

THE LIGHTHOUSE  
AT THE EDGE  
OF THE WORLD

BY J. R. DAWSON

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*The First Bright Thing*  
*The Lighthouse at the Edge of the World*

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LIGHTHOUSE  
AT THE  
EDGE  
OF THE  
WORLD



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*To Jessie,  
All my stories are for you.*

*To Cerberus,  
Better known as Toby, Stitch, and Paddington.  
Now you'll live forever.*

*And finally,  
To who I was.  
The girl who ran after L trains  
slept on couches  
and walked through snowstorms  
alone  
because Chicago held her brave, young heart.*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

While this book holds many hopes, it also comes with some difficult passages, including an active shooter situation, death, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide, endangerment of an animal, and estrangement from a parent.

If you are struggling, as someone who has struggled herself, I can say there is hope even when it very much does not look like it. Please reach out to someone, text 988, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

If you are a survivor like Charlie or her parents, there are resources and people who understand. A good place to start is Survivors Empowered at [survivorshempowered.org](http://survivorshempowered.org), an organization run by Jessi Ghawi's family that provides resources and self-empowerment for those whose lives have been affected by gun violence.

For Chicago residents specifically, there is [chicagosurvivors.org](http://chicagosurvivors.org), which is a wonderful nonprofit that provides services to the families of Chicago homicide victims.

And these are only three organizations in a long list of groups that offer support and help. You're not alone.



“Love doesn’t die, people do.”

—*Meritt Malloy, “Epitaph,” a meditation before Kaddish*



# REMNANTS

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Here is your story, written down. Above all, remember this.

Your name is Harosen. You are the ferryman. You built the Station. You protect the city from the Haunts and the demon beyond. He started the Great Fire. You locked him away in a tower.

You must keep your Station's light burning.

Do not let him out.

*—Excerpt from a letter to the ferryman*





# NERA

Nera Harosen lived in a ferry station for the dead, between the city and the lake.

But living, for Nera, was living in a forever. Each day in the Station passed like the last, each night like the one to come.

But Nera did not yet know that tonight, forever would end.

Nera stood at the edge of the ethereal Station, her back straight and her eyes glassy, a specter with lantern in hand. The little basset hound named Elbee stood by her side.

*The Haunts are getting closer,* he said to her.

Nera saw the Haunts, frightening static and smoke, an amalgamation of lost souls, reaching out from the darkened sides of the path that led to the Station, clawing at the stones. But they still hissed and shrank back when the great light from above swung their way, like a sword from the sky.

Her father's lighthouse.

*The lighthouse still holds them back,* Nera said. But then the light flickered. Something wasn't right. It hadn't been right for some time.

*Your father is getting older,* Elbee said. *The lighthouse gets dimmer. Nera, I am afraid what will happen if things don't change.*

The lighthouse flickered again.

Before Nera could say anything else, they saw tonight's guests cross under the long bridge that separated the lake and the Station from the city. Nera raised her lantern higher. *Here!* she called to the dogs that led the souls down the stone path. She would guide them past the Haunts and into the Station, where her father waited to ferry them to the world-to-come.

As her father's apprentice, it was her great duty to keep the Haunts from devouring the new souls, to protect their guests from harm.

The ghosts who arrived did not look like the corrupted Haunts. These souls were small whispers, feelings, remnants of someones who used to be. She could not see them properly; they weren't corporeal any longer, more like wisps of clouds moving alongside one another. Guiding them were many, *many* dogs. They protected the ghosts that had not been consumed by the Haunts. They led them to the lake and beyond.

Between the bridge's underpass and Nera, on the stone path, was a fountain. A plume of water sprayed down through the crowds far beyond its circular basin, sprinkling the souls and the stones. As every dog and ghost crossed through its mist, Nera saw the spirits' bodies reappear. Not alive, but the memories of

faces, hands, feet, hair. In gray scale, rather than in color, but visible all the same.

The soul remembering the body.

Nera raised her lantern, and the crowd followed her light past the four main pillars and into the massive Station. Her father said it resembled a train station. The dogs said it was grand and gorgeous. It was all Nera had known.

*You are safe now. This is your resting point,* Elbee sounded out to the crowd behind them, in the voice and language of the dead. Nera did not speak to the dead. Only the dogs did. *It is between the world-that-was and the world-to-come. You are welcome here. Take your time. And when you are ready, the ferry leaves every night for the Veil.*

Everything about the Station's marble, glass, and iron frame spoke strength. As Nera turned around and headed past the large pillars into the Station, the atrium ahead gleamed with the lighthouse above the glass dome and the stars beyond it. The perfectly polished floors were immaculate. Two long curved staircases stood opposite one another on either side of her, curling upward to the balconied second floor. All of this, the glass and the polished floor and the golden staircases, reflected the lighthouse's lamp that shone courtesy of her father's magic.

