

AN END TO ALL THINGS

By Karina Sumner-Smith

Sitting in the raised concrete alcove of what had once been a doorway, her feet pulled beneath her to keep them from the wet, Xhea watched a middle-aged man awkwardly pretend to fumble with the catch of a newspaper vending machine. Magic sparkled above him in a shape like an upturned tulip, deflecting the heavy rain and letting it pour to the ground around him, tracing a circle in the puddles at his feet. He was, of course, watching her.

It was not his attention that had caught her notice, nor the way he was slowly but surely making his way down the street towards her, but rather the ghost of a teenaged girl tethered to him with a line of energy more felt than seen. She could not be much older than Xhea herself – fourteen, she supposed, perhaps fifteen – and she floated an arm's span above the man at the end of her tether like a girl-shaped helium balloon.

As Xhea waited, she tied a coin to the end of a thin braid of her hair with a bit of discarded ribbon. The coin was an old and dirtied thing, found in the concrete labyrinth of tunnels beneath the City. Once it would have bought her bread, cigarettes, a warm place to sleep. Now it was nothing but a bit of shiny metal, a decoration that watched with the pressed eyes of a dead Queen, no magic in its essence other than a sense of the past that hung about it like the faint scent of something sweet.

What was it, Xhea wondered, that made the ghost-afflicted wait until the darkest, rainiest days to seek her out? She snorted softly, a sound without care or pity. They didn't want to be seen with her, that was the truth of it, as if her very presence could leave a shadow that wouldn't burn away. In a city built upon the bright, sparkling magic of life, who would admit to needing the help of the thin and sickly talents of a girl who could see ghosts?

Xhea had started braiding another section of her dark hair before the man at last made up his mind to approach. He shuffled forward. He glanced about. He walked right past as if intending to keep going, then stopped and turned. Xhea watched as he came to stand before her and her narrow shelter, the heavy rain falling between them like a beaded curtain.

Xhea held his eyes as she slowly pulled a cigarette from one of her oversized jacket's many pockets and placed it against her lips. He blinked. From another pocket she drew forth a single match, thankfully dry, which she struck with a practiced flick of a chip-painted nail. Cigarette lit, she leaned back against the concrete alcove and exhaled.

"Well?" he said impatiently. He stood looking down at her, back straight as if to get every last intimidating inch out of his average-sized frame. She knew his kind.

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to help me?" he said. "I have a ghost."

"I can see that," Xhea replied, returning the cigarette to her lips.

"I was told," the man said slowly, as if she were younger than her fourteen years and dreadfully slow, "that you can help people with ghosts."

Xhea raised an eyebrow and watched him until he began to squirm, hearing his words and finding them foolish.

"Forget this!" he muttered and turned angrily away. Xhea let him leave without watching him go. He remained blithely unaware that his ghost had remained right where she was, floating before Xhea's shelter with her tether stretching like a long elastic band, a clear indication that the man would return.

Xhea smoked slowly, watching the ghost. She floated serenely, eyes closed and her legs folded beneath her like a dreaming Buddha. The ghost's hair was pale – blonde, Xhea supposed – her skin even paler, each appearing in Xhea's black-and-white vision as a faintly luminescent gray. The ghost girl's dress was more vivid, hanging in loose folds that appeared almost to shimmer as they moved in an unfelt breeze, the fabric untouched by rain.

Red, Xhea guessed, from the energy it exuded. She rather appreciated the contrast.

What was their story, she wondered. Too young to be his wife, unless his tastes ran to the illegal; too calm and familiar to be the victim of a hit and run or the unlucky bystander in a spell gone awry. His daughter, maybe. How touching.

Was it disease that had taken her? Suicide? Perhaps her father had killed her.

Xhea exhaled a long breath of smoke as the man again approached. Come to my temple, she thought to him mockingly. Four walls of concrete and one of rain; a cloud of tobacco for incense. Come pray for your ghost.

He stood for a long moment, staring at her. "You're too young to be smoking," he said at last.

"And she's too young to be dead," Xhea replied, nodding towards the ghost that once again hovered above his head. The coins in her hair clinked together at the movement.

She had to give him this: he started, but nothing more. Most of those who came to her searched wildly about themselves when she revealed the location of their hauntings, though they had told her that the ghosts were there themselves.

"So tell me," Xhea said, "this help you've come to me for – do you want her gone, your pale ghost? Or is it something you need to say to her? Maybe something you think she has to say to you?"

The man watched her in an angry, uncomfortable silence.

