

Silent Knife



David Nurenberg

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No one would suspect that Ariadne, the cold and deadly "Silent Knife" of Prince Liliane, was once a sensitive college girl who preferred books to blades. But that life ended when her lover Andre cast her aside, into the waiting fangs of an unknown Sire who fled after the Embrace. Re-shaped by her Prince's cruel tutelage, Ariadne has fought hard to earn her place in Liliane's court. Now that court is threatened from all sides: Liliane's former Seneschal is staging a rebellion, wielding deadly magics that threaten Kindred and humans alike. The Invictus Council is preparing a hostile takeover to preserve the Masquerade, and the city's powerful Mages are losing patience with the entire vampire population. In short, this is the worst possible time for Andre to re-enter Ariadne's life. In his presence, the girl Ariadne once was begins to resurface, and this may be just the chance her jealous Elders are waiting for to rid themselves of her upstart presence....



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For Liana

Silent Knife

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Prologue

Blood ran in rivulets down the walls.

Crimson tendrils spread like spider-plant shoots, indifferent to the paintings suspended in their path. The Christ in the Rueland Frueauf original now hanging askew was wet with fresh blossoms of scarlet. His placid face was buried under a bright, bloody starburst, all save his left eye. The orb stared from the blot with a promise of judgment on what was transpiring in the candlelit foyer.

In a rough circle formed by upturned furniture, two men struggled. Behind one of the toppled couches, two women crouched. Somewhere an old phonograph played an aria from Donizetti's *La fille du régiment*, skipping every few seconds.

The women turned to face each other. Red beads spattered the platinum-dyed hair of one. When the flickering candlelight caught her locks just right, the bubbled blood shone like rubies. "We need to get out of here," she whispered, tugging at her companion's black silk sleeve.

"No." The other woman, olive skinned and soft featured, pulled her arm away, reached for the straight, double-edged sword that lay beyond her grasp on the carpet. She couldn't grab it, not without disobeying orders and moving from cover.

"Don't be an idiot, Ariadne. Let Wilson take care of this."

Ariadne turned back to the fight, a whip of her jet-black hair snapping in the air. She peered over the makeshift barricade to see Wilson, the larger of the two combatants, wrap his fingers around his opponent's neck. A gash several inches long ran in a half-moon across Wilson's scalp, as if his bald head were smiling back at Ariadne, reassuring her that things would be all right. His actual face was locked in a crooked expression that could have been a grin or a snarl of pain. Wilson's black leather jacket was soaked with blood, torn and rent to reveal skin, tissue, and bone beneath. Seeing the damage to the coat pained Ariadne more than the wounds to his flesh; it was his badge of office as Sheriff, enforcer for the local Prince. It had taken Wilson decades to earn, and Ariadne hoped he intended to make his adversary suffer for every rip and scuff.

The smaller man struggled in Wilson's grip. His unshod feet slipped and slid in the red puddle beneath them, his callused fingers clutched at Wilson's shoulders. Then he went suddenly still. A strangely amiable smile crept across his lips, as if he had bumped into

an old friend he only now recognized. Ariadne watched as he straightened his fingers and calmly jabbed the tips into the enforcer's sides. They began to sink in, displacing pools of red and white ooze.

"Sorry, Sheriff," the smaller man said, "but this fight's over. I'm leaving."

"Roarke!" Wilson barked his opponent's name, coughing blood into the other man's face. The hands in his sides were buried now up to the wrists. Roarke tensed, then moved his arms in a zigzag. They cut through flesh as if it were water, severing sinew and bone and organ. Wilson's torso exploded, splattering Ariadne's face with gore.

Beside her, the other woman screamed. Ariadne snapped around to see her backing away, mouth wide, fangs jutting. She was right next to the fallen blade.

"Hera," Ariadne hissed. "Quick. The sword."

Hera stared through a gap in the toppled furniture. Her gaze fixed on Roarke as he wiped a few chunks of Wilson off his arms, then bent down and retrieved a large leather-bound book from the floor. He shook his head at the blood that now stained its pages.

"Hera!"

Wordlessly, never taking her eyes off the victorious Roarke, Hera kicked the sword over to Ariadne. Then she scrambled to her feet and fled.

Roarke regarded Ariadne warily as she stepped around the couch. She held the sword with both hands, the tip slightly raised toward her opponent. She straightened her back.

"You're between me an' the door," he drawled calmly, advancing toward her. "I'm gonna be walking out now, with the grimoire. The only question is how many more Licks I kill before I leave."

Ariadne bristled at the insult; she had long ago passed beyond the ranks of those mortals kept around as food. She bared her fangs and raised her sword. "Stay back."

"You're a young'un, so I'm going to give you some choices. You can just stand there, all threatening, and let me go. Tell the Prince you did your best, but I knocked you flat. Tell her whatever you want. Or you can forget the Prince's little pipe dream and join me. We'll clean up this pus-covered world the right way."

He took another step forward, then nodded toward the corpse behind him. "Or maybe you want to end up like the Sheriff..."

"We trusted you." Ariadne's dark eyes flashed. "We thought you believed."

Roarke kept advancing, his left hand outstretched.

"New Jerusalem means that much to you, girl? You'd lay down your eternal life for it, right here an' now?"

"Yes!"

Back still straight, Ariadne charged. Roarke moved to intercept with an empty-handed blow, but at the last moment she ducked, spun along his side, and brought her blade around in an arc. It lopped off Roarke's left arm at the elbow in a clean, perfect cut. The limb and the large book in its grasp thudded dully onto the carpet.

Roarke buried his head in his shoulder, face twisted in pain, but let loose no cry. With half-closed lids he eyed the arm where it lay, then turned to regard Ariadne.

For a moment, time froze. Then both moved at once. Ariadne's blade swept low, slicing through the book's thick pages, its binding barely slowing the upswing. Roarke howled

curses as he landed beside the ruined tome, grasping uselessly with his good hand at the sundered halves.

He stared up at her, his eyes a maelstrom of hatred. Ariadne raised her sword again and moved in, only to find Roarke had somehow produced a blade to parry hers.

Then Ariadne realized it wasn't a sword. The severed bone from his left shoulder had grown down, extended to twice its former length. Lined with serrated edges, the bone-blade ended in a tip as sharp as any stiletto's.

Ariadne did not permit herself horror or revulsion. They circled the room, testing one another, thrusting and retreating.

Footsteps thundered close. Ariadne could hear the shouts of the Prince's soldiers. Roarke could, too. He inclined his head to her in a curt nod, then dove low, barreling into her legs and using his body as a battering ram. She toppled and landed with her face just inches from the grimoire.

The tattered page fragments twitched before her eyes, blackening and combusting of their own volition. She glimpsed groups of swiftly vanishing letters, written in a script she could not read. More than anything, it seemed to her like musical notation.

Forcing herself to turn away, Ariadne rose up, but it was too late. Roarke was fleeing into the hallway.

A dozen figures trampled past in pursuit. Shouts echoed down the hall.

The needle on the phonograph finally fell off the record. The Donizetti aria abruptly ceased, as if cut off by sword stroke. Ariadne steadied herself, wiped her blade, and took off in pursuit.



Part One

*My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me...*

—Emily Dickinson

Chapter One

Ariadne's mind was quiet at last, because she was breaking someone's jaw.

Human figures swayed and bent all around her like stalks of wheat blown helplessly by the wind. Fast as they were, she was always faster. One of the few rebels still standing managed to draw a pistol. A jump, a pivot, a swing of Ariadne's sword, and the hand that held the gun fell to the ground. Just as a scream began to bubble in the rebel's throat, Ariadne's next slice took off his head.

The hum of industrial machinery and the buzz of electric streetlights created a cocoon, demarcated by a hazy yellow-white aura within which the rebels stumbled as if bound by its edges. Outside the glow, in the thin fog that hung over the city of Cambridge, the crumpled metal frame of the Stata Center loomed Behemoth-like over the MIT campus. The blue police assistance lights on nearby call boxes shone dimly, like the impotent torches of distant angry villagers.

One of the rebels centered himself and lunged at her. She let him come, chose not to stop his knife as it took a slice out of her cheek, scraping bone. The drops of red scattered in front of her eyes and then merged with the fog. She ducked in under the arm, her fist pounding beneath the rib cage in a mockery of the Heimlich maneuver. He crumpled but did not let go of his weapon.

His control, however, was gone. He jabbed out madly. The edge of his knife scraped at Ariadne's arm, her shoulder, even her long hair, now half loose from its ponytail. A lucky stab found the tendon of Ariadne's wrist, and her hand released her sword. The fog did nothing to absorb the sound of its clatter against the pavement.

The rebel grinned, as much in surprise as triumph. He advanced and Ariadne gave ground, until she felt the presence of the concrete wall behind her. The rebel shouted as he lunged.

At the last moment Ariadne seized his knife-hand and, with a gesture made no less swift by its familiarity, snapped it at the wrist. She followed with a punch to the stomach that breached flesh and bone until she felt the wet, intimate kiss of what lay inside. Then she withdrew, pushing his body with her foot as she did. He clutched at phantoms in the air as he fell backward to the ground.

Between eye blinks, Ariadne swooped down to seize her fallen blade. She swung it in an arc that tore the rebel's head from his body, giving birth to a tiny bouquet of

sparks as the blade's tip scratched the pavement. It would mar the blade, but blades could be repaired.

Silence on the street. The billowing clouds from the steam vents merged with the fog that wrapped the campus, turning buildings into the crudely rendered legs of indifferent giants, cars into blind rats scurrying about between their feet. Occasional shadows moved behind lab windows lit up for late-night research. MBTA trains rumbled beneath the pavement, the ripples teasing Ariadne's toes within her boots.

By the time the yowl of the police siren and the subsequent footfalls announced the arrival of would-be investigators, Ariadne was gone, moving through the shadows and the fog, dragging the headless corpses behind her into a service alley. She dropped them unceremoniously to the damp pavement and stared at them for a long moment. Her eyes were trained on her victims, but she was really searching herself for some ember of pity, or even revulsion. She found nothing.

Even letting the rebel disarm her, raising the stakes for a few moments, hadn't stirred her. Inside, there was still just a cloud of white, like the static on a broken television set.

Ariadne rubbed the torn tendons of her arm, the pain finally starting to register. She gritted her teeth through the discomfort as she ripped off a storm drain cover, then shoved the bodies of the slain rebels into the sewer. Their skin and muscle were already beginning to come off in chunks between her fingers. She flicked the dead matter idly onto the curb, where it crumbled into oozing dirt.

Ariadne reached behind a dumpster and pulled out a guitar case. She removed the leather jacket and jeans inside, drew them up over her blood-soaked bodysuit. She then placed her blade neatly inside the now-empty case and slung it around her back. There was no easy way to clean her hands, so she shoved them in her pockets and began walking.

Start to finish, leaping upon the rebels to cleanup: four minutes. It wasn't her best time ever, but it would do.

Another four minutes later, Ariadne stood expectantly, her hands in fists inside her jacket, before a parking garage. In the fog the entrance ramp looked like the maw of some squatting beast, its concrete tongue revealed in flickers by the dying halogen lights.

The soft sound of flesh meeting flesh resounded from inside the tunnel. Ariadne heard no footsteps as some of the fog around the unmanned attendant booth coalesced into the shape of a man. His wide hands separated and collided slowly in applause.

Still Ariadne waited, brown eyes unblinking. Her hair merged with the darkness around her. So, too, did Mister Rose's ebon skin; it seemed an extension of the murk from which he emerged. As he moved closer, his finely tailored suit gave him definition, a framed container for his bulky mass. By the time he stood before Ariadne, his face appeared to have been sculpted out of obsidian—a statue in some Egyptian museum brought to life.

"Acceptable, Sheriff," said Mister Rose. "For now."

• • • • •

Ariadne and Rose walked slowly through the gauntlet of parking meters on Amherst Street. The fog was departing, driven east to the harbor by a now-steady breeze. Whenever the two passed under a streetlight, it seemed to bleed away some of their mystique, turning them into an unassuming pair. Ariadne, tall and lithe, looking barely older than the oc-

casual MIT student who sped past them on a late-night bicycle ride. Mister Rose, stout and distinguished, was dressed in a suit out-of-fashion enough to let him pass as one of her professors. Only the fact that no puffs of air escaped into the cold night air as she and her companion spoke betrayed them as something extraordinary.

“With you as the new Sheriff, Prince Liliane expects this crisis to be over by week’s end. Isn’t that what she said?”

Ariadne stared ahead at the boxy laboratory buildings that were just tall enough to dash all hopes of seeing Memorial Drive, or even most of the Boston skyline that lay beyond.

“It’s not a crisis.” She spoke toward the buildings, not Rose. “It’s an internal matter. A dispute between the Prince and her former Seneschal.”

“Well practiced. Not only can you fight, you can parrot the party line. The younger generation has ever-so-many talents.”

Ariadne did not take the bait. To do so would have been suicidal. “Roarke’s rebellion is no threat to the Masquerade. We engage only at night, in secluded areas, with due discretion. The kine know no more about us than they ever did. You have my word.”

“How comforting. The word of a neonate.”

Ariadne kept her gaze fixed ahead of her, although she slowed her pace. “You saw what I can do. You saw how well I kept that last fight under wraps, even in a populated area such as this. I spotted the rebels in a crowd, lured them to an alley, and took care of them.”

“Encouraging, yes. You do impressive work.”

Before she could stop herself, Ariadne said, “The Prince told you that. Anyone in the coterie could have told you that.”

Rose stared sidelong at her. “Liliane will simply have to forgive me if I didn’t just settle for reading her memos—or accepting the boasts of her minions without some proof. And that’s what I’ve seen: some proof. Nothing more.”

Ariadne pushed down the knot in her stomach. Icily, she said, “All I meant was that the Council has nothing to fear.”

Rose placed a restraining hand on Ariadne’s shoulder. “The Council only wishes to help.” He didn’t squeeze. He didn’t have to. “Even a Prince needs to look to those above her from time to time. For guidance. It’s the way of things, and there’s no shame in that.”

Ariadne stared at the sidewalk, counted to three, and then turned to face him. His eyes seemed more tired than she had been expecting, but no less alert for it.

“Liliane will make sure the Masquerade holds. We have the strength to deal with the uprising and the resources to contain mortal press and police as we do so. We don’t need any ... assistance.”

Rose stared at her, and Ariadne could almost feel vibrations shaking her body, though this time not from any passing subway train. His face began to twist, and she tensed until she saw it was twisting into a smile.

“I can tell you don’t even believe that yourself. You’re worried. You have your own doubts.”

Ariadne opened her mouth, but Rose shook his head.

“Liliane is right about one thing, little one: Your fighting prowess is remarkable. The Council could make good use of someone with your talents. You like swords, yes?”

Still keeping one hand on her shoulder, he pulled aside his blazer to reveal a shoulderholster.

Instead of a gun handle, a jeweled hilt peeked out over the lip of the leather.

"I'm sure you've never seen a sword like this before. It's one of only two ever made, and the Council owns both. Do you know what it can do?"

The pattern on the hilt changed each time Ariadne refocused her eyes. One moment it bore a simple fleur de lis pattern, the next it was made of small, sculpted figures with gargoyle features. She cocked her head, and from the new angle the hilt looked to be made of petrified wood carved with runes.

"It's not charged yet—" Rose tapped the blade gently with his finger "—but draw blood once to feed it, and on its next cut, it steals a soul."

He drew his coat back to conceal the weapon once more. Rose smiled as he watched Ariadne fight the urge to reach for it like a child baited by a shiny toy, then added, "We have all sorts of wonders, for our worthiest hands to wield."

The image of the sword flickered on Ariadne's retinas, like the visual residue of a fireworks display. For a moment, she had lost track of just where she was.

Then, with a start, she yanked herself away from his grip. Her hand flew instinctively to the guitar case at her back, but she stopped there.

Rose stared expectantly, his smile instantly gone.

"I have my own blades, thank you. And they are sworn to the service of Prince Liliane." She lowered her hand to her side, turned, and resumed walking.

"The so-called Dame of Eagle Hill," Rose said as he drew up alongside her, adding a low rumble that passed for a chuckle. "I've never liked this city. It's a bad place for our kind. Too many wizards asking too many questions. Your Prince surprised all of us with her success here, and the Council certainly appreciates an Invictus presence in Boston. But the Masquerade must be held even tighter here than elsewhere. If Liliane cannot control her brood—"

"The war will be won." Ariadne narrowed her eyes. "And we'll win it quickly. I'll do everything necessary to ensure that."

"What is necessary right now is that you find a way to return to your Prince without drawing undue attention. You're not expecting to ride the subway, buying tokens and holding onto rails with those blood-soaked hands, I hope."

"Of course not. I've already arranged for a cab." And the subway doesn't even take tokens any longer, you dinosaur, she thought. They have plastic scan-cards now.

They emerged onto the grassy plain that preceded Memorial Drive on the banks of the Charles River. The fog was almost completely gone now. The skyline stretched before them: the monolithic Hancock Building, the snub-nosed and pugnacious-looking Prudential Center. The smaller skyscrapers clustered at a respectful distance like attendants, casting their lights obediently into the midnight dark. At their base, the water of the Charles turned the city upside down, blurred and distorted it, and not for the first time Ariadne entertained the thought that the warped city in the water was in fact the real one, all bent and murky.

Pairs of white and red lights zoomed past between Ariadne and the two skylines, an ever-shifting barrier of cars like flaming swords barring her passage. The city was not for

her, not her place to work and love and gawk and enjoy. Here, she was allowed only to hunt.

But she had another city awaiting her. It didn't exist yet, but she was helping Liliane build it. Once this war was over, once they were rid of Mister Rose ...

"She squinted, waiting for the expected yellow-and-white blur of an approaching cab. She and Rose exchanged no more words until it arrived. Rose entered first, certain to make eye contact with the driver. Ariadne could feel the pulse of energy exchanged between them, knew that after this gaze the cabbie's eyes would never quite fall on them. She knew that the cabbie wouldn't be troubled by the blurry features in the rearview mirror, that he would fail to recall any of the words he might overhear during the ride. She could have planted the subliminal message herself, of course. She wondered if Rose had done it just to feel useful."

Sunken into the back seat, Ariadne stared without seeing, letting the passing lights and the rhythm of the car as it passed over the uneven pavement lull her almost to sleep. Except she hadn't slept, not like a human being, in ten years.

The cab radio was playing an old Aerosmith song. Ariadne reached for a memory that eluded her, and then for the feeling that should have accompanied that loss, with no success. It reminded her of a different song, one she had been trying to remember for months. She only seemed able to recollect it when some other music was playing, but then the notes in her mind got scrambled with the notes outside it.

Somewhere in all of that reaching, Ariadne's eyes settled on the driver's license pasted on the back of the glass window that bisected the cab.

For the first time all evening, Ariadne felt terror.

It ran through all her nerves at once, a lightning strike that nearly spasmed her limbs. Mister Rose's eyes slid toward her, questioning, and she quickly tried to compose herself.

The cabbie's name.

Ariadne knew she had to glance in the mirror, but postponed it for long, torturous seconds. Having stepped off a precipice, though, she could only resist gravity for so long.

The mirror moved slowly into her field of vision, and there he was. The same blond hair, a little thinner and more matted, but she could feel its texture under her fingertips just by staring. The same stout nose, the same rough skin, the same brown-red lips, the same small, intense blue eyes, each cradling a ring of gold at the center, staring ahead into the road. Then they suddenly glanced up, dimly aware of some unseen scrutiny.

