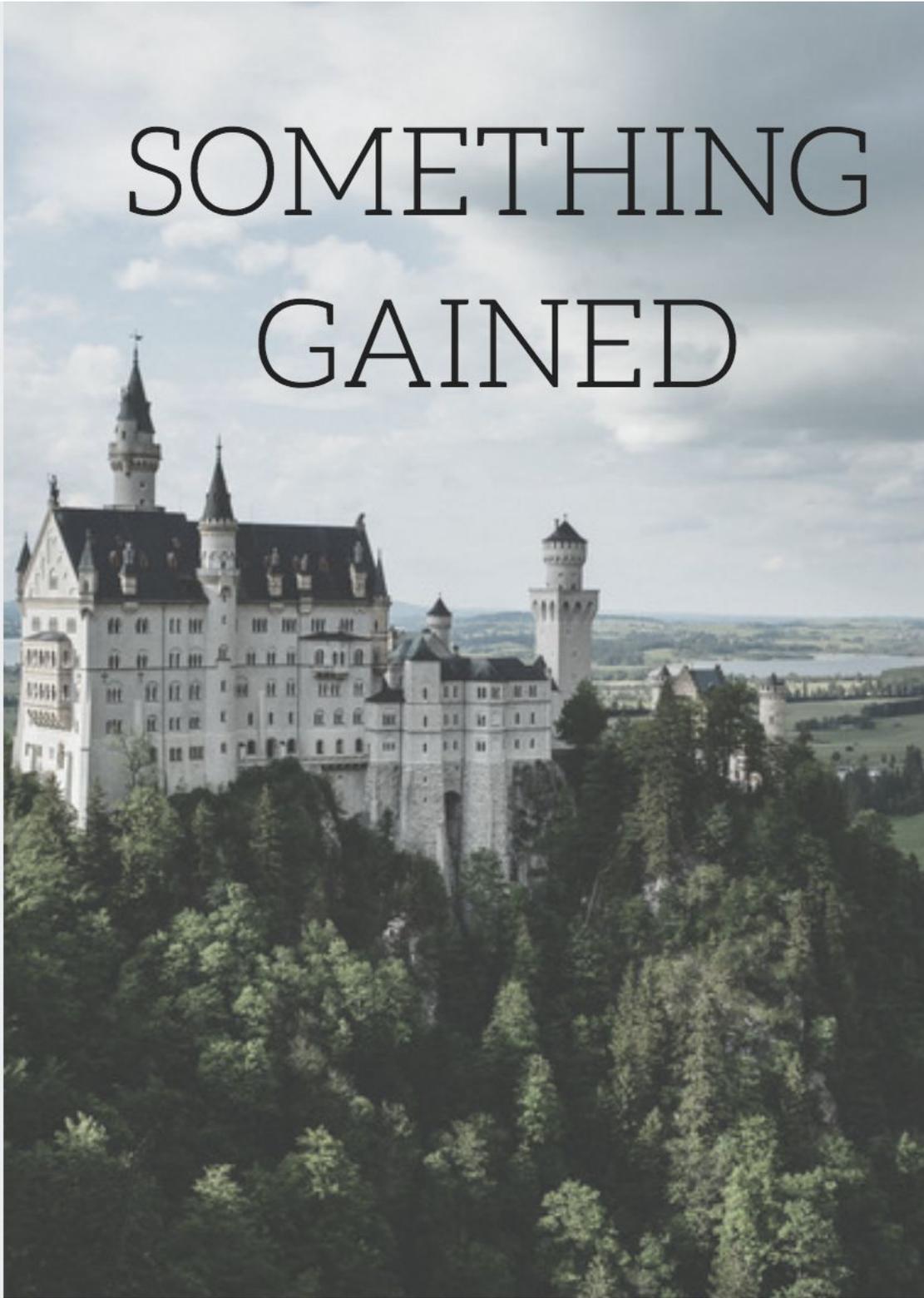


SOMETHING GAINED



Chapter 1

"Mum!" Erin screamed, backing into her bedside table. The wood was cold and rough against her back, loud whispers surrounded her. In front of her stood what appeared to be an army of the undead, and she could see right through them. She shook as they got closer, curling into a ball and listening to them repeat her name over and over.