"Ah." Xhea sighed. "You don't know. Just came to see what the freak girl could offer."

It was only then that Xhea realized how thin his umbrella of magic had become, and how dark the circles beneath his eyes looked. She squelched what little sympathy she felt. Even if he had lost everything, if everyone he loved had died, he still had a bright magical signature, a gift of nature and blood. Doors opened to his touch; vendors could sell him food; the City acknowledged he existed. He was, in a word, normal.

Unlike herself. There was no brightness in her, only a dark stillness that she could only think of as absence.

"I'll tell you what," she said at last. "I'll take your ghost for a day, maybe two, give you a little break. If that turns out okay, we can discuss something ... more permanent."

"How much?" he said brusquely.

"A week's worth of food chits," she said, "and five hundred unshaped *renai*."

"Five hundred!"

"You'd use less to get a taxi across the City."

"But unshaped?" he asked, confused that she didn't want the *renai*, the magical equivalent of the old-world currency, to be spelled to her own unique signature, but raw. "Gods – *why*?"

"I didn't ask you how you got a ghost," she said. "Don't ask what I'll do with the payment."

His protective umbrella flickered and failed, and the rain poured down on his unprotected head. Xhea watched as, to her eyes, his hair and clothing changed from mottled grays to tones of charcoal and black, the fabric slicking itself to his middle-aged body. Water dribbled in his eyes and trickled from his nose.

"You *are* a freak," he said at last in a voice she would have called dangerous had not the frustration in the words revealed his helplessness. "A monstrosity. Your mother should have drowned you at birth."

Xhea ground her cigarette against the wet concrete, watching the bright ember at the end sizzle and dull to black. A line of smoke rose upwards, vanishing.

"You're the one standing in the rain," she said.

Fourteen years old and Xhea knew how to fight with a knife, how to scream like someone dying, how to steal food from children and business people distracted on long-distance calls – and yes, how to get the best of a sad and sorry man in mourning.

A deal was struck. The rest was only negotiation.

* * *

Changing the anchor of a ghost's tether was not an easy thing, but it was something that Xhea knew how to do and do well: a bit of magic that she could perform without failure and one that had given her a reputation in the lower levels of the City. Throughout known history, ghosts were said to remain in the living world because of unfinished business – something they couldn't leave behind. What few knew was that ghosts were literally bound to that unfinished business.

Unless, of course, one had a really sharp knife.

Xhea's knife was a small silver blade that folded into a handle inlaid with mother of pearl. The man, soaked to the bone, stood rigidly as Xhea climbed onto an overturned fruit crate, knife extended, and began to examine the tether above his head.

"Don't cut me," he said.

"Don't complain," she replied.

The pockets of her jacket were full with food chits, little plastic tabs imprinted with just enough *renai* to buy her a single serving at a time. They were designed for children too young to be trusted to share their own magical energy safely or wisely, more likely to buy heaps of candy or be drained by a predator than to purchase a balanced meal. Though she looked younger than her age, even with her eyes darkened with black eyeliner and nails painted some shade of dark, Xhea knew she looked far too old to be using chits. She couldn't bring herself to care.

It was that, steal, or starve.

The other half of the man's payment he had spelled to be transferred to her upon completion of their bargain. The little light of the uncompleted transfer hovered about Xhea's face like her own shining ghost, awaiting its time to leap into her body.

When Xhea took hold of the tether, the ghost of the girl jerked. Xhea watched her carefully as she adjusted her hand, trying to get a better grip on a section of energized air that felt as if it had been oiled.

"Hurry," the man said. "Please, just ... hurry."

Xhea's knife flashed down. The ghost's eyes flew open and she recoiled, springing back to the end of the tether that Xhea refused to release. The ghost opened her mouth as if to scream, her once-perfect calm gone, but she only watched in silence as Xhea took the sliced end of the tether and pressed it to her own chest. It sank in like the rain into a storm sewer, vanishing completely.

"That's it?"

"You want to pay more?"

"I – "

"Then that's it."

The rain had slowed to a drizzle; he stepped back, away from her concrete shelter and into the center of the street. He stood for a moment, watching her with a confused and unnerved look on his face, then turned and walked away without another word.

Xhea's payment – a mere five hundred *renai* of pure magic – brightened for a moment, then sped forward and slammed into the exact center of her forehead. Xhea stumbled back, falling from the crate to her knees, a sound like the ocean roaring in her ears. In the back of her throat she tasted bile as her stomach attempted to return what little food she'd eaten that day. Head in her hands, she focused on not throwing up.