The cabbie searched the mirror for a long moment, as if he thought he saw something, but quickly returned his gaze to the road. Ariadne was safely hidden. Still, her blood was seething like it hadn't all through the battle.

Andrei.

Andrei Montague.

She wanted to speak the name out loud, almost had to cover her mouth not to. Rose was staring at her impatiently. She looked at her lap.

The cab had reached East Boston, was already turning onto Porter Street. Only a few minutes remained. Ariadne's fingers flexed helplessly. She bit her lip. She could last a few minutes. She had to. Why weren't they on Shelby Street yet? Were they going to hit every single red light in East Boston?

An advertisement jingle was playing on the radio, and Ariadne swore she could remember that damned song if only it lasted a little longer.

Then “Imagine” came on and shattered her concentration. She glanced up to the mirror. Andrei’s face loomed. He was humming, harmonizing with John Lennon when the “ah-ha, ah-ha-ah” came along. Within her pockets, Ariadne began softly tapping her thighs in rhythm.

Instead of the constant stale iron of blood, she tasted orange pekoe tea. Claws began tearing into her brain, pulling out memories like entrails: a dormitory lounge, a checkered dance floor, and, before she could stop the mad rush of images, a covered bridge at midnight.

Her mouth opened. Her lips began to form a word. Her throat cracked as she began to speak his name.

The cab pulled abruptly to a halt. Ariadne, jarred back to her senses, threw open the door and raced out. Later, she would wonder if Rose even bothered to pay the fare or if he’d just made Andrei forget the ride had ever happened. She would wonder if Rose had taken note of her own discombobulation. For now, she just shot ahead, scrambled up the side of Eagle Hill to the looming Victorian that presided over the neighborhood. She pushed herself as fast as she could fly to the door, grasping for the handle, not nearly as frightened of Mister Rose’s reaction as she was of the thought that she might stop, might look back, might chase down the cab, get inside, and never emerge again.

Outside, the Boston skyline continued casting its light into the dark night, which gobbled it up and demanded more. In the Charles, the upside-down mirror-city mocked its parent, grinning with streetlight eyes, flashing its crooked set of beacon teeth.

Chapter Two

Ariadne is wearing a tank top and a long floral skirt, sitting all splayed out along the shaggy rainbow bed-throw that her roommate gave her last Christmas, tossing a stuffed platypus named Telemachus up and down in the air. Sunlight, warm and beautiful, fills the room. A pile of books lays scattered pell-mell at the edge of the bed—The Collected Works of Byron, Wuthering Heights, Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life—pages dog-eared, covered in bright yellow sticky notes. A volume of Keats opens its pages like welcoming arms in her lap, but the words begin to blur...



Not important. Ariadne's injured arm shivered as she clasped the bony white hand of one of the elders. A fluttering of yellowed silk scraped the mostly healed knife-wound on her wrist. In Ariadne's other hand lay the meaty, callused fingers of one her fellow soldiers, poking through the holes in his leather glove.

"For we are all one circle." A soft contralto voice wove its way through the room, seeming to come from everywhere at once. "Though we dwell in the darkness, we, together, are a beacon of light."

Two-dozen men and women formed a ring. They were a motley collection: some had faces soft and supple, lacking only the rosy glow of youth's bloom. Other brows were creased and withered, and still others twisted into visages of bone and tumor barely recognizable as human. Some wore T-shirts and jeans, others leather jackets, still others suits and ballroom gowns. One even wore clerical robes. There seemed nothing common to them all save their joined hands and the fact they all were staring at one woman, hands linked along with the rest.

She was not tall, but appeared so. Perhaps it was her posture, elegant and proud in a way that the modern age seemed to have forgotten. It was an attitude relegated to old portraits of royalty. Perhaps it was her raiment, although Ariadne couldn't find anything remarkable about the white dress she wore. It was simple and tasteful, utterly blemishless, and blended so well with the paleness of the woman's skin that it seemed a part of her. The intricate coil of her auburn hair looked almost like a crown.

"Even the Damned have a place in God's plan." Prince Liliane spoke from perfectly sculpted lips. Her downcast blue eyes were hidden beneath the most elegant of lashes. Her

voice was warm and welcoming, the voice of the mother you always wished you'd had, the mother from storybooks, nurturing and shielding, a tiger's love born upon a dove's wing. "Let us never forget we are God's children, every one."

"Every one," the circle repeated in unison.

Ariadne felt the words issue from her mouth. She glanced up for just a moment and, over the shoulder of one of the others, saw the hulking golem that was Mister Rose. He was the only figure outside the circle, though he watched with interest.

Ariadne turned her attention to the ground before her, in the center of the circle. The grand oak table that usually stood centerpiece in the dining room was gone, the scarlet carpet peeled back along pre-cut lines, to reveal the smooth metal surface of the basin. It was wide and deep enough to hold a half-dozen bodies, and the circle stood close enough that Ariadne could see the history of chips and nicks in the bronze.

"As we are united by God's love," said Liliane, raising her hands, and thus the hands she held, "so shall we be united by our blood."

With that, she inclined her smooth, beautiful neck and bent just enough, her mouth opening wide, to sink two silvery fangs into the wrist to her left. The old man beside her shuddered, spasming even as he turned his own head and bit the wrist of the teenage girl to his left. As her blood dribbled down his shaggy goatee, her eyes rolled back in her head and she turned as if in a dream to bite the wrist of her neighbor. They all followed in turn, and Ariadne steeled herself for the piercing bolt of pain and pleasure when her moment came. As always, it brought back shuddering memories of a night of tears, a covered bridge, a—

All thought fled and, as if moved by gravity's hand, Ariadne turned and sank her own fangs into her partner's wrist. She drank slowly, cautiously, even as her body shivered with small waves of static. She felt stirrings in her stomach, her breasts, the lobes of her brain. But she did not swallow. No one ever swallowed.

Instead, she swung her head back, dizzy with the motion, and with a concerted effort spat the blood into the basin before her. It joined a cascade of other sprays, splattering black against the dark metal. Small rivers trickled from two-dozen wrists, streaming down every edge of the basin's circumference to spiral away down the drain at the center. Within seconds, the rivers had stopped and new skin had covered the holes on everyone's wrists. A wave of vertigo rippled through all assembled.

Liliane threw her head back, shivering, savoring. "The cistern receives our offerings. Let its stores grow deep, deep, and let all who are thirsty in a time of need drink. As we build with blood, so we rebuild with mortar and brick the Just City. Though we are barred from Paradise, we can make, even in Hell, a New Jerusalem."

"New Jerusalem," they repeated.

Liliane closed her eyes, bowed her head, and released the hands on either side of her. At once, the circle broke into its component parts. Then began the clustering. *We are God's children, every one*, thought Ariadne with a sigh, *but we all have our own corners of the room*.

As always, Ariadne watched the dyads and triads break off. And, as always, she stood alone, as she had ever since becoming Sheriff.

Ariadne gazed for a moment at the couches with the television set, kept on low volume, where the refugees, orphans, and riffraff lounged. In life, they never would have associated, the skater boys and the Armanis, the designer-handbag women and the green-haired ponytailers. Brian, Ella, Doughboy, and, yes, even Hera. Ariadne mutely followed

their motions with her eyes as they played at debauchery, surrounded by bowls of fruits and bottles of wine they could not taste.

Ariadne knew all their stories—the families they had fled, the courts from which they had been exiled, the crimes of which they had been convicted and the elders they had crossed. Liliane forgave it all, in exchange for loyalty. Ariadne listened as they rattled on about television shows, the latest musicals in the theater district, the up-and-coming socialites on Beacon Hill, making references to an outside world, to people in it, which Ariadne had to remind herself still existed.

They tensed when she wandered close. Ariadne knew that if she gave an order, they would drop their conversations mid-sentence and obey. She nodded, walked on by, and they relaxed, but made their voices softer. Ariadne strained to hear the sounds, imagining that so long as she could, she was still taking part in their camaraderie.

The curtains, divans, and plush chairs at the other end of the room seemed to swallow all noise, so much so that, no more than five strides from where she had been, Ariadne felt as if she had entered a different world. Here the elders sat in small pockets, exchanging small talk as brittle and as awkward as their hunched bodies.

Some read, or just pretended to, and some stared at the paintings on the walls: Courtois's *The Crucifixion of Saint Andrew*, Lafosse's *The Rape of Proserpine*, other scenes of stormy and sweeping pain. Ariadne wondered if the elders found quiet delight in the agonized faces, the blasts of color. For Ariadne, those pained faces had become familiar friends. It was impossible to imagine anything was amiss so long as they hung there, Saint Andrew in his reassuring grimace, the nymphs in their never-changing crawl of hopeless desperation.

But the elders seemed to find no such reassurance. The siege mentality of recent days was hitting them the hardest. Normally they preferred to hole up in their own sanctums and safe houses, far from the prying eyes and stalking knives of others. But ever since the war had begun, this was the only safe place left. All their childer, the vampires they had created with their own fangs out of love, pity, or boredom, lingered close by. Sire, childe, sire, childe, sire, childe—an unbroken chain that admitted no new links. A pair or two of small red eyes darted Ariadne's way, staring in contempt. Most simply ignored her.

At a table nearby, Liliane held court, the most powerful elders arrayed on either side. They were the Primogen, residents of the city even before Liliane's arrival, and as usual they were giving counsel. The Prince was smiling, which was not unusual. Tonight, though, she was the only one smiling.

Ariadne came to a halt at a respectful distance behind her Prince, and then tried to look occupied by staring at one of the potted plants.

"Quite an assortment of courtiers you have here." Mister Rose was reclining in the chair across from Liliane as if he owned it, sipping blood from a wineglass. "I still find it hard to believe that you'll take in anyone who'll come to you."

"All of God's children are welcome within these walls," said the Prince unapologetically, "presuming they observe His laws."

"I've been listening. You all say you're building some special society."

"Yes."

Liliane gave no further elaboration.

"Your, ah, Ritual of Unity. The basin and all. That's a part of this special society? Non-traditional, but quaint."

Ariadne watched the Primogen, saw a few of the elders draw up just a little taller, saw them do everything but nod their own agreement with Rose's discomfort. But if Liliane felt cornered in the slightest, not a trace of it showed.

"Our ways are our own," the Prince said. "The fact that *you* find them foreign makes them no less traditional."

"Oh, the Council sees some use for the Vinculum," said Rose, swirling the liquid in his glass casually. "The young taste the blood of the elders, who command them through it, keep them in their place. It's a passable tool for those Princes who lack more creative means of exercising leadership. But tell me: How do you keep track of whose blood is whose? Do you really let just anyone drink from the common well if they're desperate enough?"

Liliane laid her chin on folded hands. "You are quite an inquisitive guest." Her voice, still melodious, lingered on the word *guest* for just an instant longer than was necessary. "When the Council agreed that we would establish our demesne in East Boston, they knew full well that the task required a different approach. If not, you would have moved in yourselves long ago, yes?"

Mister Rose's smile thinned. He said nothing.

Liliane continued. "The agreement stipulated quite clearly that in return for a regular tithe, we would rule this desmene however we wished and that the Council would keep a respectful distance."

Mister Rose leaned forward. "When *we* gave you *permission* to set up operations here, we allowed you a certain ... latitude ... as long as you kept up the tithes and the Masquerade. But this civil war—"

"Will be over by week's end," said Liliane. "You have seen our Silent Knife in action tonight, have you not?"

Mister Rose adjusted himself in the chair, then slowly nodded. "Yes, your Sheriff is quite impressive. Tonight was the most encouraging sign I've seen around here."

Ariadne, still unacknowledged by any of them, allowed herself a secret smile.

"Good," said Liliane. "Then you know how short-lived this anomaly will prove. You may enjoy our hospitality as long as you see fit, Mister Rose, but when you return to your fellows, do remind them that their concerns, while appreciated, are entirely unwarranted."

Mister Rose looked to the elders briefly in turn, but none would give him the encouragement of meeting his gaze. He set down his glass and got to his feet. "Very well. We'll leave this in your hands—for a little while longer, at least. We'll talk again at week's end."

"But of course," said Liliane sweetly. She did not rise. "You are always a welcome addition to our circle. Come again, and we will speak further of the world that we are building here."

Rose looked as if he were about to say something, but then thought better of it. He snapped his fingers, and two servants in tuxedos who had been waiting at the door hurried forward with his overcoat. Ariadne wondered why on earth a vampire would bother to wear one.

As Rose swept out of the room, Liliane shook her head slowly. "There are few greater tragedies than a lack of faith. How can anyone, especially the Damned, sustain themselves without it?"

Then she rose, and the very motion was enough to silence the room, drawing everyone's attention her way. Only Ariadne, who had already been at attention, made no adjustment.

"Be at peace, one and all, and rejoice." Liliane's voice cascaded over the room. "Our Silent Knife has brought us another victory."

The young ones flashed furtive smiles Ariadne's way. The elders glared.

Liliane had been circling the room until she stood right beside her protégé. "For one so new to the night, she fights with the avenging wrath of the Seraphim themselves."

Ariadne trembled in her presence, though she could not tell if it was from fear or pride.

"Truly, we are blessed, and our time spent training her was not in vain. You others, watch her. Learn from her. For did the Lord not say, a childe will show us the way?"

Liliane's voice began to build. "We are not merely a coterie of damned souls. We are building a new world. The Council cannot see it. Roarke, sadly, could not look beyond his own petty hurts to see it. The wizards who believe this city to be theirs see a piece of it, and thus they do not molest us. But even they cannot see it all. New Jerusalem shall be first among nations. So we swear."

"So we swear," came the chorus, and Ariadne chanted enthusiastically with them. But when Liliane retired from the room, a vacuum seemed to suck the energy from Ariadne, to be replaced by the din of conversations slowly reviving.

Ariadne tried to recall the Prince's voice, recreate the feeling from a moment earlier, but it was no use. Bourne had sidled up into her field of vision. Ariadne could almost hear the sound Bourne's fat tongue made as it slid over his fangs and lips.

Like his tongue, the rest of Bourne was fat. His battered construction jacket never quite fit him right and his hunting cap looked downright ridiculous in the stately environs of the elders' half of the room. Not that anyone ever commented. Bourne's sire, Silas, sat a few feet away, his wrinkled face and ice-blue eyes absorbed in a staring contest with St. Andrew's on the wall.

"Who knew old Roarkey had such fight in him?" Bourne said. "I hear Wedge is going to defect to his side."

"Your information's out of date." Ariadne stared daggers at him. "I killed Wedge tonight."

Bourne shrugged. "Hard to keep track, isn't it? Not enough that a third of the court tore out of here when Roarke took off, but we keep losin' more in dribbles. Never would have suspected Wedge. But no one suspected Roarke, either. 'Cept me and Silas, of course."

"Aren't you tired of congratulating yourself?" Ariadne's eyes kept seeking an exit, but Bourne had somehow managed to block every egress simply by placing his bulk in the right space. "Besides, this will all be over soon enough."

"I keep hearing that," said Bourne. "It's as if you think Roarke is just some bug you're gonna squish beneath those fashionable little boots of yours. Roarke, who used to be our great fanged hope. This time, I think we're all a little wiser about who we place our trust in. This time we're watching our stars-of-morning a little more closely."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you implying something?"

"Only that 'avenging Seraphim' are angels like any other. And angels can fall."

He reached out, stroked her long black hair brazenly. The passage of his hand through her hair suddenly brought back another tactile memory, another hand, other smells and feelings that stirred her.

That song popped up again, torturing her with a few half-remembered bars. *Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da*. She couldn't tell if it was a happy tune or a sad one, but even with so little of the melody she could tell it was about yearning.

Andrei Montague, driving a taxi. Insane!

With a savage motion Ariadne slapped Bourne's hand away. He flinched, took a step back.

"Maybe you're confused, Bourne. Silas is your sire, which means I can't just chop your head off. But that doesn't mean I answer to you. We're done here."

She laid her hands on Bourne and shoved him aside. The leer that oozed across Bourne's features as he fell back a step made Ariadne wonder if goading her into touching him had been his actual goal the whole time.

"Pride goeth before splatting on your pretty little face—that's all I'm saying," Bourne called after her.

She let the darkness eat up his words as she strode out of the room. Ariadne hadn't asked to be the one standing there when Roarke ripped Wilson, the last Sheriff, in two. But she did her duty, rallied the troops, and earned her rank as Sheriff in his place. If she did it out of ambition, then it was a pretty stupid move, because ever since donning a Sheriff's jacket the only person who seemed willing to actually talk with her was that fat idiot Bourne.

But she was *good* at what she did, damn it. She wasn't going to apologize. And she would never make a mistake like Roarke did. Roarke had met Nadine, and for her—or maybe just for her grimoire—he had turned his back on New Jerusalem. Liliane had given them both every chance, and when the Prince finally destroyed Nadine, Roarke's response had been infantile. Ungrateful.

Ariadne would never be that stupid. She repeated it like a mantra as she began her pre-dawn preparations for tomorrow night's battles. Distant strains of music echoed in her ears all the while.

Chapter Three

The morning wind bites Ariadne all over; but she endures the shivers, nestles closer to Andrei to feed off his warmth. He moves his hands across her small shoulders.

“See?” She twists in his arms to face him. “Wasn’t this worth it?”

They stare together at the bare quad, looking like a giant scale model of the campus grounds, but missing all the little cardboard students. At this hour of the morning no sane people are awake. She pities the sane.

She feels Andrei’s breath through the rise and fall of his chest at her back. “Hrm. I never thought I’d say it, Ari, but I’m glad you got me up at this ungodly hour.”

The sun has bubbled up from below the horizon like an egg frying sunny-side up on the pan of God, orange, quivering, beckoning.

Ariadne smiles. “See what you miss by sleeping in?”

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With the sudden start of a patient receiving an adrenaline injection directly into the heart, Ariadne awoke. She could swear the song she had been trying to remember ever since the cab ride had run through her dream in its entirety, but now it dissolved into wisps of smoke in her mind. With a shrug, she swung her legs over the side of her slab and got up.

In Ariadne’s room—her cell—it was always night. She didn’t need the lamp on her desk, didn’t even know if the bulb still worked. Years ago, she had wanted it as a reminder of her old life. Now, it was only a piece of jetsam she hadn’t yet gotten around to disposing of.

Here, buried deep within the underground levels beneath Liliane’s mansion, no carpet covered Ariadne’s floor, no paintings or tapestries adorned the walls. There was no furniture save a concrete slab for sleeping and a locked steel box inside which rested her two best blades. She didn’t need anything more.

Her nightly ritual began with sharpening her swords. Katanas forged from *tamahagane*, Japanese iron sand, their steel had been folded over a dozen times in the forging and then cooled with clay. The *nakago* carved into each face bore the name of an undead swordsmith from Kyoto whom Liliane claimed had been plying his trade since the days of the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Prince had presented them as a gift to Ariadne on the night when, after nearly two years of grueling torment, she determined that her pupil had earned them. Ariadne had

never been more grateful for anything in her life. She'd wanted to erupt in sobs and fling herself at her lady's knees, but knew by then the penalty for showing such weakness.

Tonight, for almost two hours she ran the ceramic cross-bar across each side of each blade, wiped them up and down with oil. Then she spent another hour practicing her martial arts with robotic precision, after which she simply ceased. She did not sweat, did not pant, did not feel the satisfied rush that followed calisthenics in her living days, nor the prickly need for a shower. No fog of sleep hung over her. She was awake, lucid, and all this time she had been planning.