"ERIN"

"ERIN"

"ERIN"

The voices were different, old women to young boys and anything in-between. "What do you want?! Why me?!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, clutching her raven-black hair in her hands. They didn't answer her, they only got closer; extending their arms out towards her. Their nails were cracked and worn-down, but some were manicured to perfection and shone in the light of her bedroom. They reached out to touch her, their fingers cold against her pale skin. Their touch felt sad, longing and scared; desperation soaking their bodies. Erin cried, feeling overwhelmed by their emotions. She always knew she was too empathetic, but this was more than she'd ever felt before. Her mother burst through the door and the ghosts disappeared, whooshing away with the wind. She wrapped her arms around Erin and she sobbed into her chest. "Do you see them too?" Erin asked desperately, rocking back and forth in her mother's arms.

"No." her mother sighed, eyes wide, "I think you need to go stay with grandma for a while."

"Grandma?!" Erin looked up at her mother, shocked, "I don't wanna go to England, I love Australia! Why do I have to fly to the other side of the world because of this?!" Erin's mother sighed, wiping her tears.

"You'll understand why once you get there." she spoke quietly, kissing Erin's forehead.

"Erin!" Erin's grandma spoke up, hitting her hands against the steering wheel. "it's your first day at a new school, you have to listen to what I'm saying or you won't know what to do!"

Erin jumped "Sorry, grandma." she looked through the windshield, staring at the castle in front of her. "This is a school?" she questioned, her grandma laughed, parking in front of the huge academy. "It is, it's also where you'll be living for the next few years." Erin sighed, overwhelmed.

"But don't worry," her grandma continued "I'll see you on Saturdays, and you can always call me."

Chapter 2

Walking into the academy, Erin looked around in awe at the medieval architecture. The castle-like building was set in the stone walls of the valley, a single road leading up to its iron gates. Moss clung to the ancient walls as if it were glued that way. The once proud turrets had somewhat crumbled, giving the impression of a disheveled party hat. Erin's thoughts were interrupted by a sweet voice.

"Hiya, Welcome to Silver Valley Academy!" the girl spoke. "My name is Rory and I am here to show you around." Her eyes twinkled pleasantly in the sunlight. She stood with grace and poise; her shoulders back and feet placed at a confident angle. She had a narrow, oblong face with protruding cheekbones and a pointy chin. Her eyes were a misty green, and her perfectly plucked eyebrows had a sharp arch that followed the slight curve of her eye. A small, defined nose stood above her smiling lips, which were tinted in a questionably dark red, an unsuccessful attempt to mask how thin they were. Her thick locks of curly hair were put up in a high ponytail, every wisp of red hair held back by countless amounts of bobby pins and clips. She started to walk, motioning Erin forward with a small nudge of her head. She strode with an air of confidence and took long strides, her smile warm and inviting; like a warm drink on a cold winter's day.

"This," Rory motioned. "Is your dorm. Your belongings have been placed on the bed and your school books and uniform are on your desk. I'll be back in 15 minutes to take you to your first class; if you need anything, I'm just next door." she smiled softly at Erin before walking out the door.

Erin sighed, "Welcome home, me." Stripping off her shirt, Erin quickly changed into her new white undershirt, and pulled on her official 'Silver Valley Academy' blazer, its black sleeves reaching just over her wrist. A slight breeze brushed softly across the girl's face, interrupting her solemn thought process. Erin's brows furrowed in confusion, "Why aren't there aren't any open windows in here?"

"What a shame."

Erin's head shot up, evidently alarmed at the intruding voice. She gasped in horror at the sight of the ghost. They were back.

"Out of all the decisions you could have made today, you chose to trust *her*." the ghost started, shaking his head in frustration.

Erin stumbled back, gripping the side of her bed, "W-who a-a-are you?"