"Breathe," she whispered. Her head spun. She reached out to grab at the concrete wall as a sudden rush of vertigo seemed to flip the world on its side and tilt it back again. Xhea gagged and clutched at her stomach. "Breathe ... breathe ..."

It was in these moments, with the raw magic coursing through her body, that she always swore she would never ask for *renai* in payment ever again. For someone with so little talent, such a strange magic as she had, it was a waste, a rush of energy without use or end. She would stick to food chits and pity.

Then the vertigo began to subside, her dizziness to fade, the terrible churning in her stomach settling like the wind after a storm. She could hear the rain again, pattering down on the wet concrete, and the wind as it sighed through the City's towering corridors of mirror and steel. She felt ... she almost had to struggle for the word ... alive. For as long as the bright magic coursed within her, the dark stillness that always seemed to fill her body was absent. Like sun burning away heavy fog, the magic banished the darkness: she was light, empty, on fire.

She ignored the thought that murmured in the back of her mind, as it always did, that this was strange, foreign, *wrong*; this, she replied, is what normal people must feel every day.

Slowly, Xhea opened her eyes. Instead of black and white, a world of unending grays, she saw color. No matter how many times she did this, the sudden brilliance of the world around her made her want to gasp, unsure if she should stare or cover her eyes.

The ghost hovered above her, legs again curled in a meditative pose, though it was Xhea's sprawled body that now held her attention rather than the flowing dreams of her death. She was blonde, Xhea noted, and her eyes were a pale electric blue, but her dress wasn't red but a deep plum. It reminded Xhea of new spring blossoms – something she so rarely saw, trapped as she was at the concrete base of the City.

"That looked like it hurt," the ghost said, her voice tentative.

"A good observation."

Xhea felt that she had but to lift her arms to float up beside the ghost-girl, untethered by weight or the world. Reality had other ideas. Xhea struggled to her feet, holding the wall of her little alcove until she was certain that her unsteady legs could hold her.

Breathe, she reminded herself, and after a moment the rush of dizziness and nausea again subsided. Xhea stepped down onto the long-deserted roadway, tilting her head upwards to feel the rain wash down her face. There was a sensation of tugging against her ribcage as the ghost's tether tightened and stretched, then the ghost was dragged inevitably after her.

"Why ..." the ghost started, "why ... why am I here?"

"That was the bargain," Xhea replied, glancing over her shoulder. The world spun about her as she turned. "Nothing personal, I assure you."

Everything was so bright – the ghost-girl's dress, the mirrored surfaces of the City buildings, the magical glow of aircars shimmering across the sky high above her. Color stabbed at her eyes, strange and vivid, and somewhere in the back of her head Xhea felt the faint beginnings of pain. There was too much, too bright, but she wanted it all.

"Bargain? I was just sleeping. And now ..." The ghost looked down, apparently only just realizing that she inhabited a space without gravity, hovering about five feet from the ground and skimming forward without walking.

"Oh," said Xhea. "That. You're dead."

"I can't be," the ghost whispered, peering over her crossed legs and watching the pavement speed by. "No. I was just asleep."

Great, Xhea thought. A talker. She had seemed so quiet at first, so serene; Xhea had thought that she might dream away her death until the City crumbled to dust and the sun burned away the sky. It would have made things so much easier. Perhaps this was why the man had wanted to get rid of her – a sense that an unseen speaker was doing her best to talk his ear off.

Well, she had only committed to a day, perhaps two, and then she could let the tether go. The girl would catapult back to her original anchor and would be out of Xhea's hair unless the man wanted to pay her significantly more.

"I was asleep," the ghost insisted, "only asleep."

"Then this must be a very bad dream."

On any day the ground level of the City was sparsely populated, the magic-weak bottom dwellers hidden away in their homes, but with the rain coming down the streets were all but deserted. Buildings' doorways and elevators, usually oblivious to her presence, flickered now as she went past, registering the *renai* burning in her body. For these brief moments, she had but to touch the keypad to have doors open for her. As always, she was tempted to get inside an elevator and ride it to the top, never mind how she would get down again with the bright magic gone from her system. Whatever magic gave her the ability to see and speak to ghosts, the magic that tainted her vision and seemed to pool inside her like a black and silent lake, was not enough for the City's systems. She could only wonder what the world would look like from so high.