At last she put on her usual functional black bodysuit and her Sherri's jacket, and walked through the halls of the haven to Liliane's study. Ariadne's senses were edgy enough tonight that she imagined she could detect the rats skittering on the floorboards of the abandoned Victorian house that lay above the subterranean complex. Liliane's study was the only place where she accepted the complete silence.

Few had permission to enter the Prince's private wing without a specific invitation. Liliane had adorned her room with wall-to-wall books, statuary, hanging vines, and a Japanese rock garden. Ariadne spared none of these a second glance as she opened Liliane's antique writing desk and removed the city map. She plotted the pattern of rebel sightings, extrapolated Roarke's spheres of influence, and attempted to triangulate his position.

Within an hour she was ready for the briefing. The clock on the wall read 9:30 P.M. when the five other Kindred entered the training room.

They stood, if anything, too much at attention. Likely it was their first visit to Liliane's study. Most of the veteran soldiers were elsewhere, assigned to protect the elders, but for all their lack of experience, four of the soldiers standing before Ariadne had proven their prowess. She was confident in their abilities, their brutality, their efficiency, and their loyalty.

The fifth member, a newcomer, stared at Ariadne appraisingly. His red hair was cut buzz-short, his eyes a washed-out green. A shamrock tattoo twisted around his right cheek, the tip of its stem ending in a mouth that was poised to bite into his ear with bladelike teeth. There was a hunger in his eyes that Ariadne couldn't help but notice.

Her fingers clicked the enamel switch on the slide projector, a relic of classrooms from her parents' generation. "Some of you have yet to see combat against Roarke's forces. You need to know what you're up against."

A square of light appeared against the white linen sheet Ariadne had draped over one wall of the study, revealing a muted color photo of a scarecrow incongruously placed in the center of a fashionable Beacon Hill brownstone dining room. The scarecrow was female, wearing an elegant evening gown torn in a dozen places, straw apparently erupting from every break. Its eyes, ears, and mouth also spewed straw like vomitus frozen in mid-spew. Ariadne waited until she saw the narrowing of the others' eyes, and then the flinch-back.

The scarecrow wasn't stuffed with straw at all, but mud.

It also wasn't a scarecrow, but the body of Antoinette, an elder in Liliane's court whose face was hardly unfamiliar to them. As Ariadne clicked slide after slide, the assemblage saw how the mud had burst its way from the inside out, through the very pores of Antoinette's skin.

Mud was smeared across the rest of the dining room in pentagrams and spirals. Silverware was jammed into the walls, the table, the artwork, and the light fixtures.

"We don't know how he does this," said Ariadne. "The mud, or preserving Antoinette's image on film. Just as we still have no idea how he grew his arm into a sword after I sliced it off the night he began the rebellion. Everything we know about the wizards tells us that our kind can't use their magic. But that grimoire of Nadine's must have taught him *something* before I destroyed it, as he's quick to keep reminding us."

One of the soldiers shook his head. "You mean Roarke sent us these pictures?"

"Yes. He wants us to be afraid."

Ariadne looked over the troops to see how well Roarke's strategy had worked. She was pleased to note that they were quickly recovering their composure.

The tattooed man was even smiling. Ariadne took note of that, too.

"Roarke's strategy, as far as we can tell, is that he *has* no strategy, beyond causing chaos. Each act he commits is more bizarre than the last. His forces will hit an elder's house and burn it to the ground, or do something like this instead. Antoinette's recovering now."

If by recovering, you mean lingering on as a gibbering wreck, Ariadne added mentally.

"He seems to want to provoke us, to threaten the anonymity of the Masquerade or to force us to do the same in order to fight him."

The tattooed man coughed.

"Yes?" Ariadne raised an eyebrow.

"There's no strategy *you* could find, you mean."

Ariadne saw the others stiffen and subtly put a few inches distance between themselves and their comrade. This newcomer was the latest waif to wander into Liliane's sanctum. All Ariadne knew was that he came with a reputation for savagery and violence, belied by his lean, nimble form and his baby face.

She called him out and he snapped to attention, but in a mocking fashion, saluting and winking, clicking his tongue. The others looked to her expectantly.

Insolence from Bourne, the childe of a high-ranking elder, was one thing. From this street rat? Quite another.

Ariadne called the new recruit forward, and with much preening he strutted toward her. She asked his name.

"What, they didn't tell you?"

"When I ask you something," she said softly but firmly, "you will respond immediately. What is your name?"

"Patrick O'Malley." He held out a greasy hand. "But you can call me Po-Mo."

She left his hand hanging. Instead she stepped closer to Po-Mo, until she was just inside the boundaries of his personal space. He bristled. Ariadne had found that Kindred, more even than kine, seem to resent this sort of intrusion; it was some sort of instinctual animal challenge.

"Are you prepared to follow my orders to the letter, immediately, without question? No matter what they are?"

"I guess," said Po-Mo. "But word is, you're only ten years dead. What makes you so special?"

Now the others were staring. One was slowly shaking his head and mouthing the word "no," but Po-Mo either didn't see or didn't care. "Word is, you don't even know who your sire is."

Someone whispered a desperate “shut up” to him.

“Now, I’ve only been here a little while,” Po-Mo said, “but I see the lay of the land. ‘Come one, come all,’ says the Prince lady, but somehow it’s just Licks who can name their family trees who are in charge. All the elders are like, a zillion years old. ‘Cept you. Before I go where you say, I think it’s only fair I know what makes you so special.”

“Po-Mo,” Ariadne snapped, “remove your flak jacket.”

“Awright.” He rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say.” He removed the garment, showing off his well-chiseled pectoral muscles, playing to the small crowd.

“Po-Mo,” Ariadne said slowly, clearly, “unholster your gun and shoot yourself in the foot.”

He blinked. “Say again?”

“Wrong answer,” she said, and delivered a backhand with blinding speed, smacking him in the face and sending him reeling to the ground. The others’ eyes all tracked him as he staggered and started to rise. No one offered a hand.

Ariadne could see rage bunch the muscles of Po-Mo’s neck, but he stood back up to attention.

“Po-Mo, take your gun and shoot yourself in the stomach.”

“I don’t know what you’re playing, but I ain’t going to—”

She lashed out again. He was ready this time, for her backhand. But she only feinted with it. As he reacted to the false move, she drew her blade. Ariadne cracked Po-Mo’s legs with the flat of her sword, sending him to the ground again.

Ariadne moved back as, muttering curses, Po-Mo rose to his feet, this time in fighting stance. His fangs were out. His eyes blazed with anger.

“You crazy bi—”

“Po-Mo.” Her voice cut through his words as surely as her blade. “I want to see if you detect a pattern here. In a moment I am going to order you to take your gun and shoot yourself in the chest. If you refuse, the next order will be to shoot yourself in the forehead.”

“And if I say screw you?”

“Then I do it for you.”

“I’d like to see you try, you—”

Before the rest of the words escaped his mouth, she lunged forward, grabbed the gun from his holster, spun him around, and locked him in a full nelson. He tried to flip her over, tried to break her hold, but she was too well positioned. She cocked the gun, pressed it to his temple.

“I’m told you’re a good fighter, Po-Mo,” she said. “It would be a shame to take you out of the roster because you’re spending the rest of the night in blinding pain while you heal from a bullet wound to the brain. A chest wound will heal much quicker, especially if it’s clean.”

Po-Mo made a valiant surge, and for a moment it looked as if he would break free. Then Ariadne stepped on his foot with her heel. The crunch of bone was audible, and he grimaced, eyes bulging.

“I’m going to let you go now, Po-Mo. I’ll then give your gun back to you and order you to shoot yourself in the chest. I suggest you obey.”

She did just that. And she waited.

Po-Mo looked her in the eyes, sizing her up, making whatever calculations he felt he had to make.

“Po-Mo,” she said slowly, softly. “Shoot yourself in the—”

He turned the gun around on himself and fired. A bang and then a splatter of red splayed like a Jackson Pollack painting on the far wall of the training room.

The others looked on, some smiling, as Po-Mo fought back a cry of pain, taut muscles visible all along his face. He clutched at his chest, then slowly staggered back to standing posture.

Ariadne nodded her approval. “Weapon down. Collect your flak jacket and get back in formation.”

Po-Mo holstered his gun and silently returned to the line. He stood at attention, a thin red river trickling slowly down his chest, across his crotch, dripping into a small pool on the floor.

“Now, the briefing.” Ariadne picked up as if nothing untoward had happened. “For the benefit of those who might be a little new to this—” she eyed Po-Mo with the hint of a smile “—Roarke’s forces are small. After last night he likely has only nine or ten actual Kindred under his command, although we all know he’s not above ghouling mortals into obeying him without question. Intelligence reports estimate his mortal followers at between fifteen and twenty. He might even be having his forces Embrace, but newly made vampires are more of a liability than an aid in battle, so if he’s expanding the ranks in that way it’ll be a while before we see any new Licks. And this war *will* be over in less than a while.

“During that time, though, Roarke’s men are going to cause all the trouble they can. His magic, wherever it comes from, gives him an edge, as does his reliance on hit-and-run attacks. Roarke thinks we can’t be everywhere at once. We’re going to prove him wrong by doing just that. We’ll break into two-man patrols around any target that could conceivably be seen as strategic, or even as vulnerable.”

“When can we bring the fight to him?” someone asked.

“Soon,” said Ariadne. “It’s become clear that we can’t just annihilate his forces the way we thought we could when the war began. So it’s time for new tactics. We need to capture someone and interrogate him, so we can pinpoint Roarke’s base of operations. We have some ideas about its location already. Obviously, it can’t be in Boston proper.”

Another soldier spoke up. “That’s what everyone always says. But Roarke’s got all that weird magic. Maybe the wizards are letting him crash with them.”

Ariadne shook her head. “Boston’s been a wizard town for centuries, and they’ve never let our kind join their club, no matter what powers they have. Liliame’s pact with the Merlins makes it very clear that the only Kindred entitled to Boston real estate are right here in this court. None of the nearby Princes would dare shelter him, which leaves Roarke with only scattered bits of unclaimed turf: Malden, Medford, maybe even North Cambridge. Let’s start the patrols and see what we find.”

She drew herself up. “I don’t need to tell you what’s at stake here. Each and every one of you had a reason to come here—something or someone you fled, someplace you didn’t belong. Then you found your way to us. Here, the world you knew no longer exists. Here, you’re valued. If Roarke succeeds, *here* vanishes. Do I make myself clear?”

The heads nodded, eyes locked on her.

Ariadne's own gaze lingered for a moment on Po-Mo. His eyes were defiant, but his mouth remained closed. The wound in his chest continued to seep blood.

"We take in anyone here," she said to him evenly, "but not without rules. New Jerusalem will be a citadel of order and harmony. If you want to be a reaver, I hear Roarke's recruiting. But that's not a job with much long-term security."

She snapped to attention. "So we swear," she called out.

"So we swear!" the others answered with fervor.

Po-Mo lingered for a moment. Ariadne did not shrink from his gaze. It took everyone a while to see Liliane's vision, and some never came around at all. They just mouthed the words until they got tired or discouraged and wandered away.

"How?" he asked, his voice ragged from the pain he was fighting.

"Think before you mouth off next time," Ariadne said simply, "and I might teach you a few things."

"I ain't talking about how you took me down. I'm talkin' about how you became what you are with no sire. I ain't got no sire, neither. Poser got himself staked. But you sayin' that here, I can rise as high as you, even with that?"

"Prove yourself," said Ariadne. "Better yourself. Reap the benefits."

For a moment, Ariadne saw a crimson flicker in Po-Mo's eyes. Was it the dawning of an appreciation for New Jerusalem, or the fires of ambition, stoked and beginning to gain strength?

Chapter Four

Blades hidden in the unassuming guitar case over her shoulders, Ariadne joined Hera as the two walked up from the subterranean depths, out into the main hallway of Liliane's old Victorian house. They stepped into the night, indifferent to the cold winds blasting across Eagle Hill, ruffling lawns and sending hooded teenage boys running girlishly for shelter. Their feet made no sound as they descended the slope the concrete of which shielded Liliane's underground safehouse, or as they passed an overgrown courtyard where a homeless man gazed sightlessly over the bay to the pale lights of the P.J. McArdle drawbridge across the Chelsea River.

Beyond the tanks of liquefied natural gas that dominated the sickly gray-white city sky, the city of Chelsea was barely visible through a dull, smoggy curtain. For the past ten years, as far as Ariadne was concerned, it might as well have been Europe, and the river the Atlantic, so confined had her universe grown. She traced the hidden boundaries between the neighborhoods where the wizards would and wouldn't tolerate Kindred, the neighborhoods where other Kindred's respect for Liliane's demesne began and ended, the neighborhoods where mortals tended to be more or less suspicious.

I may be bound in a nutshell, she mused, but at least here I'm queen of infinite space. One look at the respect and fear in Hera's eyes as she walked alongside Ariadne confirmed that.

Ariadne broke the silence. "This is a new night." The phrase was something Liliane always said, when welcoming a new urchin into the court. It meant that the past was past.

Hera turned to regard her. She had been twirling her curly hair, now dyed green, around her fingers compulsively for the duration of the walk.

"Liliane only says that for crimes committed before joining her, not after." Hera paused. "I failed her, and you, that night when Roarke rebelled. I ran. You should have told the Prince or punished me yourself. Why didn't you?"

"After Roarke's split, we couldn't afford to lose any more warriors," said Ariadne. If there was more she wanted to say, she couldn't seem to find the words.

East Boston's vertiginously steep streets spilled the two Kindred down past small clustered apartments with barred windows, Spanish food marts with gang logos painted on their tightly shut iron grates, Italian restaurants-slash-bars the patrons of which huddled around the glow of TV screens as if for warmth.

“So, are you worried about the Council?” Hera said, after a time.

“I clean up my messes,” said Ariadne. “The Masquerade is safe.”

They passed lengthy streets of brick buildings interrupted by gaps where half-demolished foundations sat; Ariadne could never tell if someone was building something new in these spots or blasting something down. Ariadne saw a few wooden slat houses interspersed between them, all of which were slanting or buckling or deformed in the way her childhood plastic Barbie Castle playset got melted when she left it in front of a space-heater one night. In one spot, a squished-thin triple-decker, the kind that you could find squeezed between two other buildings, stood alone, abandoned lots on both sides. In the middle of a bunch of houses with boarded-up windows stood an inexplicable green pasture with a miniature set of streets, all named after 1950s movie stars—John Wayne Lane, Judy Garland Drive—except all these “streets” were little more than footpaths. Several streets led to dead ends, gravel roads, or fenced-off areas of the airport tarmac.

Ariadne’s thoughts drifted. She remembered Andrei once saying that East Boston shouldn’t even really exist. It was a half-landfilled island surrounding Logan Airport. To arrive by car meant driving as if to the airport but veering off at the last moment onto a disused overflow parking ramp that spilled you out into a residential area. “Boston’s back-stage,” he would call it. “Its twilight zone.”

Hera interrupted Ariadne’s reverie. “I know you’re careful about the Masquerade. You’re the Silent Knife. What about the rest of ... what about that new guy, Po-Mo? All it takes is one slip. I mean, we’re fighting with swords on city streets. It’s only a matter of time before the sheep start looking up. All the Council needs is the slightest hint that the mortals know what we are ...”

Her voice trailed off as Ariadne stared her in the eyes. “Are you thinking of holding back for fear of breaking the Masquerade?”

“N-no. Your training’s been great. But I’ve been focusing on the fighting, not on how to keep the fighting quiet. I’m ... I’m worried.”

“Then fight,” said Ariadne. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

The look in Hera’s eyes told Ariadne she would have left it there, wouldn’t have asked her again. But Ariadne could tell Hera’s doubts hadn’t been quieted. A ten-minute diversion now might save them a lot of trouble in the battle to come.

“This way.” Ariadne suddenly broke down a side street.

Hera followed, past laundromat after laundromat, a plethora of beauty salons, a few garages that had been converted to churches, and one giant cathedral in the middle of a groaty parking lot. Trash lay everywhere. Ariadne stepped catlike over the maimed frame of a bicycle, entered a small yard, and knocked on a pair of storm shelter doors.

Hera stared expectantly, one hand hovering around the holster for her knife, half-hidden by her denim jacket, until plywood creaked aside.

A thin, aquiline face poked up from the darkness within—a sixteen-year old boy dressed in a Georgetown sweater and running pants. The quick narrowing of his eyes in a predator’s assessment revealed him as Kindred.

“If you’re here to ask about last night,” he said without introduction or pleasantries, “it’s covered. Leave me alone, I have work to do.”

“I’m here to make introductions.” Ariadne gestured to Hera.

“No need,” said the boy. “You’re Hera Ortega, daughter of Hernando and Inéz Ortega, aged twenty at time of your Embrace. Your sire was Utrece, a Primogen of the Lowell Court. When you flashed your fangs at an old rival from high school, he publicly flayed you as an example to the others about keeping the Masquerade. You ran. Liliane found you starved and half-insane in a maintenance tunnel of the Orange Line. You’ve been a soldier in the Sheriff’s brigade ever since. How am I doing so far?”

Hera rocked on the balls of her feet, eyes narrowing. “You’ve ... I ... I’ve never met you before. How do you—”

“It’s my business to know things, and to control how much others know.” His voice grew testy. “Right now you’re keeping me from doing that business. So if you’ll excuse me—?”

He began to close the door, but the wood smacked against Ariadne’s hand. He fought futilely for a few seconds to push it back.

Ariadne ignored his efforts. “Here, this is Archibald. He hates when people call him Archie. He’s our Raven.”

“I prefer the title media relations manager,” Archibald grunted as he tried to close the door again, but Ariadne’s hand didn’t move an inch. He gave up with an exaggerated huff. “The title you use isn’t only inappropriately melodramatic, it’s inaccurate. Ravens can be taught to speak and convey information. They can’t alter the message—which is entirely what we are supposed to do.”

Hera blinked. “I ... I don’t—”

“Archibald’s job is to keep news of our activities suppressed.”

“Not suppressed,” Archibald said indignantly. “Any idiot in some tinpot dictatorship can try to suppress news, which of course never works. It only creates a backlash. I *work-shop* news.”

The wan teenager stepped aside and with a hand indicated a bank of a dozen computer screens glowing in the dark, faintly illuminating wall-length cork boards full of newspaper and magazine clippings.

“Wait,” said Hera, “you mean when Roarke set fire to that elder’s house the other night, you made the papers report something different?”

Archibald rolled his eyes. “No, I did not. You think I control every firefighter, policeman, and beat reporter in the gaddamned city?”

“Don’t be modest,” said Ariadne. “Archibald has contacts at the *Globe*, the *Herald*, the *Phoenix*, and every other paper worth mentioning. Don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Archibald huffed. “But those contacts aren’t the important ones at all. Any wet-behind-the-ears media relations manager can get a major newspaper to move a suspicious fire from the front page to page twelve. But why waste your political capital? Get them to run it on the front page in all its full-color glory. Let them get it out of their system.

“The key is that they never follow it up. The next day, there’s nearly always something juicier to print there. Rich white girl goes missing in Barbados. Political candidate takes bribe, has a mistress. Homeland Security raises the terror alert. This was all so much harder in the days before the Internet and the twenty-four hour news cycle. Now I just make sure an email lands in the right box at the right time, and the mass media’s natural amnesia takes care of the rest.”

Hera stared. “That’s it?”

“That’s it?” Archibald reared back. “That’s the *magic* of it. If you walk into a news-room and use mental compulsion on an editor, someone’s going to notice. In the information war, that’s the equivalent of street-boxing. A media relations manager? He’s a martial arts master. He uses info-judo, lets the wheel of the news cycle do his work for him.”