The ghost scowled at the girl, "My name is Vincent, not that it's any of your concern. However, I will tell you this," he floated over to the windowsill and looked out the window. "You need to be very careful who you trust in this world, there are some really unstable people in this world, and Rory Hutchings is one of them."

Erin looked at the apparition confused, "Why...What?"

Turning to glare at the still gobsmacked girl, the ghost states in a gruff voice, "Erin Fleming, I am under no obligation to make sense to the likes of you. However, there is a prophecy written

many years ago - the collector and the fifth element join their powers. Yet only one will survive. Be careful Erin, you seem pretty gullible."

"Why you assho-" Erin was cut off by a sharp knock at the door. Looking back towards the ghost, Erin realised that he had disappeared. Tricky bastard. "Come in," Erin breathed before straightening out her uniform, Rory walked in, a large smile plastered on her face after she locked eyes with Erin, before slipping off her face.

"What's wrong?" Rory questioned.

"Huh? Nothing"

"I can see it in your eyes. The panic. What's gotten you so scared?" Rory pushed softly, walking towards Erin with a worried expression, her soft hands caressing Erins shoulders in a friendly, borderline intimate way.

"It's nothing, I promise." Erin said, looking away as she felt her cheeks heat up.

Chapter 3

It's a few weeks after Erin had arrived at the academy. In addition to Rory she had made a bunch of friends. Noora a lanky, blonde girl who practiced the element of air and Josh an athletic water elemental had joined Erin and Rory for lunch a few times and had become pretty close.

Today Erin was in her fifth class of the day, half asleep on the desk; the exhaustion of attending a magic school catching up to her.

"Miss Fleming?" their spells teacher, Mr. Hogg questioned patronisingly. "Am I interrupting your sleep?"

With a small jab in the side from Rory, Erin sprung up on her chair, "It wasn't me!"

"Miss Fleming, I suggest that it's in your best interest to pay attention in my lessons; we wouldn't want you failing now, would we?" Mr. Hogg berated harshly, before swiftly turning around and walking back towards the blackboard.

Rory looked over at the girl, smiling softly before running her hand over Erin's. Over the past few weeks, the girls had become something resembling a couple. The bell goes, Erin and Rory stand up to leave class, over the weeks their favourite spot to be alone is the courtyard, usually they just sit there, watch people practice their element and talk. They talked a lot.

"You're so cute when you're half asleep like that." Rory mumbled, brushing her lips softly against the girls forehead.

"Roryyyy." Erin pouted, moving herself out of Rory's embrace; blush covering her pale face.

Rory blushed as well the redness on her face matched her bright flame like hair "You gotta stop doing that." Rory mumbled

Erin didn't hear what her girlfriend had said, "Stop what? Can you repeat that?"

"Stop doing things that make me want to kiss you." Both their faces burned up, now resembling ripe tomatoes. Erin looked down while Rory turned her face away.

"Can I ask you something?" Rory said, turning to look at her.

"Go ahead." Erin replied a little nervously

"What can you do?"

Erin was confused, "What do you mean?"

Rory sighed, "I mean, what are your powers? What can you do? Why are you here at Silver Valley Academy."

"Well," Erin took a deep breath. "I can see people after they die. I can talk to them."

"What, like ghosts?" Rory asked.

"I guess so." she replied.

Rory was quiet for a moment. Contemplating.

"Can you show me?" she said.

"You won't be able to see anything," Erin told her. "And it is more a matter of circumstance - if there is a ghost nearby, I can see it. When I was back home in Australia I didn't realise that nobody else could see them, I just thought they were normal people. Then one night I was having a nightmare and accidentally conjured myself an army of ghosts; when I woke up, my

room was full of dead people that only I could see. That's when my mum decided that I should come here, so I could learn to control my power.”

Rory's jaw dropped, “An army?”

“Yep,” Erin said. “Right there in my bedroom.”