The dogs weaved around, guiding all the ghosts through the atrium, up to the mezzanine, and down carpeted halls that snaked off this main marble hub. Nera knew these hallways led to many rooms full of things ghosts missed from the city. An echo of life, but something safer: nostalgia.

Nera never used these rooms, because what use did she have for nostalgia?

Nera did not remember life outside. She had been found by the Station Master as a baby, her fingers grasping onto the shores of Chicago, her feet kicking in the waters of Lake Michigan. She had been raised inside the Station's walls. She was not dead, but her life was lived among the dead. Years passed in the way summers do when one is young: time marches, and there are days and nights, all uncounted. But Nera enjoyed the feeling of forever. Even when she had decided to become an adult, her life had been here, in these unmeasured echoes of others.

The souls came from the city. They would leave through the lake. And Nera would stay here as their anchor, their guide, their protector. The same scene, over and over again, an eternal welcome and goodbye. She was the sinew between here and there. Someday, when Father left through the Veil and entered the world-to-come, he would trust her own magic to light the Station. And she would give everything to this home.

She hoped she would be enough.

This existence was safe. This home was shelter, knowing no breath, but also no pain. Their staff was small, only Nera and her father and the dogs. How grateful Nera was, to not know the city's pain.

This is what she told herself.

Elbee, the leader of the dogs, stayed by Nera's side in the atrium. He had tired, doleful eyes that always seemed to know more than he told her. He nudged her side. She wondered, if they were in the city, would his touch be something more than a way of saying, "Hi, I'm here." Nera didn't feel, didn't smell, didn't taste. She sensed pressure, numbly, and saw, clearly, that her friend Elbee was beside her. But what would the fur of a dog feel like?

No. She shook the idea from her thoughts. It was enough to know Elbee existed. Sometimes these ideas of being alive would rise, but Father always said it was too easy to get caught up in life, in the world-that-was. *Don't look the guests in the eyes, he often said. Don't see their faces. They are a crowd to be guided. Stay in this moment, don't get distracted.*

At the stroke of midnight, her father appeared at the top of the staircase.

The Station Master's name was Harosen. He had once been a mortal man, had once lived in the city over a hundred years ago. Then, after the Great Fire that almost destroyed the city, the Haunts had risen. So, he'd built the lighthouse, became its keeper and protector. He'd held the line for over a century, forging himself into something more than a mortal. He now stood like an old white statue, tired and chipping away, but still thick and broad and confident.

He was his own kind of specter, with color in his cheeks and pepper gray in his thick, combed hair. He wore an old black vest and occasionally hooked his thumbs in its pockets. A red bow tie hugged his neck, but he did not breathe or speak aloud.

If she could, Nera would keep him here like this, forever.

Then again, forever was all she knew.

But she saw the lighthouse above him, still flickering. Still dimmer than it should be. Elbee was right.

*All aboard*, Father announced to the dogs in the voice of the dead. Then he looked to Nera, his hazel eyes sparkling with affection.

*Nera*, he said as they met at the bottom of the stairs. *You are my greatest wonder of light in this Station.*

For all the magic the Station held, it still grew very solemn when it was time to gather for the ferry. Some souls departed for the hotel wing, not yet prepared to leave, but most followed the dogs onward through the atrium to the eastern side's docks, facing the waters. They were ready. Nera and Harosen followed the souls and the dogs like two shepherds.

The colorful pair brought up the rear of this monochrome parade, passing under the red wooden archway that marked their path into the waters of Lake Michigan and the ferry that waited for them. The dogs flanked their procession, one for each spirit, and led the guests aboard. The ferry always held as many people as it needed to. The souls, their guide dogs, the Station Master, and Nera.

The boat wasn't a gondola, and it wasn't a fantastical galleon. For as long

as Nera could remember, it had taken the form of a motorized double-decker ferry. Instead of architecture tours, though, this boat ferried its guests to the world-to-come.

Harosen started up the engine while his daughter dutifully stepped onto the rocking boat. Nera looked to Elbee, and Elbee reported, *Everyone is safely aboard.*

The passengers took seats on the wooden benches, or stood at the railings. Like most nights, the majority were older, but there were a few children. The souls pointed around at the dock, at the outside of the Station, and some craned their necks to see the city skyline. Others looked away, like they'd already said their goodbyes. Or maybe they didn't know how to say goodbye.

If it were Nera's final time seeing the skyline, she supposed she would watch it until it disappeared. She stole a glance now, eyeing the large buildings that glistened like the stars; lights dancing on and off from the faces of those behemoths. She did not know any of the names of the buildings. Chicago was a foreign land, too distant to see the living, but too close to ignore.