“What about activists?” Hera insisted. “Independent media? Conspiracy nuts? Stubborn cops who won’t let go? I mean, aren’t there some people out there who’ll want to follow up on stories of people with swords running around Boston’s backstreets?”

“Sure,” said Archibald. “They’re my best friends. Easiest way to kill a story is for me to feed the truth, or at least selected chunks of it, to the conspiracy blogs. I tell them that there’s a civil war going on between two factions in the local vampire courts, and they’re all over it right away.”

His mouth widened in pride, revealing the skinniest of fangs. “Of course, when I say ‘vampires,’ they understand it to mean secret government black-ops supersoldiers, genetically bred for use both abroad against various enemies and at home against domestic-resistance movements. Funding for it all gets laundered through Halliburton, enhancement drugs get stored in Wal-Mart facilities, and so forth. I usually just nudge, and the conspirosphere runs with it in directions I could never dream up. No legitimate outlet would touch the story with the proverbial ten-foot pole then.

“As for stubborn cops—well, I don’t have to dig too far in most cases before I find something they’ve done that, once it hits the papers, ruins them for good. Drug habit, affair, kiddie porn ... it’s already there. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve actually had to fabricate anything. Find the info, pass it to the papers through legit channels, and the wheel does the rest. Info-judo.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It’s incredibly difficult,” said Archibald. “Getting harder the longer this war goes on. The fact that I make it sound easy is a testament to just how elite I am. That’s a reputation I won’t be able to keep for long, though, if you won’t leave me alone to get back to work.”

Ariadne turned to her partner. “See? What happened to you in Lowell won’t happen here. Liliame doesn’t let it. She has the Ravens and other resources as well.”

Hera nodded, her expression more confused than convinced, but Ariadne could sense a shift.

“Thank you, Archibald,” she said to the Raven, and half-nodded.

“Hey, this isn’t a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Ariadne,” he spat back. “I’m not a stop on the tourist circuit. Don’t bring your nubes by my place again.”

“In your information editing, Archibald, try not to erase your memory of that Lupine I decapitated and saved you from last September.”

Ariadne smiled a saccharine smile. Archibald looked anywhere but at her.

“There’s info-judo, and then there’s the truth. Don’t forget it.” She finally released her hand from the storm shelter door, which the Raven pulled shut with a loud bang.

“Th-thanks,” said Hera. “I mean, for trying to make me feel better.”

Ariadne wanted so much to reach out and clasp her on the shoulder. That was the whole point of New Jerusalem, wasn’t it? A world where age and clan meant less than the common bond between all Kindred?

But New Jerusalem couldn't be enjoyed before it was built.

"I didn't do it for the sake of your feelings." Ariadne fixed Hera with sudden coldness. "I did it for the sake of your efficiency. Now come on."

The gratitude that had been pooling in Hera's eyes, green like her hair, turned first to confusion, then to embarrassment, then to determination.

The Sheriff's jacket rested particularly heavy on Ariadne's shoulders as the two women vanished into the night.



Roarke's men seldom bothered to hide their scent. Ariadne had tasted the blood of this target before, could pull it out from the diesel stench of the freight trains and the stink of the Taco Bell on Broadway.

"Taco Hell," Hera muttered. "Where bad little tacos go when they die."

The target was a waif of a girl who betrayed what she was by wearing shorts and flip-flops in the freezing air. If her mortal friends noticed, they didn't seem bothered, but Ariadne did note how they kept a few feet of distance even as they talked on their stoop. Though she was obviously newly made and her skin still looked brown and bright, there was the scent of predator about her—a predator too young to know that stealth was all that kept her from becoming prey.

Flip-flops! Ariadne shook her head. The waif wouldn't even be able to run.

The only problem was, even on a cold night such as this, people were still out and about. Packed into coats and gloves and mufflers, they walked their dogs, bought late-night lottery tickets, and drove, drove, drove everywhere. Traffic in the city was eternal.

Ariadne and Hera stalked down a side street, shielded by the bumper-to-bumper cars parked against every millimeter of curbside. An attack here was out of the question; no amount of info-judo could cover up a fight out in the open.

They waited nearly two hours until the gaggle of girls dispersed and Roarke's minion walked hand-in-hand with one of them into the house. Ariadne tensed. This had all the markings of a trap.

Hera cocked her head inquisitively.

The Prince needed a captive. The thought of another stakeout, maybe even on another night, suddenly seemed unbearable to Ariadne.

"Let's get this over with," she said. "If it's a trap, let's spring it in their faces."

Hera bit her lip and nodded. "Frontal assault. I'll take the lead."

Ariadne shook her head. "No. My mission, my risk. I'll draw their attention from the front while you sneak around the back, find the least likely point of entry, and use it."

"But Ariadne—"

"This isn't a time to prove anything to anyone," she snapped. "If this is a rat's nest, we don't stick around to clean it. We just grab a rat and run. Got it?"

Hera stared at the house for several seconds, then nodded. She turned her back on Ariadne and bled away into the darkness.

Ariadne caught sight of a vaguely Hera-shaped blur circling the house, selecting an oak tree behind it and beginning to climb. The Sheriff then steeled herself, stepped out from cover, and made a beeline for the front door, eyeing the building's windows for the telltale motion of snipers.

The door was locked. As quietly as possible Ariadne seized it and snapped it loose. The cracks of light from its removal revealed movement, and Ariadne immediately flipped the door sideways, charged with it like a battering ram.

She felt the impact, heard a shout and a fall. Tossing the door aside, she barely had an instant to take in the apartment—a messy aggregation of clothing-covered futons, a brown carpet giving way to a dirty-linoleum kitchenette—before the waif scrambled to her knees from a prone position.

Ariadne tackled her into the room beyond, away from the prying view of the street. They rolled along, scattering newspapers and dog toys, impacting against a glass table with enough force to shatter it.

Roarke's waif growled, fangs out, claws drawn, bucking and kicking, a ball of fury and animal urge for self-preservation. Ariadne's knees pinioned her captive's legs; one elbow pinned the girl's shoulder, the other flexed as she held her sword high.

The face of girl beneath her became a mass of wrinkles, her eyes red, her mouth wide, revealing the full length of her fangs. She hissed the way any doomed beast did, in one last hope to scare a foe away with an empty threat. Her free arm raked Ariadne across the face, tearing five lines into her cheek.

A shadow fell across them, and Ariadne rolled off her opponent and out of the way as a male form lunged at her. Ariadne could smell the Vitae inside him—another Kindred, which likely meant even more were waiting.

He swung a crowbar in feverish arcs. Ariadne lifted her sword and parried as best she could. She felt her heel smack up against a dresser. There was precious little room to fight in so cluttered an apartment, but she could use that to her advantage.

As the fallen girl began to get up, Ariadne timed the crowbar swings, dove low beneath the next one and grabbed the girl, using her to slam into the newcomer, sandwiching them both against a bookcase. Books rained down upon them. In the confusion Ariadne stepped back and lopped the girl's head off with her katana.

The male dived away, stumbling on fallen bric-a-brac as he did. He swung the crowbar wildly, trying to keep Ariadne at a distance.

"You bitch," he growled. "You killed her!"

Ariadne gave no answer. She watched the pattern of the crowbar swings, looked for her opening.

"Silent Knife." He took a clumsy swipe that she easily avoided. "You don't suck blood, you suck ice!"

Another swing, another miss.

"You weren't ever human. You were *born* a freaking monster!" Another swing. "Say something, dammit!"

Ariadne feinted a swing, ducked low and kicked to the stomach, the knee, the stomach again. Her opponent crumpled, off balance, and with a surge forward she threw him to the ground. As he started to rise she brought down her blade, pinning the man to the shag carpet through his sternum. His fingers froze around the crowbar and his arm locked, a statue of an intended action.

He was trapped. His head lolled back and forth, and he began to cry out. Ariadne moved in, covered his mouth with her hand. With exertion, she crushed his cheekbones

and jaw, ending his cry in a useless gurgle. She paused, considering, and then methodically seized each kneecap and separated it from the leg.

Ariadne paused to consider her groaning captive. One step closer to Roarke, one step closer to normalcy in the demesne. Ariadne ran her hand slowly across the scars on her cheek, feeling them knit as the pads of her fingers passed.

Roarke would be defeated.

And what then? a small voice inside her asked.

When New Jerusalem was realized, when they had made Liliane's ideal city a reality, would Ariadne's life still be an endless series of battles? She tried to imagine a preferable alternative, some other role for herself, and came up only with the image of the here and now, the pinned creature beneath her, helplessly spewing out his fury, trying with futile shivers to unstick himself from the floor.

A crash resounded upstairs, followed by a truncated scream.

Hera!

"Stay there," Ariadne hissed to the pinned man, then tore up the stairs. Why had she delayed so long? She should have been securing the house, or ordering a withdrawal, the instant she had a prisoner.

A shadowy figure plunged at her from the stairwell above. Ariadne grabbed her in mid-flight, planted a foot between those of her opponent, used her attacker's momentum to fling her down the stairs to land in a heap on the floor. Ariadne could hear the soft crunch of vertebrae, the bursting of sacs and the snapping of tendons, followed by a low moan.

She turned to see the face of the mortal girl who had been the female Kindred's hanger-on. She had been an insider the whole time, one more element of the trap. Only mortals seduced by the power of Kindred blood or mental compulsion so heedlessly threw their lives away like that. But how extensive was the nest? Two Kindred, one mortal? That couldn't be the end. Even a ghouléd mortal couldn't have challenged Hera enough for that kind of scream.

Ariadne rounded the stairs cautiously, emerged in a hallway crowded in by the tapering walls of the house's triangular roof. A perfect bottleneck. Hera lay sprawled in the hall, trying to rise shakily from the floor. Her face was a mangled mess of crimson, her nose a sinkhole.

Ariadne looked up at four doors along the hall, all opening at once. Figures came at her *en masse*. She stopped counting at three. Ariadne fought them in the hall, on the stairs. She threw punches and kicks, sliced flesh, broke limbs. They pushed her into a wall with enough force that her body made an impression in the plaster, white shards flaking all around.

Fangs and knives flashed by her face. She swept her foot in an arc that felled two rebels. She leapt upon one of them, her fangs at his throat, ripping it open even as her leg flew out and struck the gut of another. Their punches and kicks found her body. There was no room to dodge them. She fought through the pain, walking a slow, choreographed dance through showers of saliva and blood, sword swinging.

The world organized itself into an easy, understandable pattern of weight and balance, of resistance and give. She felt as if she were a mere extension of the universe around her, a tree or a waterfall acting as nature intended of it, wanting nothing more. Just when Ariadne wished this sensation would last forever, the final rebel fell and the spell broke.

Ariadne fought a wave of vertigo but remained standing. Seven fallen forms lay at her feet, mortal and Kindred alike. She pulled herself up, inspected all the nooks and crannies of the upstairs to confirm that these had been the last. Then she returned to Hera's mangled

form, searched inside herself for any fire of concern and found only cold embers. Whatever the rebels had done to Hera, it would heal. Everything healed these days, didn't it?

Clean-up had to be completed first. Ariadne descended the stairs, found the ghouléd girl lying like a broken doll at their foot. Her eyes were glassy, frozen in shock, but the vein on her neck still pulsed with the fading throes of life.

"That's all you ever got to be," Ariadne said. "Someone's weapon. Doing your appointed task until you met something or someone stronger. Did your existence mean anything at all?"

The girl did not, could not answer. Her eyes moved sightlessly in their sockets, perhaps trying to track down the source of the voice. There was a desperation in that movement, in the very rise and fall of her chest, a defiant attempt to keep living.

Ariadne bent low, ran her hand across the girl's sweat-soaked forehead, found it ice-cold. "It's over now," she said in a voice entirely devoid of mercy or deliverance, a voice that could have been an auto-reader announcing the weather. She extended her fangs and plunged them into the girl's neck.

Liquid fire ran up Ariadne's fangs and filled her arteries, flooding her with emotion that she could deceive herself into thinking was her own. Ariadne felt the bruises and tears from the battle healing, but fought back the urge to drink her victim dry, to replenish all her own lost strength and then some. Instead, she picked up the girl's shattered form and carried her upstairs to where Hera's prone form awaited. Her comrade needed the Vitae more than she did.

At the top of the landing, Hera's clothing remained—a denim jacket, cargo pants, combat boots, even her two bowie knives—but the Kindred herself was gone, reduced to a woman-shaped pile of ash, black as polished onyx and shining in the flickering light of the hallway. Ariadne had seen plenty of Kindred turn to earth and dust in her time, but this was different. And Hera had been very much herself just a few moments earlier.

Ariadne dropped the mortal, fell into a fighting crouch. Had she missed a rebel? Her search had been thorough, or so she had thought. She raced downstairs, saw her surviving captive still pinned, helpless, to the rug. What had happened?

Her eyes darted to the splintered door in the front hallway, to the empty frame that revealed the street beyond. Who had walked by, and what had they seen?

There was no time to investigate any of this. Ariadne tore the cover off the futon, wrapped up her captive, slung him over her shoulder, and headed out the back door. The plan had called for her and Hera to walk the captive back, feigning mutual drunkenness, but that option was gone. Fortunately, the neighborhood was rough enough that anyone who saw her would be hiding. The brave ones might place a call to the slow-to-respond cops. Mostly they'd just recognize trouble and turn away. Better, in a place like this, not to know what was happening. Poverty and desperation wielded its own sort of info-judo.

Ariadne hurried through the back alleys, putting a few blocks between her and the battle site. Agonizing minutes passed until the coast was clear enough for her to tear open the trunk of a car and stuff her captive inside. With impossibly bad timing, the first few bars of that tune she had remembered in Andrei's taxicab rang in Ariadne's mind as she hotwired the vehicle. *Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da ...*

She made tracks for Eagle Hill, looking in the rearview mirror constantly. It was a stupid habit, she realized, as a Kindred pursuer would cast no reflection. So why, then, did she imagine she could see Hera's face every time she glanced up?

Chapter Five

“O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, so haggard and so woe-begone? The squirrel’s granary is full, and the harvest’s done.”

Ariadne closes her eyes, bites her lip, hugs Telemachus the Platypus close, trying to force Keats’s words into her brain. Finally she exhales, blowing a lock of tousled black hair farther out of place.

She finally looks down at the text, faded against yellowed and cracking pages that reek more than slightly of mildew. This is the 1939 edition, crumbling brown binding reinforced by masking tape. She had passed by all of the glossy, perma-bound editions the library had to offer until she spotted this one. The page that bore “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” with all of its small tears and discolorations, had clearly been loved, with all the beauty and devastation that love brought.

“I see a lily on thy brow, with anguish moist and fever dew, and on thy cheeks a fading rose, fast withereth too ...”

Ariadne’s eyes keep wandering to the clock, counting, counting, until it is time to meet Andrei. She also sees the pile of books for class, the open document on her computer that needs to become a term paper by tomorrow at 9:00 A.M. None of it is real. His hand is real. His breath is real.

The phone rings and Ariadne jumps, memories of the sunrise splintering into sparks. Her jolt propels Telemachus across the room to land in a deep pile of unwashed laundry that is keeping her closet door ajar. She reaches for the phone, feeling a sting of fear as the volume of Keats lands on the floor, bouncing, shedding pages.

“Hello?”

• • • • •

“Ariadne.”

In the millisecond that the fingertips grazed Ariadne’s shoulder, she spun around and seized them in one lithe, gloved hand. She used the momentum to pull the arm behind them and pin it against its owner’s back, slamming him against the staircase banister hard enough to splinter the wood.

The foyer of the house on Eagle Hill was, for a change, deserted. The couches were empty, the television was off, the cistern lay dry. Liliane had convened a special council of the elders, and the neonates knew well enough to stay several rooms away. Ariadne stood guard outside the hall anyway, just in case someone decided to be stupid. She had been staring into the swirling colors of the paintings, seeking reassurance in the unchanging determination in the faces of St. Andrew's tormentors, the perpetual agony of Proserpine's attendants.

Now she was staring into Bourne's startled, porcine eyes, at his scraggly black beard, at the tip of her blade as she pointed it at him with her free hand.

He broke into a grin. "Finally decided you wanted me in your arms, eh? Picked a damn fine time to realize it, what with the war and all, but hey, I'll take some time out."

He motioned with his free hand. "Right here on the floor, then? Or, lest you impugn my chivalry, there's always the privacy of the porta-potty over in that construction site across the street."

With a grunt of disgust and a shove, Ariadne let him go.

"Lost the mood?" Bourne feigned disappointment even as he rubbed his aching arm. "Was it something I said?"

Bourne made an exaggerated show of retrieving and dusting off his hunting hat, which had fallen when Ariadne spun him. "Why so prickly? Your mission last night was a success. We have ourselves a prisoner. Any news about Roarke's hidey-hole?"

"Interrogation is Liliane's job," said Ariadne, stiffening. She knew what was coming. He wouldn't miss the chance to deride her for it.

"Right. You just kill things. We're all specialists these days. Is that it now?"

"And what's your specialty?" Ariadne asked coolly, finally turning his way. "Hiding beneath your sire's coattails?"

"Hey, I was out on a patrol, too, walking the beat as fast my poor fat legs could take me. But I didn't run into any trouble. Looks like the party was all at your place. Shame about Hera, though."

Ariadne did not flinch from his gaze. For the millionth time, she wondered how Hera's murderer had managed to slip by her and what the black ashes of her corpse might signify. But Bourne's words called her back. He hadn't unleashed his worst yet. He was still building.

"Ding dong, the witch is dead. Well, technically we're all dead, you know. Difference with Hera is, she won't be getting up again tomorrow night."

Ariadne stared daggers at him.

"But, hey," Bourne went on, "let's look at the numbers. Archibald's clean-up crew said four rebel Licks dead, and that many mortals, too. Say, here's a joke, Ariadne: What's the difference between a trashed Lick and a trashed mortal?"

He had finally come to it.

Bourne leaned in close to her. She could feel his spittle land on her face. "A mortal leaves a corpse."

Ariadne forced herself to stay still. Any violence out here would disrupt the elders' meeting, and Silas was among them.

"Four dead mortals." He circled around her. "Ooh! And I forgot. One half-dead, paralyzed one. White girl from the suburbs. The kind of victim the police would actually care about. Archie had himself quite the little meltdown. He's kind of cute when he tantrums."

Ariadne closed her eyes, balled her fists, felt her nails dig deep into her palms.

Bourne chuckled, adjusting his cap. “The Ravens will be working overtime for a week. No, I don’t imagine Liliane will be too happy about this little botch. Of course, she’ll forgive anything her ‘Silent Knife’ does. Or will she?”

Ariadne struggled, and failed, to keep the iron lid clasped on the memories of her first nights in Liliane’s court. The Prince’s voice spilled out, catechizing the sireless refugee Ariadne had been.

“Know what thou art, child,” Liliane said. “Only in New Jerusalem will such creatures as you be safe.”

Safe from what? A much younger Ariadne had found out the night she accidentally drained an old wino to death. She’d torn half the man’s neck open in her frenzy, and his corpse lay splayed at her feet.

Brain muddled and uncertain, she had called Liliane for help, and the Prince had come.

“Since the dawn of creation,” Liliane had said calmly as she drove spikes through an astonished Ariadne’s arms and ankles, nailing her to a nearby fence, “God has told the race of Man what do to with monsters.”

The whiskey in the blood she had drunk weighed down Ariadne’s every organ, dulling her responses as she protested, tried to break free. When she discovered she couldn’t, she’d begged Liliane not to leave her. The sun would be rising in a matter of minutes.