Chapter 4

The old wooden desks were arranged in pairs in the Spells classroom. To Erin's dismay, Rory walked right up to the front of the room sat at the desk closest to the teacher. She explained to Erin that while she was not particularly fond of the Spells teacher, Mr. Hogg, the best way to survive his class was to keep your head down and do as your told. During the class, the old man developed a tendency to call on Erin to answer questions he knew she wouldn't know. Though Erin thought he was an asshole, for whatever reason, Mr. Hogg praised Rory every chance he got. After twenty minutes of reading straight from the textbook, Erin noticed a word she didn't know. 'It must be a plant or something' she thought. She lent over to Rory. "Hey," she whispers to her partner. "What does that mean?"

Just as Rory was about opened her mouth to reply, a large menacing shadow fell over her desk and the seat mates. She looked up to see her giant pig like teacher staring daggers at her as if Erin was a rat in a room full of mice.

"Miss Fleming," He growled, causing spit to fly from his mouth and onto the hard wood desk. "Is there something you want to share with the rest of us?"

"No sir," Erin replied quickly. "Nothing at all, I was just asking Rory a question."

"Get up!" Mr. Hogg strode around the table and tightly took Erin by the arm. He dragged her out of the classroom and into the hallway. "Stay here, and don't come back in until I say." He walks back into the classroom, slamming the door, creating an echo in the empty hallway.

He didn't return to the hallway until after the bell rang nearly half an hour later. After Erin was dismissed, Mr. Hogg walked past her, deliberately knocked her shoulder, causing her to fall. Rory rushed to offer Erin a hand.

"Gosh, are you okay?" She worriedly asked, pulling Erin up to stand. "I can't believe that bloody brute!" her muddy brown eyes squint at the teacher walking down the hallway.

Erin softly places her hand on Rory's arm, "It's okay, I'm not hurt or anything." But that wasn't true. Erin felt her arm throb where the teacher had grabbed her.

"Are you sure?" Rory questions, worried filled in her eyes and sweat sticking to her bright red hair. Erin nodded, she didn't want to worry Rory, softly placing her slender fingers on Erins arm. Rory asked "Are you really sure?"

Erin paused for a second before replying, "I'm okay." Rory squeezes her where Mr. Hogg had grabbed her, her eyes filled with anger at Erin's lie, "What a load of -"

"What the hell Rory?!" Erin winces loudly in pain, pulling herself away from Rory's grip "Why would you do that?!" Erin's mind was racing, what caused the sudden change in Rory's attitude?

"Why would you lie to me?!" Rory hissed angrily. "I'm your girlfriend, no? Don't you love me?!"

"I told you, she's bad news, she just wants your powers." Vincent whispers into Erin's ear, Erin brushes him off. "She doesn't really love you." The last one rang in her head for a while.

"I just didn't want you to worry about me, Rory," Erin tries to explain, though Rory doesn't seem to be listening. "I only lied because I love you."

"Why don't you just kill him with your powers?" Rory advises, grabbing onto Erin's shoulders, the tips of her fingers going white due to how tight her grip was. "You know what I am talking about! Those bloody necromancer powers you got! Or better yet, give them to me so I can do it!"

“What?” Erin says in disbelief, were the ghosts telling the truth the whole time? Did Rory only want Erin for her element? Erin pushes Rory back, horrified with her discovery. Erin shuffles back, but spins around before beginning to sprint away with her mind in puzzles and her heart in two.

Chapter 5

As Erin made her way back to her dorm, she thought about how strange Rory has been acting lately, and how aggressive she's been towards her. She really liked Rory, but was it worth the way she was being treated? And if Rory is just trying to steal her powers, does she even have feelings for Erin at all? Erin sat on her bed for what seemed to be hours of paranoia and frustration, thinking through Rory's motives and how to stop her from taking her powers. This story seemed awful familiar, and she began to remember what Vincent was trying to tell her.

"The prophecy!" she thought, getting up immediately and walking to the door. She looked through the peephole, eyeing anyone walking past and making sure they weren't Rory. The outside seemed different now. What used to be a friendly, fun place for Erin and her kind was now a warzone; and the opposing side was Rory.

