

## The Job of an Unrequited

(an excerpt)

by Rachael Needham

This hospital is filled with the usual hospital noises. A variety of beeps, cries, breathing patterns, and prayers bombard my sensitive ears. Even from my seat in the smoker's box outside of the ER, where future Reaps puff their lives away in impatient and stale silence, I have difficulty concentrating on my assigned task. Yet another Reaper had been too swift, and here I am cleaning up their mess. This time it was a little girl by the name of Ella.

The heads of the Death Department spare Requirers, such as myself, "unnecessary details" like the names of Reaps whose souls need to be returned. They say it's for our own good, that tuning in to such details can ignite emotions. Human emotions can be dangerous for Reapers and Requirers. But I indulge anyway. It's hard not to when Ella's loved ones are practically screaming their prayers.

"She's only 11," their pleas make my chest ache, a bitter sweet reminder that there were once, perhaps, people who pleaded for my life. "Please God. Let Ella be ok."

The nurses haven't informed them that she has already flat lined. They're still rubbing the defibrillators together in hope to save her.

The prayers become overwhelming, and I have to pull back from my concentration. One of the smokers gets up from his sit on the bench and throws his cigarette on the ground despite there being an ashtray to his right. I follow behind him as he walks towards the ER's automatic doors. If I wanted, I could walk through the hospital walls and straight to Ella. Humans can't see me; however, future Reaps often can. And, because this is a hospital, there are too many soon-to-be Reaps here to risk being seen. Instead I enter if I were a normal human, dressed in the same

blue hoodie and jeans I was Reaped in. When the smoker reaches the doors, they slide open. I walk in just before they close.

After passing the enormous rumble of prayers and cries in the waiting room, I slip into the ER after a nurse. I don't have to look long to find Ella. A crowd of white robes, masked faces, and beeping machines surround her. The doctors and nurses yell numbers and solutions to somehow bring her back to life.

I approach her gurney, eyeing everyone for any sign of recognition that I am here.

And then I see her.

No, not her bruised face or her blood splattered clothes. I see her soul. Floating helplessly above her lifeless body. Severed and abandoned.

My chest aches again, this time in anticipation for the collision that comes with reattaching her soul to her vessel.

I reach out for the soul's hand, our fingers touch, and I'm blinded by her last memories. I see candlelight, a boy grinning over a birthday cake. I feel her joy and excitement as she, the boy, and other children race each other in the street. I hear screams and feel fear and see headlights and then nothing.

It's ecstasy.

This is what the Death Department warns us about. Reapers and Requirers are no longer meant to feel human emotions. We have no use for them. They only make us crave life or death or anything that is not this nothingness of simply existing.

I have the power to possess this human, to take control of her vessel and live her life as if it were mine. I could live again. I could die.

But if I were to possess this human.

Ella.

If I were to possess Ella, she would be forced to take my place as a Requirer.

So, I resist the ecstasy. I grab the soul's wrist and pull it back down to Ella. It immediately reattaches, eager to fuse with its dwelling. The heart monitor beeps once, then twice, until her life is requited.