“Not to fear, dear one,” said the Prince as she skulked off into the shadows. “I’ve called the constabularies. They’ll surely help you.”

The police arrived, to be certain. They found a dead drunk lying prone beneath a blood-soaked woman staked to a fence. They vomited at the sight of it, at the sight of her. Ariadne had felt a giant piece of her mortal self fall off and die right there.

Then her shame fled in the face of terror. They would look at the man’s neck, look at her bloody, frothing mouth, and *know*. She’d imagined the revulsion in their expressions turning to rage, seeing herself reflected in their eyes for what she was. There wouldn’t be an arrest, a trial, or any other crutches of the modern civilized world. They would fall back on instincts passed down from the days of the cave and the hunt. They would slay the demon in their midst.

With a roar, Ariadne had found the strength to tear herself loose, sweeping past the frazzled cops and off into the morning dusk, desperate to seek shelter before God Himself unleashed His wrath with the morning sun. Ariadne learned how to clean up her messes after that. Later, she learned not to make messes to begin with.

Tonight, she had left a mess.

Hera was dead. But the more Ariadne searched herself for grief, for regret over her loss, the more she kept finding only embarrassment.

Bourne moved in close. “This isn’t like you, Ariadne. You’re never this sloppy.”

“Go to hell.”

“We’re already there, sweetie. Of course, I can forgive you for not realizing it, only ten years deceased. In my day, no ten-years-dead babe in arms earned a title such as Sheriff, but hey, the times are a-changing. Hmm, I bet you’re too young to know that reference.

"The times can a-change right back, too," he whispered, tongue dancing across the fold of her ear, "if you're not careful."

With a cry of rage Ariadne hurled him back to the ground. An instant later, her foot was on his throat, her sword at his chest, right above his heart.

Bourne coughed. "*Déjà vu* all over again. How many times have we been in this position?"

Ariadne's eyes narrowed, but neither her foot nor her blade wavered.

Bourne's voice shook only slightly. "This is where I tell you that, if you kill me, it'll be the excuse Silas has been waiting for."

She pushed the tip of the blade into his neck. A thin ooze of Vitae bubbled out. "Maybe this is the excuse the Prince has been waiting for to finally cut that old buzzard loose," said Ariadne. "Ever thought of that?"

Bourne looked Ariadne up and down. "You know, I think this time, you just might do it. And you're in enough trouble for one evening." He smiled crookedly. "Truce?"

The blade dug deeper.

"Okay!" Bourne's voice scraped. "I'll get you into the meeting. How's that?"

Ariadne paused. Then she withdrew the sword a centimeter.

"Liliane's private council?" she asked warily.

"Um, I don't know what's in Grand Ballroom C, but I'm pretty sure that Liliane's is the only meeting worth mentioning tonight."

"Only elders are permitted. Only the Primogen."

"Of whom my pappy, as we've discussed *ad nauseum*, is one."

"He lets *you* attend?"

"Ooh, you're so sexy when you're jealous. Besides, why wouldn't he? I've been dead nine decades now, give or take a few months. Frankly, I find it a little reassuring that Liliane hasn't let you skip *all* the required steps to earning your spurs."

The blade re-entered his throat. "Hey! Hey! Bad mood tonight?"

Ariadne kept the blade where it was. "I didn't ask to rise as far as I did in just ten years, Bourne. I didn't ask to have no lineage, to have some anonymous sire abandon me. But if you haven't noticed, lineage or no lineage, I've been single-handedly winning this war for all of you. I've earned the respect of every Kindred who wields a blade or a gun in Liliane's service. If the elders refuse to realize that, it's their problem."

"The elders will never realize it," Bourne's strangled voice managed to croak, "because they're a bunch of bloated pusbags whose power depends upon not realizing it."

"Even your sire?"

"Especially him!"

She pulled the blade back, and Bourne started laughing.

"What?" Ariadne snapped.

"Your face. What I'll never get over, Ariadne, is how surprised you always seem. You don't know me nearly as well as you think you do."

"I don't *want* to know you any better. And what makes you think that I want to be in that room with them?"

Bourne laughed harder. “Oh, love. Stick to the battlefield. You’ve got no skills at all in the Danse.”

“I’m still here, aren’t I? And I’m about to enter a meeting of Liliane’s private council, or so you promised.”

“That you are.” Bourne stumbled to his feet, making a great production out of dusting himself off again, of rubbing his throat. “Just remember, this is what *you* wanted. Don’t blame the messenger for what you see and hear.”



True to his word, a knock from Bourne opened the door to the council chamber. Bourne whispered something in the house-steward’s ear and he ushered the two of them in silently. No one in the chamber looked up as they entered, but Ariadne wasn’t surprised when she saw what had captured their attention.

Prince Liliane had brought out the box.

Dressed in an immaculate white pants suit, hair coiled elegantly, the Prince circled slowly within the bounds of the cluster of elders. The council chamber was a symphony in red, from the carpets to the wall hangings. Ivory friezes from *Paradise Lost* ringed the top of the room, cherubs gazing with glazed expressions of joy and goodwill down at the room’s occupants: well-dressed men and women in black, and the Prince in white at their center. They all stood as perfectly still as the characters in the frieze above them. Liliane’s was the only motion in the room.

The Prince wrapped her manicured nails around the lever on top of the box. Today, a hapless rat was its unlucky tenant. It was a fat, hairy old thing, gray with festering pink patches that spoke either of mange or lost fights for dominance with its younger fellows.

The irony was not lost on Ariadne, surrounded as she was by the elders. Of the Kindred gathered, only she and Bourne were less than a century old.

Everyone’s eyes were focused on the large stone table in the room’s center, around which they had formed their semicircle. Liliane stood by one end, and the prisoner Ariadne had captured the previous night lay sprawled across the other.

The rebel looked young, a teenager perhaps at the time of his Embrace, which, unlike Archibald’s, couldn’t have been too long ago. Only a real neonate would be stupid enough to hurl obscenities at a Prince. Then again, spread eagle, with his arms and legs staked to the table, maybe he felt he had nothing to lose.

He was wrong.

“Learn, young one.” Liliane’s pale blue eyes worked up and down her captive’s young body. “Learn that God made every creature with a purpose. Even you.”

She bent down, placed the box at the end of the table by the captive’s feet. The box had two compartments, separated by a divider. One held the rat, while the other looked to be filled with a solid block of some black substance. There was a small lever on the side of the box that Liliane gently released. The rat snapped to attention, watching the divider between its compartment and the neighboring one lift. The solid block of black burst, becoming a cloud that sprayed into the rat’s section.

“These driver ants, for example. *Solenopsis Invicta*. God made them the hygienic custodians of this sullied world, returning it, tree by tree, corpse by corpse, to its former state of grace. Female, every one of them.”

Between eye-blinks, the ant-cloud covered the rat. The rodent spasmed and leapt under its black blanket ... or perhaps the movement was merely a result of the swarm's momentum as it poured in to fill the empty space. If the rat shrieked, the sound was lost beneath the shroud of insects.

"Driver ants are blind, guided only by Divine Providence. They poke and prod until they find an opening. Failing that ... they create one."

After a few minutes, the rat's struggles ceased. Its form sagged, became indistinct save for a few jagged protrusions that might have been bone.

The captive was not unaffected. His eyes remained fixed on the box. Kindred didn't sweat, but Ariadne had long since learned to read their body language. The rebel knew full well what was about to happen.

"I am going to teach you what your traitorous sire should have," Liliane spoke not with malice, but with the sad concern of a disappointed parent. "Our durability as Kindred is not a gift from God, but His curse, the chief use of which is to teach us the meaning of humility. We can suffer as no mortal can."

She maneuvered the box until one end pointed toward the rebel's foot, and, with a swift motion followed by the eyes of everyone in the room, flicked the lever again, releasing the outer door.

The ants cascaded out in a widening column, crossing the inches between the box and the rebel's legs. Some of them scattered or went astray, only to veer back unerringly toward the captive, as if they all knew their mission.

The rebel pulled and craned his neck in an attempt to watch as the ants ensconced his feet, moved toward his ankles, as if seeing the act would give him some power over it.

He began to scream. Everyone else watched in silence. Memories of Ariadne's own initiation rites, locked away in mental vaults of iron, slowly slipped from their prisons. She recalled all too vividly what Liliane had made her watch, made her undergo...

Irrelevant! The woman she had been on that slab, more terrified of her own new powers than of the ants, had been consumed. Ariadne was now the Silent Knife, and even if she could not entirely banish fear, she had at least banished pity.

Minutes passed. By the time the ants climbed to the rebel's knees, he had screamed his throat raw, pleading to tell them anything they wanted to know.

Later, when the ants cleared his thighs, Liliane smiled. The moment those red lips spread across her face, the ants froze in their march, heeding her silent call. They began to recede, leaving rows of exposed muscle fiber, the occasional scrap of tumescent skin, and a few squares of denim in their wake.

They marched obediently back into the box. Liliane cupped her hands, scooping any strays and outliers from the swarm gently back inside. No insect so much as twitched until Liliane closed the lid with a deft, dainty motion of her hands.

Between dry sobs, the rebel revealed each of Roarke's hideouts, their defenses, the names of the Kindred and kine dwelling there.

Ariadne saw the elders watching with fascination and even glee on their ancient faces, most likely imagining Roarke, their traitorous former Seneschal, on the table instead. None looked more eager than Bourne's sire, Silas.

Silas certainly did *look* like an elder. Although Liliane was reputed to be four hundred years old, a century older than Silas, she had been Embraced in early middle age and on occasion still laughed like a teenager. Silas, on the other hand—with his wrinkled skin,

bleary eyes, hooked nose, and faded Victorian three-piece suit—looked like a wizened villain from a Charles Dickens novel. A few tufts of white hair clung stubbornly to his head.

As tempting as it was to laugh at Silas, no one ever did. Not more than once, anyway. An aura of dread hung around the man's shoulders like a musty overcoat, even as he toddled along with his oddly hunched gait. A Labrador retriever, as gaunt and spindly as Silas himself, accompanied him, its eyes filled with humanlike malevolence.

Some private part of Ariadne had always whispered to her that she would one day become like Liliane: elegant, refined, deadliness wrapped in silks. But what if her destiny was to become some gnarled thing like Silas or his hound?

"Silas fancies himself next in line for Seneschal," Bourne had explained to her as he led her to the meeting. "And the rising tide lifts all boats, eh? Hrm, you're too young to know that line, either. But it'd be neat, eh? Imagine all the favors I could call in then. I'd be an even more useful man to know."

Ariadne hadn't replied; it seemed obvious Liliane didn't want another Seneschal. Otherwise, wouldn't she have replaced Roarke already? After all, his betrayal was over a month old.

By now the rebel had given Liliane all she wanted, and he watched with fearful expectation for her to finish what she had started.

"Look ye not so afraid, child," Liliane stroked his trembling cheek with her palm. "For we are a merciful Prince, and true to our word. We said you could go if you told us everything, and you did."

The Prince turned her deep blue eyes Ariadne's way. Ariadne thought she was used to the eternal cold inside her, but the sight of the Prince could always make the temperature drop a few degrees inside her chest. Surely Liliane would chastise her for her unauthorized presence!

But the Prince merely smiled and motioned to the table. Ariadne figured it out. She stepped forward and, one by one, grasped and ripped the stakes out from the stone, just as she had originally wedged them there, through the prisoner's flesh and bone, when she'd first brought him to the room.

She then helped him rise to his shaky feet, the bones half-exposed, and guided him in a hobble across the red-carpeted floor to the giant brass door, where the *Paradise Lost* friezes all converged. The rebel shook Ariadne off and, beneath Lucifer's temptation of Eve, flipped the finger to the assembled Primogen.

"Roarke's going to kill every one of you rotting old bastards," he rasped out. "The next time I come through this door, I'll be swinging a torch. You're all gonna burn!"

He then staggered his way up the stairs to freedom.

The show had ended. The elders dispersed, whispering, already beginning to plot. Bourne stayed just long enough to creep over to Ariadne.

"So, how long do you think?"

"What?"

"How long until he gets what's coming?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, girl. I've known Liliane since your granddad was messing his diapers. She never just lets someone go. You're the Sheriff. You must have seen her do this kind of thing before."

Should she tell him? Ariadne shrugged. What did it matter?

“Eggs,” she said softly. “They carried eggs. They got up to his waist, which means they used the appropriate orifice to get inside, to lay them inside his body. He’ll have just enough time to make it back to Roarke and the other rebels before they hatch and eat him from the inside out.”

“Yummy.” Bourne licked his lips. “Got to hand it to our lady—she’s creative. Here I was thinking stakes, sunlight, and decapitation were pretty much your basic menu of choices. But there she goes and figures out another option. Bravo.”

Liliane turned, and Bourne’s already ash-pale skin seemed to whiten under her gaze. But the Prince stared right past him.

“Come here, our Silent Knife.”

Bourne withdrew to meld with the elders. Insanely, Ariadne began wishing he had stayed. She stepped forward tentatively, apologies all ready for being where she shouldn’t have been.

“Ah, pretty one.” Liliane stroked Ariadne’s hair. “What a pleasant surprise to have you join us tonight. Our wayward bird, wrapped in love, rewarding us with all we ever ask.”

“I owe you a debt beyond measure, my lady.”

The words seemed to come out of Ariadne’s mouth of their own volition, but she didn’t disagree with them. Ten years ago, the same night Andrei’s words—his soft voice, apologetic, damnably unhateable—had torn her as if she had been made of cobwebs, a shape bearing fangs had come out of the darkness to murder her body. Her soul—Andrei had taken care of that first.

Even though she had been within dashing distance of a police call box, she hadn’t even made a move toward the red button. As if disappointed by her acquiescence, or perhaps finding her as unworthy as Andrei had, her assailant vanished after the deed. Ariadne had awoken hours later to wander alone, starving, terrified by the thing she had become ... until Liliane had found her and taken her in.

“It is we who owe you,” said the Prince, moving closer. “Thanks to your blades, Roarke has lost many of his rabble. We now know where to find the rest. Because of you, we can end this insurrection and resume our path to creating New Jerusalem.”

Then she withdrew only slightly, gazed around the room—ice-blue eyes taking stock of each of the assembled figures. “Yet there is ever a cost. Our own number has diminished.”

Hera. Ariadne steeled herself. This was the beginning. Bourne had started here, too. Hera’s loss was regrettable, from a tactical standpoint, even if Ariadne couldn’t seem to find the emotion to mourn the woman herself.

But Ariadne’s carelessness in leaving the bodies, the threat that mistake posed to the Masquerade—Hera’s own sire had nearly destroyed her for far less. Ariadne suddenly wondered if Bourne’s bringing her here had been planned all along, a public humiliation to ruin the reputation of an upstart Sheriff.

Ariadne began the defense she had been preparing ever since the incident. “Milady, I know some mistakes were made, and I accept responsibility for—”

“Ssh.”

Liliane's lips were now millimeters from Ariadne's own. The Prince's presence was a scent that reached in through the nose to throttle the brain. Ariadne was sure that Liliane would only have to exhale and she would shatter into a billion shards of glass.

The Prince whispered conspiratorially: "Our Ravens have attended to their duties. Whatever else happened, let it form one more scar upon Roarke's traitorous hide." Then she kissed Ariadne gently, with lips so cold they burned.

Liliane raised her voice so the assemblage could hear. "What Roarke has spurned, you shall be given. You have been our Knife. Now you shall be our Hand, as well."

Ariadne's trance shattered. "M-Me, milady? Your Hand?"

The cold red eyes of the elders all focused into a ring around her. None of the Primo-gen exchanged even a whisper. They didn't have to. Murder didn't need a voice.

"Yes. We hereby dub thee Seneschal. You shall act as our voice on the Hunt, bringing the Holy Word to those thrice-cursed ingrate rebels."

Liliane smiled broadly, clasping her hands together in either applause or prayer; Ariadne couldn't tell which. No one joined her in the gesture.

"Delightful poetry!" said the Prince. "The instrument of Roarke's destruction shall take his place at my side. Go, now, and lead the Hunt!"

Ariadne bowed, swore and re-swore her service, acting out the motions she had learned long ago. But dread crept and metastasized within her. Seneschal? Only Kindred centuries in age held that kind of title.

A ruffling under Silas's coat sleeves betrayed his wringing hands. The Labrador by his side shuddered, its stomach shivering rapidly.

Yet Liliane beamed so proudly, salving Ariadne with the infinite warmth of a mother-sister-teacher. The newly made Seneschal felt her whole world collapse into a fervent desire to please her Prince.

You've earned this, Ariadne told herself. Haven't you done whatever she's asked, killed whoever she's asked, risked yourself while all the elders sat with spindled fingers, plotting?

The assemblage filtered out of the room, joined the crowd of neonates already assembled around the cistern for the unity ritual. Everyone linked hands in a circle around the basin in the dining room. This time, the hand Liliane held at her right side was Ariadne's.

Ariadne heard Hera's scream echoing her mind. She resisted the urge to snap around to look.

"As we are united by God's love," Liliane was saying, "so shall we be united by our blood."

The scream continued in Ariadne's ears, now in her own voice. It was the same scream she had made the night Andrei had left her.

Liliane's fangs bit into Ariadne's wrist. Her thoughts smeared mercifully into oblivion. Blood flowed into the basin.

Chapter Six

Ariadne knelt at Liliane's feet in the Prince's study. The door was closed, and of course, there were no windows. The Prince sat in a great leather chair, crossing her legs as she reached for a crystalline goblet topped high with blood.

"Our Silent Knife." Liliane smiled, patting the seat of the chair beside her. "Come, sit with us."

Ariadne could no more refuse than the blood in her veins could have refused to circulate when she was alive. She laid her scabbarded swords down by the foot of the chair and sat down on a bed of cushions. The enveloping pillows felt like a maw, eager to swallow her small form whole.

"You seem hesitant to accept the honor we have bestowed upon you. Do you not desire it? Do you think yourself unworthy?"

Ariadne could not look up, for fear Liliane's gaze would flay away her flesh and reveal only mistakes. Still, she managed to speak.

"You have raised me, my lady. Tutored me, made me what I am."

"Are you not pleased? Are your blades not feared by quick and dead alike, in the court and beyond? Ah, I see. What transpired of late has sowed the seeds of doubt."

Infinite warmth pooled in Liliane's crystal-blue eyes. "Hera's destruction is a lesson, if you are but wise enough to see it. The world is full of those who seek to extinguish the light of righteousness. The bearers of that flickering light must needs stumble at times, so fierce are the gales and storms. This, too, is a part of God's divine plan. Do you understand?"

Ariadne did not dare speak a word.

"Our own mistakes have been legion," said the Prince. "I learned, quite painfully, how a misstep in building the castle of Paradise will rain down stones and fire."

On those rare occasions when Liliane used the personal *I*, Ariadne shivered. Such intimacy somehow seemed dangerous, like the removal of a screen that was in place to protect Ariadne, and not her Prince.

"Even now, the memories fade. The tide washes away all things, Daughter, and memories are but the vanguard grains of sand upon the shore. But still, I can recall those days before God cast me out from the light of His love, as befits my own place in His plan. As a young novitiate of His most Catholic Church, I indulged in such hubris as to believe that I knew the path He had set out for me. Though a mere initiate, I saw myself one day as

prioress of the abbey, and studied day and night, neglecting my chores, teaching myself to read—a forbidden act for Eve’s stock in that time and place.