The ground level was a terrible place, rough and edged or falling apart entirely, old foundations crumbling away and the bases of magically-reinforced buildings standing in their stead. But even the ground level was too much for Xhea, filled with magic and its relentless brightness. Still dragging the ghost behind her, she came at last to the entrance to her home: a heavy metal grate pushed aside to reveal a dark hole and the rusted rungs of a ladder leading down.

Squinting already with a magic-induced headache, Xhea lowered herself into the darkness.

Once, Xhea knew, the City had been different, delving downwards instead of relentlessly up, up, up. But with magic came a craving for all things growing, for light and life and open air, and much of the old infrastructure was discarded. All that was left now of the old City were tunnels, some filled with broken roadways or rusting train tracks, others flooded or boarded up or too dangerous to explore. Xhea knew them all.

Her normal sight needed little light; shades of gray were easier to tell apart than the startling array of colors that magical sight brought – and, worse, the unnerving absence that accompanied darkness. She kept a flashlight in a jacket pocket for just such an occasion.

She shone the beam down the tunnel and began to pick her way forward, stepping over rusted nails and dried refuse with confidence borne of long practice. The ghost made a low noise, almost a whimper; Xhea glanced back to see the ghost-girl grimace, her eyes closed, one hand over her mouth in disgust. Even dead, few City-dwellers had the nerve to travel the roads and passageways in which she lived.

Xhea's home was a small room, once maintenance space, up a small set of stairs that led off a train tunnel. The door creaked open at her touch and she shone the flashlight around the room, checking that everything was safe before entering.

There was something comforting about concrete, Xhea thought. Even with her sight burning with magic, it was still gray. In one corner were the bits and pieces of the past that she'd found in one tunnel or another, shoes and coins and books, dirty and mildewed but still intriguing. Against the far wall she had created a bed from a pile of blankets.

It was on this pile that she dropped without even thinking of first changing her wet clothes. She closed her eyes, opened them, and let the magic take her over. The pain at the back of her head was still there, as was that lingering sense of wrongness, but Xhea couldn't bring herself to care. With this magic inside her she could leap, spin, dance, fly.

"I don't think ..." the ghost began quietly.

"Not now," Xhea said.

"It's just that ... well, I – "

"Not. Now."

Later she would have time to talk to the ghost, discover what held her to this life and see what she could do about it – if the right payment was offered. But the days were long and the magic stayed with her for such a short time. She just wanted to lay still and feel the possibilities before it all burned away.

* * *

Xhea woke, drained of bright magic, to discover that the ghost was gone. She opened her eyes, touching her chest; the tether was still there, slippery and elusive beneath her fingers, but within an arm's length it vanished. As if she had cut her lead and fled, the ghost was nowhere to be seen.

But it was not this that had woken her.

Where the magic had shone inside her there now lay blackness, as if that dark pool of calm that she always felt lay hidden in the depths of her self had risen to fill her entirely. It was the opposite of everything she had felt with the *renai* of payment burning through her system: a magic slow and dark. Xhea suddenly felt cold.

As she watched, the darkness began to overflow. Like a fog, soft as breath, it poured from her body, falling not down but gently up, through the concrete ceiling and beyond. She could feel it even as it left her sight: an extension of herself questing outwards.

It was the ghost, Xhea thought desperately. What had she done?

Before the ghost had come to her, she'd always been able to keep the darkness in check, burn it away with snatches of bright magic or hold it down by sheer force of will. But now it coiled out from the depths of Xhea's self, a seeping magic that followed the broken line of the tether. Try as she did, this time Xhea couldn't hold it back; it was drawn to the ghost.

What was her name? Xhea was sure that in the past hours, as the bright magic and its colors slipped from her body and vision, the ghost had tried to introduce herself.

"Shai?" Xhea called, and the name felt right in her mouth. Her voice echoed around the bare walls. "Shai?"

Later, Xhea was never sure if it was the darkness, the tether or the sound of her name that called her back, but Shai returned to the room with an audible *crack*, then hung in the air by the door at the end of her tether. Her shoulders were hunched, her arms pulled in tight to her chest, her blonde hair – gray now to Xhea's vision – all but covering her face. There was a noise, too, like the distant sound of leaves pushed across pavement: she was whispering.

Xhea climbed on top of a salvaged chair, balancing carefully as she raised herself up on tiptoe, head tilted as she strained to hear the ghost's quiet litany.