"Hey, Erin!" Josh called, him and Noora ran towards her, waving their arms and calling for her to stop and talk to them. She hadn't seen them in a while, too caught up in her own problems to spend time with her friends. She bolted, she didn't have time right now. She needed answers that neither Josh or Noora could give. Sure, they would probably keep her safe, but she didn't want to risk their safety.

"Library, library, library..." She muttered to herself, dashing past classrooms and empty dorms. It was just after dinner, and everyone was outside in the school grounds, Erin sighed in relief, glad that no one would stop her on her way. She entered the library, the wooden shelves almost welcoming her. She headed straight for the Book of Prophecy, desperately flipping through the index and searching for the page she needed.

'The prophecy states that the Fifth Element and The Collector will combine their powers, therefore combining the five elements. Only one will become the most powerful young elemental in existence, and the other's destiny is for the most powerful element to decide.'

Her eyes widened as she read more, it all made sense now. She really should've listened to Vincent, he was only trying to keep her safe. She needed to defeat Rory, needed to save herself and others from her evil.

"Hey, Erin." A voice spoke quietly behind her, Erin's hands froze cold and her heart pounded in her chest; it was Rory.

"H-hey, Rory," Erin stuttered, her voice wavering as she spoke. "What are you-" Rory made a blow to Erin's eye, knocking her out. She fell to the ground, Rory swiftly picking her up and taking her to the school cellars.

The next thing Erin knew she was locked in a cage, lying against the cold metal bars that confined her. She spotted Rory standing in front of her and her adrenaline kicked in. Anger consumed her, and fear did the same.

"Where am I?!" she shouted, banging against the metal bars of the cage. Her hands would surely bruise "Tell me!"

Rory snickered, looking down at her and cracking her knuckles, "Where no one will ever find you." Erin shook with anger, she felt betrayed and she was scared beyond anything. What if no one found her down here? And even worse, what is Rory gonna do with her?

"I really liked you," she spat, voice breaking. "Now I'm not so damn sure!"

Rory snorted, kicking the cage before kneeling in front of it. "That's the difference between you and me, you have feelings. You're weak, pathetic; I'm not. I will be the strongest elemental to ever exist, and you? Well, I'm still deciding what I'll do with you."

Erin spat, missing Rory's face and hitting the floor. "See?" Rory spoke smugly "That's my point. You couldn't hurt a fly." Erin had no idea how she was going to get out of this, Rory was right, she was weak. She didn't even know where she was and she doubted that her friends did either.

Chapter 6

“Erin? Erin?”

Erin stirs from her deep sleep as she hears her name being called from afar, but she's too weak to reply. She wonders how long she's been in this cell for, trapped with nothing but her thoughts to keep her company.

She hears whispers and scuffs of shoes on the hard-concrete ground creeping closer with every second. “She has to be here somewhere.” Someone says. “Well I sure hope she is! We’ve been searching the whole school for days now, and I’m pretty sure the dungeons are the only place we haven’t been.” Somebody else replies, a tinge of frustration in their voice.

“Oh my god.” The first voice says, Erin hearing them stop close to her as she tries hard to stay awake.

“What now, Josh?” The second voice whines, “I swear to god if you’ve found another dead ra- Oh my God, Erin!”

A group of whispers and surprised calls of her name circle around Erin’s head, opening her eyes and lifting her head with the last drops of energy she can muster, she sees Josh and Noora peering in at her from the bars of the cell, a group of people behind them desperately trying to get a look at Erin as if she were a lion in a zoo.

“Hi guys” Erin barely whispers, smiling at her friends looking down at her.

“We missed you,” Noora said, smiling back for only a second before snapping her head to the side, looking at what seemed like nothing, “Vincent, can you bust her out of there?”

Vincent slowly comes into view as he walks towards and through the bars of the cell, kneeling down to greet Erin before looking up at Noora, “Well, I can’t really *grab* anything, let alone break the cell lock to free her, You’ll have to go find a key” He exclaims to the group, banging his hand on the floor for exaggeration. Noora nods in understanding before she turns to the group and instructs them to start searching for the key to the cell, walking off herself to help them.