“Yes, they beat me whenever they found me. But every fall of the lash against my naked back, every dunking of my head in the bucket, only seemed like one more test of my faith. Oh, what a fool I was, my Silent Knife. Not for seeking to better myself—no, for the Christ Himself was a teacher, preaching the advancement of the mind and soul. I was a fool for arguing this before deacons and scholars who could not see past the threat to their own power. Had I a mother like you have in me, who warned me to keep my plans wedged safely beneath my tongue, I doubt I would have listened to a word she said.”

Liliane smiled and closed her eyes. “I thought myself comely in those days—so laughable a thought now, when even the destitute have rosier skin and richer hair than the fine ladies of my youth. But then, I had a good deal less to eat, and a good many more childhood fevers to suffer.

“In any case, my looks—and, so I thought, my intellect—caught the attention of a young scholar of the Church. Peter! His name was Peter. And here I thought it would never return to me.”

Ariadne looked on, trying to share in the world unfolding beneath the Prince’s closed eyelids. “He said he would teach me all the secrets of the Holy Writ and the inner workings of the great philosophers, and I believed him. True, he showed me books. More often, he showed me the straw of his bed, and the hair of his chest as he pressed upon me. I learned far more than Aristotle and Aquinas from that one, oh yes.”

Ariadne could not keep her stomach from clenching at the mention of the young lovers. Only the greatest possible exertion of will kept her from leaping up from the chair to confess her recent, unwished-for remembrances of Andrei.

Liliane, meanwhile, continued her own confession: “When I took with child, Peter sent me away and paid me a handsome retainer, for he was wealthy. How else could he have afforded to spend his days studying within the abbey walls, while most of his fellows toiled in the fields? I saved every last coin, particularly those he sent after my son was born. Peter sent me enough to provide for the two of us in the style to which *his* family had been accustomed. My boy and I made do with far less, and hoarded the rest. Money laid roads to books, to Church officials, to the realms of knowledge that opened their own roads to power.”

Liliane shook her head slowly. When she opened her eyes, they were blood red.

“Poor Peter. He never did understand politics nearly as well as he thought he did. When his rivals discovered his sin with me, they cast him out of his high position. My uncle, not content with this punishment, hired some lawless resolute to abduct him from a tavern one night and, with a rusted blade, rob from him his manhood.”

Liliane’s face sank slightly. “A shame. He made one beautiful child.”

She continued: “To be a woman with money and no husband—and truly, now, no husband would ever have me, ruined as I was—this was the only kind of freedom for a woman in my time. That freedom convinced me more than ever that God intended me for great things. When the abbey fell on hard times, neglected when its patron lord passed away and his sons decided matters of the Church should be left to bishops, I gladly stepped in and helped pay some of the debts. It took all of the resources I had, but I did it, and the grateful nuns, apparently rendered amnesiac to my past sins at the sight of my present gold, appointed me prioress.

“Prioress of an abbey!” Liliane’s eyes flared. “I doubt you can imagine it, in these days when a woman can lead a nation in arms, heal the sick, or preside over a guild the likes of which would humble the Dutch East India Company, but in the times when I still walked in daylight, prioress of an abbey was tantamount to queen. I had access to networks of words, channels of finance, troves of secrets. All of these—words, coins, and secrets—could be exchanged for power.

“And what does one exchange power for? Safety. Justice. I opened the doors of my abbey to women fleeing the cruelty of their husbands, to women cast aside as I had been. To women who had been declared witches for no other sorcery than speaking their minds every once and again. They came to me, sometimes bringing money or cattle or wagons. I took them in, one and all, using the coffers of the wealthy ones to support those who came empty-handed. Other than my son, Astrolabe, who had grown into a healthy and hearty young man, we were all of us women, working together as equals, subject to neither king nor sheriff. We rebuilt Paradise. This, I thought, must have been God’s plan for me.”

The longer the Prince spoke, the more Ariadne found her own eyes closing, until the darkness of her lids spread out as a canvas. Upon it she saw the images Liliane described, not just with imagined sight but all senses, so detailed were the Prince’s descriptions. Ariadne found herself seeing the women in their simple peasant robes, found herself hearing their laughter and the tinkling of bells and tambourines, even smelling the aroma of roasted chicken and spices. She felt the warmth of the fires—comforting, not terrifying, as fire was to Kindred—and the sweat on their brows as they danced at night. Ariadne felt like weeping, not only for the beauty of the scene, but out of pity for herself, that she could not join in.

As Liliane’s voice dropped, clouds rolled across Ariadne’s vision. “I should have seen the mistakes I was making. I have no excuse, for the Lord sent me a messenger, in the form of a dark lady who would never meet with me by daylight. I smelled the stink of Satan upon her as she warned me of the enemies I had made, of the forces they were mustering to wreck our dreams.”

Ariadne could see a woman-shaped form flutter from shadow to shadow.

“Puffed with pride I cursed her, ordered my son to drive her out with flaming brands and garlic, as was the common wisdom of the day. I dismissed her words as the lies of the Adversary, forgetting in my pride that even he is but one more servant of the Almighty. I told myself she only wanted me to flee because my abbey stood proud as a bulwark of light, unbearable to her kind. Oh, for all of my book learning, how little I knew.”

Liliane’s voice sunk to a whisper, and in Ariadne’s mind, the clouds grew dark and menacing. “They came in the night, dozens of them, with swords and torches, hoes and spades. In defiance of God’s sanctuary they scaled the abbey walls, set fire to all that would burn. They slew all those who fought and took their pleasure from all those who couldn’t flee fast enough. I watched my son, my beautiful Astrolabe, crushed and burned and violated before me. They shoved his mutilated form into my arms, then ripped me away, crying, screaming. They announced that they had worse in store for me.”

Ariadne could see it all, feel it all. She tried and failed to block the screams from her ears.

“That was when *she* returned.” The Prince’s lips curled into a cruel smile. “She fell upon them faster than my eyes could follow, a blur of black hair and black robes. She wielded a sword—a woman with a sword! Every time I see your face, Daughter, when I see your blades in motion, I am reminded of her fury.”

In Ariadne's dream-vision the shadowy woman-form coalesced into her own shape, wore her face, wielded her katanas.

"She made of the men a harvest. Many fell before her, their blood soaking the already drenched walls. As sharp as her blade was, her nails and teeth cut men down just as surely. When she was done, when not one of them remained, she knelt down and drank, like a preening cat, at the rivers of red flowing down the stones of the abbey.

"Then she turned to me. I was a shattered thing then, and as she spirited me away from the conflagration, she Embraced me, lovingly, painfully. At first I thought it the Almighty's final judgment upon me for my hubris. Soon enough I learned that I was indeed to be His instrument, to lead the people to His truth, to create a New Jerusalem where justice and harmony reigned. Yet as He punished Moses of the Hebrews for his pride and anger, so He punished me. As a fallen creature, struck down for my arrogance, I would never be permitted to enter the Promised Land. So it was His will."

Ariadne felt as if a cold sweat were beading on her forehead. Her eyes opened to find Liliane's staring back, her ice-blue eyes inscrutable.

"I have accepted my mistakes. I work in the shadows now, content with creating a paradise only for the Damned. Is it not written that in the End Times, even the angels and the demons will be judged? Let the Most Holy look upon our own New Jerusalem that day and declare what we Kindred have created to be good. I have been at work at this task ever since the abbey's fall, all these long centuries. I have gathered the dispossessed and the weak and made them *better*." She clenched her teeth. "This is the dream your swords serve, Daughter."

Lungfuls of pride, if not actual air, swelled Ariadne's chest.

"Yes, some will perish along the way. Such is the price of Paradise, and such is the tally of sins etched upon my soul. I tell you this so you will not crumble at your mistakes, but learn from them. Everything for which I have trained you, though you may have cursed me all the while, was to prepare you to be the instrument you need to be. Divine justice must be delivered by sword. The wielder of that blade cannot, must not, ever blanch at the thought of doing what is required."

Ariadne wasn't precisely aware of when it had happened, but Liliane had risen. The Prince was standing behind her, wrapping her arms around Ariadne's chest, her lips icy as they brushed against her ear.

"Do whatever you must, Silent Knife, Hand, Daughter. Unleash your blades with the full pardon of your Prince, who will instead suffer for your sins before God, to redeem you ... and through us, our damned Kindred race."

She released Ariadne, dismissed her, and the new Seneschal almost fell over while bowing. She was dizzy, light-headed, as if she had never recovered from the last battle at all.

Ariadne's world was still spinning as she staggered to her quarters. She sat on her slab for a long, long time. She tried to envision the spires of New Jerusalem again, the life she would be leading after the world crumbled to dust. Try as she might, the scenes kept bleeding away into smiling pictures of a girl wearing her face, sitting on a sunlit bench or dancing across the campus green in broad daylight.

She shoved the images aside, began her wind-down ritual. Dawn was coming. The sounds of revelry upstairs filtered down like a heavy rain to where Ariadne sat, alone, in her room, polishing her blades mechanically.

They were mourning Hera. They were singing to New Jerusalem. Ariadne mouthed the words along with them. Her mind, just minutes ago the site of so many vivid scenes, now felt like an endless gray plain extending in all directions. The Prince had forgiven her. In the service of the dream, tonight had been a victory. That, she told herself, had been the Prince's lesson.

In victory, a soldier felt pride. At the death of a comrade, a woman felt grief. But a weapon ... a weapon didn't feel anything at all. Ariadne felt nothing at all.

Ariadne tried to convince herself that such an emotionless state was for the best, or better than the alternatives. At least she wasn't like Bourne, who mocked everything as some sort of cosmic joke. But she could not help but wonder if there should not be another path open to her.

If there was, there in the dark of her barren cell, Ariadne could not see it.

Chapter Seven

Andrei's departure drains the light from the room. Ariadne spilled wine—wine! If only her parents knew!—on his new shirt. He shrugged and hand-waved as if it didn't bother him, but she knew from his wrinkled brow that it did, had felt the grinding of his teeth when his cheek pressed against hers. It is evening but he excuses himself from her room, refuses to stay the night, leaving her to bunch up in a ball on her bed until morning. The blue flowers printed on her pillowcase seem like gaping jaws, their petals teeth that will close around her and consume her utterly.

Just as she feels her atoms merging with theirs, Andrei knocks on her door and returns. Calmer, composed, he takes her in his arms again, plays “Imagine” on her guitar. She curls up by his feet, deciding silently that great romances are thick, that they have a tapestry, not just some sunbeam yellow of young love or ashen black of love departed, but a heavy plaid coat of rich chocolate brown, stripes of red and orange, spots of blue and pink, stains from spilled wine and small rips and patches. They're inches and inches deep of wool. It sometimes chafes when you wear them, sometimes smells, sometimes comforts, but it's always thick...



Ariadne hopped the subway at Maverick Station, blended in with the shadows, unseen by passengers in their coats, reading their books, listening to their iPods. Metallica's “The Unforgiven” leaked out from someone's ear buds.

She switched lines and, between the Park Street and Kendall stops, the train snaked up like the neck of a plesiosaur from the depths into the night air for one station only. Once aloft, it seemed to grow phobic of the dazzling harborscape and skyline around it, or perhaps feeling the Boston cold, reconsidered its decision and plunged back to the steamy underground. During this brief moment of the train's aspiration to a larger world, Ariadne looked up.

Twelve years ago, new to the city, she had looked up, down, left, right, everywhere she could, with the rapt fascination of a newborn, hungry for every detail. She had noted every advertising poster (“Tutoring in 80 languages, including Swahili!”), every traveler (the young Indian man with a dotcom look checking his shiny Rolex, the pink underside of his brown fingers nervously tapping the handle of his designer briefcase; the Latina woman's fingers clenched in prayerlike steeple, barely emerging from the leopard cuffs of

her jacket sleeves), the name of every station as it sailed by beyond the window. She would look, and then she would write, wearing pencils down to nubs, scratching on ATM deposit slips and dry-cleaning receipts and whatever other salvage could be found in her pockets.

Since becoming what she now was, Ariadne had shut heavy doors against the world outside, as if she were some Victorian lady whose constitution simply wasn't up to the bustle of Hyde Park today. But tonight, she was looking out at the Charles River, in the summer dotted with the white acne of sailboats and seagulls, now marred with patches of ice, trapping the Hatch Shell amphitheater like the *HMS Endurance*. She craned her neck away from the skyline to see the Soviet bloc-style cube of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Passengers got off. Passengers got on.

The train was not a dinosaur, not a full organism at all. It was merely a red blood cell, dumping off and collecting loads of oxygen. The city would live for at least another breath.

Then the train plunged underground and that shimmer of fire inside Ariadne re-froze, a candle returning to the refrigerator to preserve its waning life, the way her mother always stored them in the refrigerator after birthdays. She stepped fluidly and silently onto the Kendall Station platform.

She knew she could take the train farther toward her destination, but where she was going seemed to demand travel by foot.

Out here in the night air, the war seemed far away. She could not see the scouts she had ordered to comb the city to confirm or refute the captured rebel's information. Those scouts could return at any moment, but their Seneschal would not be there to hear the reports.

Their Seneschal was instead walking into the face of winter winds, down Memorial Drive, along the snakeskin of the Charles River as it bent and turned toward Watertown. She could tell the local drivers from the visitors by who knew when to shift left before a line of parked cars filled the right lane at the edge of Harvard's campus. Those unfamiliar with the road formed a chain of sudden brake lights. Liliane had told Ariadne to keep clear of the university, which the wizards had claimed as theirs.

Ariadne walked past anyway, defiant.

Her feet carried her all the way to Medford, a lone, thin woman striding through the unpopulated night. She followed the remnants of a familiar smell all along the Mystic Valley Parkway, past the cemetery and the gas stations, past junkies hovering outside tenement flats, past the cardboard structures of the homeless, past the stray dogs and abandoned car chassis until she found the office of the Ronnie Cab taxi company.

Her heart had ceased to beat ten years ago, but some other tempo within her seemed to be intensifying with every mile she covered toward this spot. Unflinchingly she had done battle with Roarke and his minions, yet none of that had made her hand-wringingly, stand-on-toes nervous like this.

Ariadne stopped cold, pulled herself into the shadows of a stoop.

What are you doing here? There's a war going on.

But Roarke had hideouts in Medford. Ariadne's presence here could be construed as legitimate reconnaissance. Besides, as Seneschal, she now answered only to Liliane.

The imagined pounding of blood in her veins begged her to burst into the taxi office, swords flashing, and take what she wanted. But Ariadne collected herself, walked into Ronnie Cab so softly that no heads turned among the men seated around the card table inside.

The radio was playing Shakira's "La Tortura" as Ariadne's eyes scanned the room up and down. The walls were a collage of decades-old calendars, beer and soda advertisements, pizza delivery flyers, maps of the city poked full of pushpin holes. There, a closetlike bathroom. There, a cluster of rusty lockers. There, a storage area for filthy mops and brooms.

There, an office.

The room was yellow and brown, smelling of beer and old Chinese food. Surrounding a desk piled high with papers, reachable through a narrow path, were boxes upon boxes of filer folders; they seemed to consume every last millimeter of free space. As a centerpiece for the desk, a half-eaten donut sat on a paper plate, hosting a small but faithful congregation of ants.

Ariadne searched for a Rolodex or a promising-looking ledger, but the notebooks she opened contained financial records, car inspection forms, reimbursement slips. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason. The folders were labeled in shorthand, and half the labels were too faded to read.

Left to her own devices, Ariadne might never find Andrei's contract before dawn. She looked hopefully to the laptop resting atop the paper mound on the desk, hesitantly tapped the keyboard. A password was required.

Perhaps if she stole the computer, brought it back to Liliane's sanctum, one of the others could figure it out. Archibald, certainly. But she couldn't trust him with this. She couldn't trust anyone.

The ants swarming the donut seemed to be mocking her.

Ariadne heard footsteps and voices approaching. Stiffening, her hand flew immediately to the guitar case at her back.

A short, balding man in a half-buttoned white shirt walked into the room, blasting rapid Spanish into a cellphone while a toothpick between his lips darted left and right like a compass needle madly seeking north.

The man paused in his conversation when he saw Ariadne. Immediately, his eyes and lips widened into a smile, and curtly ended his call. As he turned his full attention to Ariadne, she could see the room's dim halogen light glint faintly off his hair gel.

He removed the toothpick in a smooth, graceful gesture. "Nice guitar case. Can I help you?"

Ariadne slowly dropped her hand.

"Andrei Montague," she said simply. "I'm ... I'm looking for Andrei Montague."

"*Andrecito*?" the man asked. "What do you want with him? He's ugly. We got much better lookin' guys than him, right *chicos*?"

A few laughs issued from the doorway. Other faces were now peering in.

Sensing Ariadne's tension, although not the reason behind it, the man raised his hands conciliatorily. "Okay, just kidding. *Andrecito*'s got the night off."

Ariadne nodded, then stood there dumbly.

"You his sister or something?"

Ariadne nodded again, wondering where her voice had fled to.

"Good," one of the others called from the next room. "Then you can tell him his mama needs to teach that boy how to *drive*!"

More laughter. The man in the doorway told them to shut up, smiling the whole time.

"*Tontos*. Don't mind them. So where you from?"

"Out of town," said Ariadne softly, with no idea why.

"How long you been in Me'for't? Andrecito show you 'round yet?"

"Look, I just need to know ... I just need to know where he's living."

"What? You his sister, and he don't tell you where he lives?"

The man's eyebrows rose, but his eyes were still dancing all over Ariadne's body.

"We've been a little distant lately." Ariadne fumbled over the words. At least that wasn't a lie.

"Hey, no worries. My name's Ronnie, and I can take you to him."

"*Ronaldo*, you dog!" another of the cabbies shouted. "Don't you go after Andrecito's sister, hear? Just 'cause he's the new guy don't mean his family's meat."

"Yeah, ain't you got enough girls already? Leave some for the rest of us."

New. Andrei just started this job. How long ago? Ariadne couldn't find the words to ask all the questions in her mind, but managed to force out the important one. "Where is he living now? Please," she added. "I need to know."

"Okay, all right." Ronnie shrugged. "You sure you don't need a ride? Don't believe these *hijos de puta*. I'm a regular gentleman."

"I believe you. But I don't need a ride, thank you. Just the address."

Ronnie sighed good-naturedly. "Suit yourself. Just don't tell Andrecito I told you, okay? Just in case he wants to get mad at someone, I don't want him comin' in here and mouthin' off. Got too much of that already." He aimed those last words out the doorway, where they were received with friendly jeers.

Their easy camaraderie lit flames of envy in Ariadne.

"Here you go." Ronnie wrote down an address. "*Mira*, see that beneath it? That's my phone number—in case, you know, you ever need anything." He grinned.

Ariadne stared at the address hungrily. It had been so simple that she didn't quite believe its existence in her hands. A freezing dread began to overtake her stomach. With a hastily muttered thank-you she walked swiftly out of Ronnie Cab.

She stared at the address, flipped the paper to and fro in her hands. Ever since that cab ride, the channel inside her head had been tuned away from dead static by only two things: Liliane and the memory of the man at this address.

The address belonged to a cheap motel in Fresh Pond. For a moment, Ariadne thought Ronnie had played a joke on her. But mortals' pulses and breathing betrayed deception like beacons, and Ariadne, with her carefully trained senses, hadn't sensed any from the taxi manager. Still, Andrei in a cheap motel at Fresh Pond, not in a suburban castle in Lexington or Lincoln?

Fresh Pond, right near the commuter train yards.

Ariadne's mind skipped painfully from her thoughts of Andrei. According to what the tortured captive had told them last night, those train yards housed Roarke's command center.