"*It doesn't end*," Shai said, eyes closed, lips barely moving. The words seemed to slip from her mouth like a soft exhalation. "*It doesn't end, it doesn't end, it doesn't end.*"

As Xhea watched, the ghost of the girl slowly began to straighten, uncurling from her hunched position, her head rising like a flower seeking the sun. Though she couldn't harm her, Xhea took a step back to avoid Shai's leg as it swung forward and folded beneath her, the smooth length of skin vanishing beneath the folds of her dress. The whispering ceased and Shai became as Xhea had first seen her: calm and serene, a picture of ghostly stillness.

"Shai?" Xhea said again, and the ghost opened her eyes.

"I'm only dreaming," she said. She sounded heartbroken, too sad to cry.

Xhea opened her mouth to reply, easy denials coming to her lips – and stopped. For there was something different about Shai, something that set her apart from every ghost Xhea had yet known. Only in black and white could she see it, made plain by the shifting grays of her vision and the intensity of the attention that she had not paid to the ghost-girl before: at her core, deep within herself, Shai sparkled with bright magic.

But ghosts were dead and Xhea knew that the dead had no magic.

She could only stare. How was it that she, living and breathing, could not hold magical brightness within herself, while the ghost of dead Shai still shone with it?

The bright magic that was the City's foundation was the very essence of life, an embodiment of light and growth. Looking upwards at its towering buildings, the City had always glowed in Xhea's sight, a white beacon even in the darkest nights. But what she felt rising from the depths of her self – the shadow she'd always sensed inside – was just the opposite: a force of stillness and dark, a slow movement that spoke of endings and of death.

Xhea looked around herself, at the concrete walls of her home deep beneath the ground, at the past braided into her hair, at the ghost that hovered in the air before her.

Yes, she thought, the word like a cold breath of fear. Yes.

And still the dark magic flowed from her, pulling towards Shai and the imbalance of a dead girl full of life. The fog seeped towards the ghost that hung before her – but then continued upwards, outwards, in the direction that the broken tether had led.

One slow step at a time, Xhea walked towards the door, following it, trusting her instinct to lead her. But as the tether binding her to the ghost tightened, she stopped. Slowly, she turned back. The ghost looked down at her, that heartbroken look still in her eyes.

"You'll have to help me," Xhea said at last, her voice trembling as she spoke. "I've never been to the top of the City before."

She swallowed and extended her hand. It was a long moment before Shai understood her meaning and still longer before she moved. Like a falling petal, her dress fanning out around her, Shai sank until they stood eye-to-eye, then slowly, deliberately,

placed her palm against Xhea's own. Xhea curled her fingers around Shai's hand and felt a glow of warmth, like a memory of living skin.

Hand in hand, the girls rose towards the City.

* * *

It was late, the afternoon all but dying, before they at last came to the right building. The air was cool, damp with the earlier rain that still lingered in puddles. Xhea stared at the elevator touchpad. The only times City workings had ever responded to her touch was right after she'd been paid, *renai* strong in her system. She'd thought her dark magical signature too weak for the City; now she wondered if was not strength, but the type of her magic that had confused the sensors.

Still hand-in-hand with Shai, Xhea pressed the touchpad and held her breath. The sensor blinked once, twice, detecting the warmth of her skin and the magic sparkling through Shai's ghostly flesh.

The elevator doors slid open.

Xhea stepped inside, heart hammering, and Shai followed before the doors shut behind her. Shai indicated the floor button with a single finger that trembled as she pointed, and together they pressed it. Xhea watched the numbers move, floor by floor, to keep from panicking; she had never been in an elevator before.

When at last the doors opened Xhea stepped back, unprepared for the inside of a City building. Light, more than could possibly come through the building's windows, streamed into the hall from every direction. She squinted at its intensity. The walls were a riot of foliage that seemed to come up through the floor and rise through the ceiling, and the carpet beneath her feet felt like moss.

Shai moved towards a door at the end of the hall so quickly that Xhea felt a firm tug on her end of the tether. She didn't protest, but followed; instinct, embodied in seeping fog, led her in the same direction.

Xhea's knock was answered by the man from that afternoon. He had changed from his wet clothes, but if anything he looked more haggard than before. He recoiled at the sight of her, and Xhea used his distraction to duck under his arm and into the room.

"You can't come in here!" he protested.

"I already did."

To Shai she said, "Is this the place?" But with a cry the ghost curled in upon herself again, doubling over in midair before vanishing. Xhea swore.

She had no choice. Closing her eyes, she released the last of her hold on the rising tide within herself, and let the darkness seep out around her. Like a magnet, one direction pulled. She followed, hurrying down a hall.

Soon, there was no doubting her destination: the light of magic shone blindingly bright around the edge of one door and the small sign tacked to its surface read *Shai*.