“How long have I been in here for?” Erin asks, turning her head to properly see Vincent.

“Well, i’d say maybe three or four days,” he says, “Your friends only came up to me for help when they noticed you weren’t in class or the dorms the previous day, then obviously we had to search the whole school top to bottom which took a while, but we found you and that’s all that matters” He smiles, proud of himself that he had helped find Erin, though his face quickly turned into a look of concern as he finally took a proper look at Erin.

“My God, you look terrible, those kids better find that key soon before you drop dead” He jokes, but Erin can sense a hint of actual worry behind his voice.

“Don’t worry, I’m alright” Erin assures Vincent, “Just a tad hungry” She adds on, stomach grumbling in agreement.

They laugh together as they hear a faint “Found it!” in the distance, followed by several footsteps quickly making their way towards the voice. Vincent smiles at Erin before floating off towards the voice as well, going to double check if the key they found was the correct one. Erin

is left alone once again, giving her enough time to stand up and gather herself before the group of friends and classmates return to her cell.

"We got it!" Josh says happily, attempting to put the key into the cell lock but only failing before Noora snatches it out of his hand

"For God's sake Josh it's upside down" She grumbles, a chorus of snickers emerge from classmates behind them as Noora places the key into the lock the correct way. After a matter of seconds, a loud *click* echoed throughout the dungeon, the cell door swinging open as Erin's classmates pile in to hug her.

"Erin, Rory's got away." Vincent explains, "You and your friends need to go find and stop her now before she gets too powerful, she's stolen almost every power possible, she's close to invincible at this point."

"She's taken some of mine, too," Erin admits, "I can feel them getting weaker and weaker the more I try to use them, that's why she threw me in here, she captured me and took my powers, and I'm guessing left me in here with no intention on coming back."

"Why that little-" Vincent growls, furrowing his brow as he huffs out hot air

"C'mon everybody, let's go" he says, edge within his voice as he zooms off towards the stairs to the dungeon, leaving the group of kids behind him to catch up.

Vincent guides the group to the front of the school, stopping abruptly at the school gates which catches the attention of one of the classmates in the group. "You're not coming?" She asks, confused as to why Vincent would stop his journey that had barely started.

"I can't," Vincent says, sighing, "My spirit is tied to the school if I move past these gates I'll disappear."

The group looks at Vincent with sympathy, sad that the person they trusted and who knew so much about the school and prophecy was about to leave them.

"You'll all be okay." Vincent assures the group, turning around to return back to the walls of the school before stopping and adding, "Do as Erin says, the prophecy will guide her towards the right direction, it'll be the quickest way to find Rory, and you *must* kill her." Vincent makes himself invisible as he continues his way towards the school, leaving the group alone for the adventure ahead of them.

Chapter 7

"Well, which way are we going?" Josh asks Erin, him and the group of people around him eagerly waiting for Erin's reply that will begin their adventure.

"I-I don't know" Erin replied, confused as to what Vincent meant by "The prophecy will guide her towards the right direction". Of course she knew at this point that she was part of the prophecy, her destiny was written down years before her birth, but why can't she feel anything? "I guess, we'll go forward?" She unsurely states, trying to convince even herself that what she's doing is right.

"You guess? What do you mean guess? I thought you were the prophecy, you're supposed to know the way." Someone in the group spat.

"I don't know! Okay?" Erin cried, stressed that she is letting everybody down, that Rory will get away and that she will never get her powers back, continuing forward with doubt now placed in everybody's minds, the group falls silent.

After what feels like forever, Erin looks back at the school to find that they had only crossed half of the long reach of grass that gave a border to the forest surrounding. Sighing in annoyance, she suddenly stops as a tingling feeling overcomes her, so strong that she falls to her knees and doubles over covering her face with her hands.

"Erin?" Noora asks, kneeling down beside her and placing her hand on Erin's shoulder, only to get quickly slapped away by Erin who now was shaking, nobody knew what was going on, except for Erin.