Ariadne shuddered. For all she knew, Roarke had his fingers in Ronnie Cab. He certainly had been able to move troops around the city with ease. His spies could have noticed her already, and even if they hadn't, there was no way she could make it to the train yards undetected. She was too well known.

For a moment she entertained thoughts of the risk anyway. But Liliane was counting on her. Liliane, who had given her so much, when no one else would. Liliane, who had already been betrayed by one Seneschal.

No, Ariadne could not choose this moment. The smart thing would be to choose no moment at all, to crumple up the address and throw it away. But the letters and numbers had scorched themselves across whatever remained of her soul.

In that moment the thrill began bleeding into fear. Ariadne was ten years out of practice, could not sustain the emotion. Her heart moved to her throat as she stormed into the night, past steaming manhole covers and the flickering neon and chrome of the city. She picked up the pace, trying to walk herself clean of all feeling entirely.

Ariadne walked all the way back to the city proper, frost forming on her form-fitting bodysuit beneath her jacket. Her black hair blew in billows in the night wind, and her heels, although they dug and dropped into a thousand cracks and fissures in the pavement, never wobbled or made her lose her balance.

She passed closed storefronts, their windows failing to show her reflection. It was midnight by the time she made it back to the city, but on a Friday the crowds of partygoers were still massed. She passed through them like a shark through minnows. Most of them, subconsciously sensing a predator in their midst, simply stepped aside, not quite knowing why. Only a few turned their heads and stared, seized by suicidal fascination.

Ariadne never made heads turn during her life. Her mother had always called her beautiful, as had Andrei, and she had never in her heart believed them. Accepting their word would have opened the door to a new kind of identity, a mantle she would have been far too embarrassed to take up.

Now, she was Liliane's Seneschal. The Prince's forces—no, *her* forces—were all assembling. She texted her scouts, who confirmed that the tortured rebel had spoken the truth. They knew where Roarke was.

Do we move now? the soldier texted back.

Ariadne checked the time. *No*, she tapped back. *Not enough hours to dawn. Tomorrow will be the reckoning.*

Tomorrow. She could be forgiven staying out now, walking, working out the swarms of centipedes crawling inside her.

Ariadne looked over her shoulder. Was that a flash of motion she saw, or just her own guilty conscience? Her guitar case and the swords within weighed reassuringly across her shoulder.

Ariadne found herself striding down Lansdowne Street, cutting through the queue of young people, wealthy college students in expensive outfits, mascaraed eyes and dyed hair begging passersby to notice, a sea of hot, bright faces blowing puffs of warm life into the chill night outside a club. They parted for her until she was face to face with the bouncer, a small bald mountain of man braving the night cold in nothing but an undershirt, revealing powerful biceps, one of which sported a tattoo of a snake wrapped around a knife.

Ariadne looked past his posture, saw the flutter of his arm hair, heard the quickening of his heartbeat and the mad inflation of his lungs that all attested to just how chilly he felt in the wind. Beneath the bouncer's gritted teeth and menacing expression, his pulse spoke the story of desperation to flee inside to the warmth and press of the club. It leapt in gratitude whenever he opened the door to admit a few new entrants, letting a blast of heat escape to warm him in the process.

Ariadne felt no sympathy, just that coldness inside her that nothing could warm.

He stood two heads above her, outweighed her twice over, but she walked right up to him, stared into his eyes for one determined moment, and *pushed* without ever touching him. She felt his muscles move in response to her will. He opened the door and admitted her, deaf to the protests of the young people at the head of the line.

Inside a club was one of the few places aside from a battlefield where Ariadne could find peace. Here the bass pounded loud enough to drown out the million whispers that had been her constant companions these past few nights.

Ariadne spoke into the eyes of the clerk as she handed over her guitar case at the coat check: “*Don’t open this.*” The buzz-cut young woman nodded robotically. Ariadne stretched. The weight around her shoulder that she had found so comforting felt, once removed, as if it had been nothing but an anchor.

With a gasp of relief she let the music take control of her body, which spun, turned, and undulated according to its dictates. Time passed, the club grew more and more packed, the press of bodies and their heat enveloped her. She prayed for it all to smother her entirely.

Ariadne was dimly aware, at times, of the men who approached. They danced next to her, preening and strutting only inches away, yet miles beyond the range of her focused perceptions, even when they ran their hands across her body or whispered things in her ear. None of them were bold enough to do anything more.

Soon enough, another song started to sing even louder than the music. Ariadne heard the rhythm of a hundred pulses, beating in time to the music, overlaid against a harmony of the song of blood inside thousands of veins and arteries.

The music on the speakers had been primal enough for her to lose herself in, but this new song was finally, truly, a river in which she could drown. It pulled her in a dozen directions at once, threatened to shatter her into a million pieces. She silently begged it to annihilate her, yearned for the explosive release more than she had ever yearned for anything in either of her two lives.

She seized the man dancing next to her, her fingers clasp tightly around his muscled arms. He smelled like alcohol, cigarettes, and gasoline, with a small twist of mint. The unshaven stubble of his chin scratched her cheek as she pulled him close, dragged her lips across his ear, down his shoulder, to his arm ... where she saw a snake-and-knife tattoo.

The bouncer. He must have been off-duty now, finally finding the warmth he had sought before. She felt his body responding to her and, for the briefest of lucid moments, reflected that he was the kind of man that, in her former lifetime, would seem to her to radiate confidence, assuredness, power. She would have fished then for the word that now seemed to come so readily: *life*. He radiated life.

Ariadne pulled him by the hand, and he did not question where this slip of a young woman found the strength to drag his near-three hundred pounds off the dance floor, into the DJ’s private prep room. He had the key, and fumbled to use it as her hands traveled all over his body. She draped herself over him, warming herself by the energy he gave off. Oh, that this moment, this promise of heat, might last forever.

The metal door slammed behind them with a clanging finality. She let him embrace her as the two tumbled around in the small confined space. In here, only the bass beat of the music could be heard, but Ariadne willed her heart, usually still in her chest, to pound to the tune of the bouncer’s pulse, and that tune alone.

She didn't hear the words he was saying, didn't feel his hands where they touched her, over her clothes, under her clothes. It was like trying to keep track of each individual drop of water while she was swimming. He pressed his lips to hers, and she could not keep control any longer, did not even want to. She felt the pre-orgasmic thrill of her fangs slipping loose from their fleshy casings.

He grunted at the pain, but the sound was lost in the winds of song in Ariadne's ears. She pushed him down to the ground, straddled him, held one hand down against his bleeding mouth to keep him from screaming. He grabbed at her with his giant arms; she was unsure if he was trying to draw her close or push her away. It didn't matter.

Ariadne became a living blanket, pressing herself to him, moving her mouth over his neck until the song was so loud and ringing that it pained her skull to hear it. Her whole body burned and shook. She had to release, had to, or she would die from the denial of it. She plunged past the soft, succulent flesh, tasting of sweat and cloves. The song, released from its prison, blasted its music into her bloodstream with every gulp.

Explosions blossomed within her. She cried out in long, keening moans in time with the pulse that now rushed his blood not through his own veins, but through hers. She felt as if she were dying and being born, over and over again, all at once, and in one transcendent moment the universe was entirely whole for her.

Ariadne lost consciousness. When she came to in a dizzy haze, she found herself braced up against a speaker, a toppled stack of CDs in her lap, a motionless bouncer lying under her legs. She pulled herself shakily to her knees and crawled over to check on him, but she knew the answer before she even touched flesh to flesh. He was dead.

Ariadne dusted herself off, adjusted her clothing, eyes always alert for the door to open. With the barest exertion of her strength she hoisted up the dead body. High on the fresh blood, she felt capable of anything right now, of tearing the club to shreds with her fingernails if she chose. Opening the door cautiously, she peered out, watched the club's crowd thinning, a new DJ taking over as the old one packed up. Just how long had she spent here?

There was a war on. She needed to get back.

But now there was a new problem. She hadn't meant to drain the bouncer dry, only to quiet the demands of the hunger. But it wasn't the murder itself she regretted, not in the way she did during those first few terrible, nauseating, thrilling times she killed someone.

Memories of those first few nights after Liliane took her in began seeping out from under the iron lid of Ariadne's mind. Among all the outcasts in Liliane's court, only Ariadne had never met her sire even once, had never been schooled in the ways of what she had now become. The Prince thus took Ariadne's training upon herself.

Liliane would lock her in a room, starve her until she was frothing, then bring her some pitiable creature—a stray pup, an alley kitten—and watch as Ariadne lost the battle to be kind, watch as she turned the tentative trust in the small creature's eyes into terror as she fell upon it to feed. Then the animals became people—usually old, decrepit, unmissed people, but sometimes there were children. Each time, Ariadne would resist with everything that made her human. Each time, she would fail.

And each time, she fought a little less.

Afterward, always, Liliane would hold Ariadne's shivering form, stroking her hair, whispering consolations, absolutions. Alone, Ariadne would dream a thousand ways to revenge herself upon the Prince for forcing her to do those horrific things. But the moment

Liliane arrived, Ariadne realized how much she needed just to be held, to have her pain stroked and caressed away, to be told that everything would be all right.

Ariadne had come a long way since those early nights, or so she had thought. Yesterday's carelessness in the rebel house might have been an aberration, but tonight, too?

There would be time to puzzle it out once she disposed of her latest mistake. She cleaned herself up, then stepped out into the hall and found a wandering techie, a young man whose neck was ringed both with headphones and an invisible collar of cannabis smell.

"No one enters this hallway." Ariadne spoke to him in a voice that came from deeper than her throat, and in a daze he dropped the roll of electrical tape he was holding and stood guard at the hall's end. She set up a similar wall of "sentries," and as she passed each, holding the bouncer's corpse in her arms, she spoke the words, *"You will not remember."*

Ariadne wove in and out of the alleys in the pitch of night, shielding herself beneath the walls of Fenway Park. The Massachusetts Turnpike seethed nearby, but she resisted the urge to drop her bundle off an overpass onto it. A suicidal jump that left no blood would be noticed.

Again, she saw a flash of motion just at the edge of her perceptions. No, not motion. A small wrongness, a piece of the night the shape of which didn't fit.

It was time to leave. She debated going back for her swords, but decided she could do that once she had taken care of more pressing business. Feeling a sense of *déjà vu*, she broke into a car, dumped the body in the passenger seat, and began to hotwire her new ride. The engine sputtered, sputtered, then turned over.

She stayed calm, didn't peel out. Ariadne guided the car at a leisurely pace through the side streets. When she turned onto Commonwealth Avenue, she found the streets empty. The bars closed at 1:00 A.M., leaving the Boston University students to huddle squirrel-like in dorms and apartments, seeking warmth from bottles or bodies.

That blur of motion again! It was keeping up with the car, but every time she looked, it vanished. Both the city skyline and its mirror-reflection in the Charles River blinked away innocently, sharing in the conspiracy.

Ariadne turned onto the BU Bridge, pulled into the right lane and set the hazard lights. She watched the thin stream of cars, a pair here, a singleton there, until the concrete span was empty of traffic. Still she kept searching the night, looking for signs of the blurred motion, that will o' the wisp that seemed to live at the edge of her vision. Nothing.

Was it anything more than her own subconscious?

Eyes constantly checking for bystanders, Ariadne scooped the bouncer's corpse up against her shoulder, like a drunken friend unable to stand on his own. She shuffled him over to the edge, past the orange construction barrels lined up for bridge repair, to the waist-high metal mesh that stood between pedestrians and the Charles River. Looking to her feet, Ariadne could see through holes in the deck to the black waters rolling below.

Ariadne extended all her senses to their fullest. The calm flow of the water became an ocean roar, the cars from nearby Commonwealth Avenue a gale force wind. An airplane cut a thunderbolt through the sky. But no footsteps. No scent of warm blood, no scent of Kindred decay. As far as she could tell, she was alone.

She lifted the bouncer over the metal divider. Without his blood, the man seemed so light. She found a construction barrel, stuffed him unceremoniously inside, and used her

strength to bend the rusted metal of its frame into a crude seal. All it took now was a heave, a motion of her wrists, a release of tension in her fingers. The weight of the barrel and its contents dropped away, banged a ricochet against the old CSX railway bridge beneath, and spun two full rotations before being swallowed up in a small black plume of river water.

Ariadne felt a release in her stomach, the closest to exhaling she could get now that she didn't breathe. She turned back to the car.

The blur of motion materialized, right in the center of her field of vision. It shot across the bridge deck and up onto the car, resolving suddenly into canine form as it flew down at her.

Two paws and all the momentum behind them slammed into Ariadne. Her back crashed into the divider, then moved up and over. A blinding mass of fur and fangs tore at her, pushing, pushing, until it pressed her over the point of balance. She reached instinctively for the guitar case and the swords inside, only to grasp air—she had left them at the club.

Cruel jaws sank into her shoulder, ruining her chance to make a last-minute grab to save herself. Ariadne felt the wind rush around her, then a terrible crack that rocked every bone.

The upside-down mirror-city in the river swallowed Ariadne, welcoming her into its alleys and avenues. Water pressed in all around, silencing her every sense.

Chapter Eight

First, panic. Ariadne felt her throat fill with water, felt its weight enter every cavity and tug at her. Her limbs felt leaden, slow to respond, dragging through walls of liquid. She thrashed and spun, all sense of direction gone.

Then, pain. It centered her perceptions, zeroed them in on her chest and neck. The dog's paws clung to her as if they were prehensile. Its jaws dug bloody chunks out of her shoulder; Ariadne's hands swept through the severed pieces of flesh floating in a cloud around her.

Relief came next. She didn't need to breathe. No matter how powerful the dog was, it seemed to be a living thing; it had to breathe, at least eventually. And regardless of which direction was up, she knew where her enemy was.

Finally, focus. She grabbed the dog by its shoulder haunches, tried to pull it off her. Its strength, like its speed, was preternatural. Ariadne brought her fists down on its back, but the water blunted the force of her blow.

She cried out soundlessly into the river as the dog's jaws found purchase in her shoulder again. Ariadne twisted and turned, trying to keep her neck away, but again water held back her movements. Her hair billowed in tangles in front of her, blocking her vision.

In her living days, Ariadne had loved dogs, would run over to pet any strays she saw wandering campus. Here, this night, one was trying to destroy her.

It was Silas's hound. It had to be. The elder must have been feeding the thing his blood—that was the only way the animal could move so fast or hold its breath for so long. Underwater, unseen, unaccountable, the beast could finish her off and Silas could blame her disappearance on Roarke.

With a surge of rage, Ariadne seized the dog's torso and hurled, using the weightlessness of the water to her advantage. The two spun, and Ariadne began kicking with all her might behind her, holding her attacker before her as a battering ram. She endured the claws and gouges as she moved them forward, forward, until she felt an impact reverberate. Whether it was a bridge column, the riverbed, or a piece of sunken debris, she didn't know, but something had arrested their forward motion, and the dog had taken the brunt of it. The impact caused it to release her.

Ariadne shook her head, whipping her hair out of her eyes. She could see the shapes of sunken barrels, bicycles, paddleboats. She could see the fingers of light from the city, showing her the way back to the surface.

A shadow cut through one of the fingers. The dog had recovered and grabbed a breath, was now churning the water beneath it like a thoroughbred racing toward the finish line, captured on slow-motion replay. But the water slowed Ariadne as much, if not more, than it did Silas's cur. Accustomed to fighting in air, she misjudged how much force she needed to bring her arm up to protect her body. It flopped like molasses, too late to stop the oncoming attack.

The dog pushed her down, and Ariadne's back cracked as it slammed into some unyielding object. Enveloped by the dark, Ariadne's mind sank along with her body.

She found herself trying to envision New Jerusalem, and saw a sparkling city bereft of any need for a creature such as her to walk its streets. The pain clawing at her body cried out like one more impurity, one more sign that she did not, would never belong in a world of light.

If I cease here, a weapon ceases to be. No one mourns the loss of a weapon.

Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da ...

Her whole world collapsed into those few bars of that partially remembered song, into the motion of her floating hair across her cheek, awakening memories of Andrei's fingers. The grip of claws around her waist became his protecting hold.

A weapon had no such memories.

With the simplicity of an underwater bubble bursting, Ariadne realized there *was* another path out of this madness, one that had been haunting her since the taxi ride. Assuming she survived to find it.

Extending her claws, she dug her fingers into the dog's neck. It spasmed and released her, and she kicked it aside as her legs worked furiously to bring her to the surface. If she could only get to land, she knew she could prevail.

She swam toward the light that the city above the waters held out to her like a safety line. Pain scraped at her kicking heels as the dog's jaws tried to catch them. In a straight swim, her long legs gave her the advantage. She increased the distance between them, pulling through the water with her arms, and broke the surface with all the relief and triumph she would have felt had her lungs actually yearned for the air it offered.

Ariadne had never been the best of swimmers, but she remembered enough. The river's current was weak, and even injured she had little trouble moving toward the shore. A splash of water behind her announced the dog's presence, a soft series of slaps heralded its pursuit. But a strong crawl easily outpaced a doggie paddle.

Dripping water and blood, Ariadne grabbed the rocks at the water's edge with soaked hands and hauled herself up. Small streams cascaded off her as she rose. Her diaphragm heaved, and a spume of dirty water blew forth from her lungs. She didn't need to breathe, but neither did she need a gallon of water clogging her insides, slowing her down.

Ariadne turned to meet her opponent.

The dog was a small black torpedo cutting through the water. With her blades, Ariadne could have sliced it in half as it approached. As things stood, she would just have to time its leap, grab it in midair, wrestle it to the ground. The loss of blood and the strenuous swim had weakened her, but the newly drained Vitae from the bouncer gave her strength.

Knees bent, she watched the oncoming shape. Five meters. Two meters.

She crouched. The dog leapt.

The dog exploded in a fireball in midair.

A puff of steam smelling of singed fur washed over Ariadne. A few bone fragments showered the water and the ground at her feet.

Ariadne spun around, still crouched, fangs bared. A growl issued from her throat, the universal predatory signal for “back away.”

All she saw was a woman sitting serenely on a bench on the Esplanade, silhouetted in the light from the skyline. A woman who did not flinch.

She was petite, with a bob of black hair streaked with a blue highlight, green eyes behind stylish glasses. She wore a thick cardigan sweater, blue jeans, and brown Doc Martens. She didn’t look any older than Ariadne, or than Ariadne *should* have been. Ariadne could smell her breath, hear her heartbeat. Kine, not Kindred.

Ariadne began calculating the time it would take, waterlogged as she was, to leap to high ground and set upon her.

“You’ll never make it before I toast you,” the woman said amicably. Her fingertips glowed softly in the night.

Ariadne stiffened. A wizard. It had to be.

“Relax. Frying Draculas isn’t my *raison d’etre*. I assume you’re one of them, given that plunge you took and how long you were under before you came up. A little far from Eagle Hill, eh?”

Ariadne said nothing, just fixed her with a withering glare.

The girl remained incongruently cheerful. “Really, I was more curious about the dog. Obfuscated motion, preternatural speed. Parazoology’s a hobby of mine. But I couldn’t just let it munch you, so against my better judgment, I had to waste it. One would think you’d be grateful. Given that there’s not much left of the pooch to study, maybe you could tell me a thing or two about it. By the way, my name’s Marie.”

Ariadne began walking away along the shoreline, never taking her eyes off Marie. The girl watched her expectantly.

“Hmph. There’s gratitude for you. You know, there’s been all sorts of talk lately about troubles with the local Draculas. Lot of folks where I hang out say it’s time to stop letting you all be our guests in these parts. Me, though—” Marie rose, sauntered nonchalantly parallel to Ariadne —“I just want to know things. Don’t you? Why not have a chat?”