Harosen kept the helm steady, and the ferry's engine pattered. It never gave out, and Harosen never guided them astray.

As the ferry pulled away from the shore and the Station, Elbee came to nudge her again.

*You always watch the city,* he muttered. *I see you. Every night.*

Nera didn't say anything. Perhaps not every night.

During the day, in the Station, there were chores and halls and lighthouses and dogs and Father. A melted mosaic of memory she could dive into, as if the Station was the whole world. But out here, she could see the breadth of the universe. Or at least the city.

*Your father hasn't looked out to the city since he left it,* Elbee said.

*Because the city is a dangerous, painful place,* Nera said.

Elbee sighed, that big gruff of a sigh that only dogs can do. *Well, if I am to forever live on the edge of a city, I am glad it is Chicago.*

It was an unknown kingdom, the place they all were leaving. The place where the ferryman's daughter would never go.

Never.

And what was the point of having an opinion on such a fact? It would not change. She was never to leave the Station and the lake. If she *was* to have an opinion, surely her opinion would be the same as her father's: they were blessed to stand in the in-between, in a dream.

Elbee wandered to a quiet corner for a nap, so Nera turned from the city lights and looked ahead into the dark black lake. To the breaker, where the ferry would head deeper into the night, and the city would disappear behind them, receding into a fog.

As they passed into open waters, and the sky and the lake both glimmered with stars, there was no going back. Only forward into an unknown. All the

souls around Harosen and Nera melted from gray to glowing bright gold and green and purple and blue . . . unique hues, running together like watercolors.

Then the boat arrived at the Veil.

Wide, a void in the air stretching from the lake to the stars. A glossy iridescence rippled through the dark night, catching the eye and then disappearing and then reappearing. Like an aurora borealis gleaming out from the mouth of a cave.

It led somewhere beyond. No one knew what was on the other side, but her father said it was a world-to-come. This was a portal leading beyond the lake, beyond the Station, beyond anything anyone on this side of the Veil had ever seen.

The Veil hummed quietly. The ferry pattered closer. Nera climbed the stairs, taking her place at her father's side.

The dogs stayed by the sides of their appointed souls, some nuzzling, others happily chatting.

*Keep your eyes on the waters,* Father murmured.

She should have stopped watching the dead. Each of their faces turning to look at their final stop, expressions of peace, anger, hope, fear, all the things she imagined a human would feel in a lifetime, now settled into this one last moment.

This was the dance of the dead performed every night. But tonight, something was different, out of step.

There, in the middle of the kaleidoscope of color, was something solid. Bold. Clear.

As clear as Nera and Harosen.

It was a woman with a messy chopped haircut: thick, unwashed dirty blonde hair with a haphazardly cut fringe. Her pale nose had little freckles. She wore a green hooded sweater, a black skirt, and bangles of silicone bracelets around her wrists. She was not glowing. She was tangible and solid, a physical body, not something bigger, not something dead. And she didn't have a dog.

She looked alive. She *was* alive.

Nera stared at her. How could she have missed this woman back at the dock? She wasn't supposed to look too closely at the crowd, but how could she have missed this?

This woman was stuck in flesh, bones, blood, schedules and deadlines and anxieties and identities.

Nera looked to her father, who had not noticed the woman. Instead, he looked to the void of the Veil. Nera couldn't see past it; only small shades of purple as the edge of the world hummed through the surface.

The glowing souls leaned forward.

But the woman, she stumbled backward, and she fell, and she gave a small hiss.

With her voice.

Not a memory of a voice, but a true voice. One that still had vocal cords, still made vibrations in the physical realm.

Nera moved closer. Harosen was readying the plank. He didn't even register Nera approaching the terrified woman with the brown eyes.

"It's alright," Nera tried. And Nera heard her voice.

*I heard my voice.*

"It's alright," I said again. Something separate from my father, from the ferry, from the dead and the lake and the Veil. It was a voice that only came from me, from a throat and a tongue and a mouth . . . *my* mouth. *My* body.

The woman shot backward. She shook her head. "It's not alright," she said. And I reached out, brushing the top of her hand. She was solid.

She really was alive.

I couldn't feel my own breath. Did I have breath?

"Who are you?" I asked her.

"Charlie," she said. Her name touched her lips, in a small inflection that only belonged to her. Her mouth turned just the slightest bit, as if she was hiding a smile . . . or perhaps a sadness. Her eye narrowed, just one, auburn specks imperfectly placed in the dark brown iris.

"You're not dead," I said.

She stared at me. "No, I'm not. And neither are you."

I suppose that is when it moved from a fairy tale to my story. My life. My death. My time in between.

When I saw Charlie, I woke up.