She was having a vision, or that's what she thought was happening at least - images of Rory were flashing in front of her closed eyes, running, looking around, and climbing a tree. The last vision faded away into nothingness as the tingling feeling soon left Erin. Catching her breath, she took her hands from her face to see Noora knelt beside her, looking worried as she looked up to the rest of the group for some sort of explanation, Erin following her gaze towards the worried looks of the people surrounding her.

"I saw her, in the forest - she's hiding in the forest."

"Where? The forest is over 100-acres, we'll never find her in time! And the sun is setting! We're going to be trapped in there forever!" Josh cries, wide and worried eyes staring at Erin as the rest of the group mumbles in agreement.

"I know, I know, just, just wait." Erin said, trying to calm everyone down, she closed her eyes and hoped to have another vision - or anything that could help her. Focusing all her energy on something - anything, she heard a whisper so faint she almost missed it, "West".

"West, we need to go west." Erin said hurriedly, running into the forest the left of her.

"What?! How do you know that!?" Josh yelled, running after her.

"I don't know! It must be the prophecy!" Erin yelled back, with a new spring found in her step and new hope found within the group, they made their way confidently into the forest.

Chapter 8

"There she is!" Noora yelled, pointing towards a mop of red hair running ahead of them. The group started running towards Rory, minus Erin, who stopped in horror.

"WAIT!" she tried to warn them, but her friends kept running,

"WAIT! IT'S A TRAP!" Erin screamed before running to her right, coming face to face with a smirking Rory.

"You here to finish me off, Sweetheart?" Rory greeted.

Erin looked disgustedly at her former girlfriend,

"Did you ever love me? Is it true? What the ghosts say? Why did you do it?!" Erin questioned, closing in on Rory with every step; oblivious to the grin on Rory's face which was becoming wider with every step.

"Is this one of those times when you want me to lie to protect your delicate emotions? You stupid girl"

Erin scoffed, clenching her fists rightly, "This isn't the first time i've dealt with someone like you!" Erin spoke, remembering Mr. Hogg.

"Really? You've dealt with rampaging mutants before? Please, tell me their names. Maybe we can exchange numbers and meet up for tea and biscuits." Rory retorted, before throwing her hands out to the side; summoning fire.

"You're seriously risking the lives of millions for one?" Erin questions, while attempting to summon some help.

"Damn right I am!" Rory says, a wicked smirk gracing her face, "-because it isn't just one life; it's yours" and with that, a large fireball was thrown at Erin; which she barely avoided before whispering, "Now."

A large group of around 130 ghosts appeared behind a confused Rory.

"Now, what?" Rory questioned, momentarily thrown off. The ghosts surged forward wrapping their arms around Rory's arms, squeezing and pulling at her body.

Feeling possessed, Erin spoke, causing a ceasefire from the ghosts,

"The unknown is scary, Rory"

Rory looked over at Erin, terror covering her face; she was out of her league.

"But the only thing scarier than the unknown Rory, is me" Erin took a deep breathe and the one sided fight resumed. It's hard to fight something you cannot see.

Within minutes, Rory was unconscious, lying on the group - eyes open in a dead stare. Erin stood opposite Rory, with smoke in her eyes and death at her back.

Erin Fleming, the necromancer had saved them. She had saved them all.

Epilogue

“Hey.” Noora said, sitting down beside her friend. It had been months since the incident, and everyone's powers had been returned back to normal.

“Hey, when is your mum picking you up?” Erin asked, sitting outside the academy waiting for her Grandma. It was the Christmas holidays and the students were all given two weeks off.

Noora shrugged, “She should be here any minute.”

Erin excitedly waved as her Grandma's car pulled up at the school.

“Bye Noora!” Erin hugged her friend, before grabbing her luggage and rushing off to her waiting relative.

Shutting the car door, she turns to her Grandma, “I missed you!” Erin said, throwing her arms around her grandma, but before her grandma could reply, she was interrupted by a familiar redhead sitting in the back of the car.

“I missed you too.” the ghost said, smirking patronisingly at Erin.

Erin went pale, eyes growing wide as she stared at the ghost sitting in the back of her grandma's car.

“Rory.”