Xhea pushed the door inwards.

There, in the center of a bed, lay a body. Xhea stepped slowly into the room until she stood at the bedside and looked down at the girl who lay so still. She knew that face, that hair, those eyes, though never had she seen Shai's ghost look so ill. Her pale hair was plastered to her head, heavy with sweat, and the hands that lay against the blankets seemed but wasted bones. Beneath her closed lids, Shai's eyes roamed, caught in dreams and visions of ghostly walking.

To Xhea's sight, Shai burned far too brightly. White-hot, as if at any moment her skin could ignite.

Life raged through Shai's body, building upon itself, multiplying: life without end. It was magic, yes, but without control. In its wake it left only brightness and disease: cancer.

Looking down at the girl's wasted flesh, Xhea could see spells whose glimmers she'd seen mirrored in the ghost. There were so many of them: one to stem the growth of the tumor on her liver, another to slow the tumors in her lungs, still another attacking the growths that spread through her bones. There were more spells, spells upon spells, staunching bleeding and energizing her faltering heart, repairing the damage that medicine and magic had left in their wake.

And all of the spells leaked magic, more magic, bright magic that because of its very nature said to her body and tumors alike: live, grow.

From the doorway behind her, a voice spoke. "I cannot save her," Shai's father said, and at last Xhea understood his failing power, the heavy weariness that marked his face. "I didn't know what else to do."

If he had been able to sense Shai's ghost around him, Xhea thought, he must have known it was too late; but how could he simply let go?

Perhaps he had gone to her for a simple reprieve from his dying daughter's ghost; perhaps he had thought that setting the ghost free would let her body finally die. Or perhaps he had sought Xhea not knowing what it was he wanted, what she could possibly do to help, only desperate to try something, anything while he still could.

"I know," she told him, not daring to look back. "This is why you came to me."

With her right hand, Xhea brushed back the hair from Shai's forehead, the skin beneath her fingertips fevered and flushed. Her left she placed on the center of Shai's chest in the exact point where the ghost's tether had been attached. Beneath her palm, Xhea could feel Shai's heartbeat, quick and erratic like the fluttering of a small bird's wings.

"Shai," Xhea said gently, softly, calling to the girl as she had the ghost. "Shai."

Shai opened her eyes. They were glazed with fever, unfocused, black pupils dilated wide within the pale rings of her irises. Looking down, Xhea knew it wasn't her own sight that made Shai's blue eyes look so empty or so gray.

"Shai, listen to me," Xhea said, still stroking her hair, speaking slowly to the dying girl and the bright ghost that she knew lay trapped somewhere inside. "Shai, it's okay. You're only dreaming. Relax," she said. "Breathe. It'll all be okay soon."

To Shai, to Shai's father, to herself, she whispered, "There must be an end to all things."

Slowly, Xhea leaned down and brushed her lips against Shai's fevered forehead. The coins braided into her hair chimed, their small, high notes ringing like prayer. Her hands steady, Xhea let her magic flow and watched as the dark fog sank into Shai's broken body like rain vanishing into soil. One by one, the spells began to flicker, their harsh brightness fading beneath a tide of shadow. One by one they uncoiled, lines of magic releasing their hold on Shai's dying flesh, the power unraveling and spinning into nothingness.

When she was finished, Shai's body lay still. The room was silent, the air as peaceful as the depths of a deep lake and as quiet. To Xhea's sight Shai was no longer the harsh white of burning magic, nor the black of emptiness, but gray. Merely gray.

"Balance," Xhea whispered, and with that word she understood her magic and her role in the world. She could have no part of the life of the City or its bright magic; she was its opposite, its balance, its end.

Behind her, Shai's father crumpled, sliding down the wall to the floor with his face lost in his hands. As she left, Xhea touched him once, stroking back the hair from his forehead as she had his daughter's, as if by touch alone she could convey all the things that had risen within her, thoughts and feelings for which she knew no words. He did not move or acknowledge her presence, but sat still and unmoving until she had left his side.

As she walked away, Xhea heard the quiet sound of his weeping.

Outside, the sun was setting. Xhea stood atop the building feeling as if she stood atop the City itself, watching the sun set in brilliant tones of ash and rainwater. It was the first sunset she'd ever seen, and she did not need color to know it was beautiful. Around her, in the towers and homes of the City, she could see the glow of life, the minutiae of lives being lived: all nature of magic, bright in her eyes.

"Balance," she said as the day faded to night.

In the darkness above the City, stars began to come out.

THE END

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