Ariadne’s muscles clenched, begging for the command to leap, to rend, to tear. For a moment, all she wanted to know was how Marie’s body would feel, flopping like a rag doll, pinioned by claw and fang.

But the moment she let that tension release, she couldn’t deny the urge to actually have a conversation, about something other than battle strategy, or keeping up the Masquerade, or pleasing the Council. Or even, she realized, about New Jerusalem.

Ariadne hoped the yearning in her eyes didn’t show.

“Come on,” Marie tried. “Anything you can share?”

“A wicked beast, sent by a wicked man,” Ariadne said softly. “One weapon trained to kill another. Its sender didn’t anticipate that the target was more than just a weapon.”

Marie looked puzzled for a moment. Her eyes seemed to be following some object that Ariadne couldn’t see. Instinctively, Ariadne reached out her senses, but except for a few very chilly ducks, Marie and she were alone along this stretch of shore.

Marie cocked her head. “Something’s weird about you. Beyond the whole undead thing, I mean. I’ve been trying to read your aura for minutes now, and I can’t.”

“My what?”

“Your aura. Normal folks have a faint one. Mages have bona fide nimbuses. Vamps, they’ve got these nasty clouds. But you—every time I look, my eyes wind up just sort of ... skidding off. It’s like water refracting light. Pretty neat trick. How do you do it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Ariadne.

“Never known a Dracula who could do magic. Not real magic or even close enough to fool me.”

Ariadne remembered Roarke’s grimoire burning into nothingness in front of her. “Maybe they just need to read the right books.”

Marie rolled her eyes. “Hardly. I read about vamps who learn a few tricks, but that’s different.”

Ariadne could feel the blood-rush from battle beginning to subside. Caution seeped back in. “I need to leave now.”

“Oh.” Marie looked disappointed. “Well, this has been such an interesting night. I’d love to meet you again. I get the feeling we could learn a lot from each other.”

Ariadne stared uncomprehendingly.

With a girlish giggle, Marie turned and simply ceased to be. Her smell faded with her.

Ariadne took stock of her situation. She was covered in blood and water, sure to attract attention. She needed to clean up, to change, to recover her swords from where they still sat in the club coatroom. She needed to move that stolen car off the bridge, and fast, before it attracted attention. She marveled a bit that it hadn’t already. But these all seemed like small problems.

Marie, and what she said, left the Seneschal puzzled. Ariadne made a note to ponder her words later. For the moment, though, they weren’t relevant either.

Only a few things really mattered: Tomorrow night, Roarke would fall and the Silent Knife’s duty would be complete. That hunt would be over and a new one, for Andrei, would begin.

Chapter Nine

The armory, with its arched ceiling, had always reminded Ariadne of a chapel. The rows and rows of hanging firearms were pews, the crates of ammunition pulpits, and, to complete the picture, at the head of the room, where the crucifix would be, stood the target-practice dummy. It filled the role of the wounded Christ, riddled with bullet holes and knife punctures, undergoing renewed torment each night as it suffered for the sake of Liliane's New Jerusalem.

Ariadne shook her head, still trying to shake loose water lodged in her ears. A whole day had passed and the wounds from last night had healed. She had changed her clothes. But somehow the Charles River still felt as if it were running through every canal in her body. She tried to distract herself from the thought by busying herself, checking to see that each rifle and handgun was oiled and loaded.

"Developing OCD on us?"

She spun around. Bourne was there, arms folded, hunting cap turned sideways on his head. Combined with his pouty expression, he exuded a cruel mockery of childhood. How was it that he could always sneak up on her?

"I don't know." Ariadne slammed shells into a shotgun as forcefully as she could. "I think these days caution is required. Wouldn't want any stray animals sneaking up on me."

Bourne's expression shouted ignorance and innocence to all the world.

"Hmph. Wake up on the wrong side of the coffin this evening, Princess? Or is the Seneschal now too high and mighty to spare a word for her old friend?"

He stretched, cracked his arms and knuckles. "So what's the plan? Which of Roarke's hidey-holes are we going to storm? Who are you taking with you? Or are you gonna fight the whole thing all alone?"

Ariadne put the gun away, walked up to Bourne, and glared. Wearing her heels, she could look him in those beady brown eyes, surrounded by paunchy flesh. He had the look of a man just starting to lose the firmness of youth, now forever frozen in that transition.

"My first plan, Bourne, is to figure out the best way of flaying your sire for treason."

"Yikes," he said. "Single-handedly slaying an elder. That would be quite the encore to defeating Roarke. Might want to be careful, though, to leave yourself a few peaks yet to climb. After all, where do you go from there? Dragon slaying, maybe. Haven't seen too

many dragons in East Boston these days. Maybe they all hang out in Charlestown. For the clam chowder, of course—”

“I’m Seneschal now. Your master can’t send his dogs—four-legged or two-legged—after me without consequences.”

“Look, I admit or deny nothing, let’s make that clear. But, for argument’s sake, let’s say you bring this issue to a head tonight. Tonight, the eve of the big assault to end the war. What’s that gonna do to morale among the troops?”

“Improve it, I imagine. The only one in the whole court who loves Silas is you.”

“Actually, I’m not too fond of him myself some days.” Bourne shrugged. “But read your Machiavelli. It’s not about love. Elders stick together. They are *not* about to sit idly by as a neonate, even one Liliane calls her Hand, lowers the axe on one of their own.”

“Maybe we’ll just have to find out what they’ll do.”

“Hey, go ahead, try. I can’t stop you. You’re the Seneschal, after all. But just remember, a Seneschal needs more than flashy swords to keep the peace. You can’t be within throat-striking distance of all the people all the time. Isn’t that what Abe Lincoln said?”

“Silas is not going to get away with trying to kill me.”

“Come on. You’re still here, right? So whatever he may or may not have tried to do couldn’t have been too much of a threat. Not to the Silent Knife. You take it up with the court, you’re going to look weak. You want to bide your time, find a better moment.”

Ariadne arched an eyebrow. “You’re giving me advice on how to outmaneuver your own sire?”

Bourne took a seat on a nearby stool, throwing back his arms against a railing. “Look here: a Seneschal’s job is ultimately political. Say what you will about Roarke, that guy was a real leader of men. We all feared him, sure—beneath that Southern gentleman act, he was the uncle of all scary freaks—but a lot of people also wanted to *be* him. Not yours truly, of course. But a lot of the younger Licks, they went for that back-country-homey crap of his. Explains why so many of them took off and followed him when he gave Liliane the finger.”

“Roarke wasn’t a leader. He was a lunatic. People say Nadine poisoned his mind, but he would be unpredictable even without delving into freakish magic.”

“You sound downright intolerant of alternative religious practices.”

“How can you joke?” said Ariadne. “You’ve seen it. You were there when we found O’Reilly’s after he and his followers were through with the place. Archibald’s crew had to rip up and replace the floorboards because Roarke had used his magic to somehow fuse the bones of our people to the wood. And that was just the bones! The flesh was strung out between the light fixtures.”

“Yeah, that cleanup was a real Martha Stewart moment. But Roarke, whatever his, ah, foibles, knows how to inspire as well as intimidate. That’s what makes him so dangerous. To rally our troops against him, you’re going to need to know how to do the same. You go after Silas now, you’re going to make the same mistake Roarke made—splitting the court in two.”

“Your concern for the court is touching. I’m so glad you want me to do the role of Seneschal justice.”

Bourne sniggered. “Who’s talking about justice? I’m talking about leadership. The two don’t usually mix, despite what your high school social studies teacher may have

told you. And yes, while few things would make Silas happier than you taking a stroll outside in broad daylight, the one thing he wants more than your death is to avoid his own. Whatever he may or may not have done—and again, I don’t admit to knowing a thing—he would never try to overtly kill you in such a traceable manner. Liliane loves you so much she’d have his head. Everyone knows that, which means any accusation you make is going to sound ridiculous.”

“Even if it’s the truth?”

“You may have the title of Seneschal, Ariadne, but truth’s a commodity that the elders control.”

Ariadne narrowed her eyes. Her claws extended, and she beat down the urge to rake Bourne across the face. He would probably take it as a sexual advance.

“Oh, come on,” said Bourne. “Don’t take it so hard. It’s all part of unlife in the big leagues. I can be really useful in helping you navigate this whole courtly drama, if you’d only let me. You know, if you have a thorn in your side, you need to turn it outward, to be a blade against your foes.”

“What?”

“Do you like that one? Read it in a fortune cookie somewhere.”

Ariadne’s eyes blazed. “All right. You want me to make use of you? I need every soldier I can get tonight on the front lines. Even the fat, obnoxious ones.”

Bourne sputtered, choking on a phantom piece of food. Ariadne finally felt a small wave of triumph.

“I was, er, envisioning myself as more of an advisor, and less of a grunt. CIA in Vietnam, pre-fall-of Dien Bien Phu, or—”

“Grunting is precisely what you do best, Bourne. Besides, having you out in front of me lessens the chances you’ll do anything to help your sire behind my back.”

Bourne scratched his neck behind his cap. “I’m probably more of a liability than an asset on the battlefield.”

Ariadne leaned forward, close enough to see the pustules on Bourne’s nose. In a mockery of sweetness, she asked, “Are you refusing a direct order from your Seneschal?”

“No, no.” Bourne edged backward, nearly falling off his stool. “You know me, Ariadne. My loyalty to you is second only to my loyalty to Liliane. And to the Beatles. Pre-Yoko, of course. So, ah, where are we going?”

Ariadne smiled far wider than she had intended to.



“The train yards at Fresh Pond. A direct attack on Roarke’s stronghold.” Liliane rested a gloved hand against her cheek as she looked over Ariadne’s shoulder at the map. “A bold move, my Silent Knife.”

Ariadne stood at one end of the table in Liliane’s study, across from the Prince. Although she spoke to Liliane, she could not help but be conscious of the three elders at the table, and did not for a moment take her eyes off the wizened man seated by the Prince’s side.

It wasn’t just that Silas looked as if he were rotting away. There was a contagious quality to his decay, a feeling it could spread to you and make everything you valued tarnish and crumble if you spent enough time in his presence. He sat hunched over as if to protect some bauble he kept in his lap. His cur, for once, was conspicuously absent from his side.

“A foolish move,” Silas said in his sandpaper voice. “To attack at the heart of his forces without first weakening his forward positions is unwise. He could call back those troops and force us to fight an attack on multiple fronts. We’d be surrounded.”

What do you mean ‘we’? Ariadne wanted to say. *It’s not as if you’ll be getting off your ancient ass to take part in this.*

“Strike at the heart of the beast,” Ariadne said simply, “and it dies. Based on our hostage’s report, Roarke has thirteen men at this base. Only three of them are Kindred. I will personally lead a strike team of five—small enough to be subtle—hit them and be gone before reinforcements can arrive. Our main force waits at the periphery. As the scattered, leaderless remnants start returning, the main force will pick them off.”

Ariadne prayed to a God she knew had abandoned her, prayed that none of them would suspect her other reason for this assault.

Silas scowled. “It’s too risky.” He addressed Liliane and only Liliane. “Roarke’s command of sorcery makes him unpredictable. We have time on our side. Roarke is hemmed in. He has nowhere to run, no resources to muster. He cannot win a war of attrition, and so to wage one is our best strategy.”

The other elders murmured their approval.

Ariadne fought down her rage, pushed images of the snapping jaws of Silas’s hound out of her mind.

“With all respect to Elder Silas,” she said icily, “we do not have time on our side. Remember, Mister Rose is returning tomorrow night to ‘re-assess’ our situation for the Council.”

“*Mister Rose*,” Silas sneered, “hasn’t been dead long enough to learn proper patience. And yet he’s been dead three times as long as our ... Seneschal.” The word sounded like ash on Silas’s lips.

“Roarke has to know that we’ve identified his hideouts by now,” Ariadne pressed. “He may already be in the process of moving his operations. We might not have another chance this good for weeks. We have to strike there, and strike tonight.”

The other elders turned to the Prince. Liliane looked her new Seneschal over, up and down, as if sizing her up for inclusion as the centerpiece of a feast. Ariadne felt as if her flesh were shivering, self-conscious of its hidden secrets.

“Our Silent Knife,” the Prince spoke, and despite herself, Ariadne jumped. “We have trusted in your instincts thus far, and have yet to be disappointed. Though the risks are great, we sense you are guided by Divine Providence, and will defer to your wisdom. If you are confident in your plan, and in your troops, then you have our blessing.”

The elders—including, eventually, Silas—stared at Ariadne. Their eyes were cold and small. She could see Silas’s jaw tense, could imagine it transforming into the snapping teeth of his hound. Ariadne could tell he was mentally flaying the flesh from her bones with his gaze.

Silas rose without a word, bowed curtly to Liliane, and then left the room, his leather shoes making no noise upon the carpet. He paused to gaze at his paintings before he departed, drawing the moment out longer and longer.

Ariadne tried to will a thought into his mind: *Go on. Your time will come.*

For the briefest of moments, Ariadne saw a vision of Silas at a wedding. The man was dressed to the nines but crumbling, crumbling to dust, until at last nothing but a top hat rested on the ashes. Then the image was gone. Wishful thinking.

When Silas finally took his leave, the other elders rose as one, bowed their deference stiffly to Ariadne, then deeply to the Prince. As they filtered out of the room, Ariadne bowed and began her own exit.

Liliane raised a slender finger. “A moment.”

Ariadne steeled herself. What if the Prince knew about her other motivation for staging the attack on Fresh Pond?

“Daughter, you have seemed troubled of late. This concerns us. A court cannot afford a troubled Hand.” Liliane rose, and Ariadne’s dizziness increased with every inch that vanished between them.

“There is no wrong inside me that defeating Roarke won’t remove,” Ariadne said at last. It wasn’t precisely a lie.

The Prince drew nearer and nearer until Ariadne felt her icy cool skin casting its freezing waves her way. She stood still, closed her eyes, awaited what would come with head held high.

“Be wary of Roarke,” Liliane whispered in her ear. “He is a great deceiver, and the power of his blood is matched only by the power of his lies. If he cannot break your bones, he will try to break your mind.”

She dug her fingers into Ariadne’s thick hair until she reached her skull, and then closed around it, tight enough to cause pain. “You have such a lovely, pretty mind. Guard it well.”

The pain turned into a caress, and Liliane gave a short, bright laugh. At once she was girlish, and she floated away to sit atop the desk. Her slender legs, sheathed in sheer white hose beneath her white dress suit, dangled.

“Ah, Ariadne. You have so exceeded all our hopes for you. We have never regretted our decision to take you in, little wounded bird who has become an eagle. Unburden yourself, little bird. New Jerusalem is your home, your family. Brace yourself with our strength.”

If Ariadne had still breathed, the air would have been caught in her lungs. How could she possibly explain what had been happening to her these past few weeks? How could she explain how the answer to the slow death of everything inside her might only lie with the living—and with one of the living in particular? To try to balance what Liliane had done *to* her with what Liliane had done *for* her had always been to set off down a road to insanity, but somehow tonight’s plan still seemed like a betrayal.

As long as I defeat Roarke, it won’t be, Ariadne thought. What I do on my own time is my concern. Right?

Maybe she just needed to see Andrei, once, from a distance, and the wrongness in her would fix itself. Maybe one conversation with him, and she could rest easy being the Silent Knife again.

“I will be right again soon,” said Ariadne. “There is no cause for worry.”

The Prince looked her Seneschal over for what seemed to Ariadne like hours.

“Tonight we can afford no errors,” she finally said. “Guard yourself—against all threats. From without, and from within.”

The Prince’s voice lingered on that last word. What did she mean by it? Was it a reference to Silas, or to what Ariadne feared Liliane sensed inside her?

The troops were poised to move out in twenty minutes. Ariadne returned to her cell, wondering if it would have been better had she never happened upon Andrei in that cab. She would have remained the Silent Knife, nothing more or less.

Now, with an addict's glee, she shoved aside her bed slab and tore at the trap door beneath, nearly unhinging it. Nearly a decade's worth of dust and rust burst in her face. With an addict's remorse, she closed her eyes, tried to find the strength to stop herself from picking up what was inside.

Ariadne's hand returned holding an album, its red binding bent and slightly rotten, its pages tattered and yellowing. Her dead heart seemed to jump exactly the way it had nine years ago, when she stalked, wearing high-heeled boots that would have frightened—and secretly fascinated—her old sandal-self, into her parents' house. She had stayed only a moment, removed this from her old room.

She had not yet become, Liliame had not yet made her into, what she was today, but a year of such tutelage had already begun the transformation. Unsure of herself, she had revisited the campus, retraced the ghost footsteps she and Andrei had walked. The damp, slightly chilly smell of an unseasonable warm front had only made the phantoms more tangible, tickling the ends of her spine and the fibers of her lungs, lingering in her sinuses before spraying out in radiant halos from her body.

Now, her fingers pressed against the plastic photo shields in the album, so hard that they left impressions on the paper and cardstock beneath. Her own face, unchanged in ten years, smiled back at her from its place beside Andrei's. The room seemed to tilt and spin, and Ariadne dug her claws into the floor, closing her eyes against vertigo. She threw back her head, raven-black hair flying out of her ponytail, mouth wide open, fangs extended. She felt as if she were gagging, drowning, crying, all without a sound.

She heard the Beatles CD he always used to play in his dorm room, smelled the cleaning solution the college used on the carpet. She felt the prickle of the flannel sheets of her old bed, and the room kept turning, turning, turning. Reality was pulling away from her, sucked into a black hole on the ceiling. She was being dragged back with such force that the flesh was ripped from her bones before the rest of her body could follow.

No more. Ariadne closed the photo album, replaced it in its hiding spot, steadied herself for a moment on her desk. She noticed her chest was heaving, even though heartbeat and breath had not been tenants for ten years. But her chest still *remembered*.

Did she really want that back? All of it? Even how she felt toward the end, even that small death on the covered bridge long before her real death arrived?

Ariadne retrieved her swords, reassured herself with their weight in her hands. Perhaps in tonight's fight with Roarke she would perish and all of her worries would be moot. But whatever lay ahead, the path to battle ran through known territory. Under the mantle of the Silent Knife, Ariadne knew exactly who she was. If Roarke recognized even a fraction of her true self, tonight he would be quaking.

Chapter Ten

"It doesn't matter that Roarke knows Liliane is on to him," Ariadne told her squad before their departure for the assault. "The Prince has negotiated with the wizards and with the Princes of the surrounding demesnes. Roarke and his rebels aren't going to find shelter anywhere. They're trapped, and they know we're coming after them. This means they're only going to fight harder. They've got nothing to lose."

The four soldiers nodded in agreement. Even Po-Mo. The tattooed punk had been getting high marks from every squad leader he had been assigned to, so Ariadne decided to give him his shot at the big leagues tonight. He joined Brian, Ella, and, because Ariadne needed to keep him where she could see him, Bourne. Bourne's flak jacket was ill-fitting for his bulk, but the way he cleaned and loaded his rifle reminded Ariadne that every member of Liliane's court, even its jester, took seriously the responsibility to defend it.

"You need to be careful," she continued. "Take no chances. We've got several advantages, but he has ... whatever it is he does. He can fuse bones into the earth. He might even be able to transform Kindred into piles of black ash from a distance." Ariadne winced as she remembered Hera's mysterious annihilation.

As they loaded their supplies into a waiting SUV, Ariadne looked out over the city and tried to imagine Archibald and his flock of Ravens scattering far and wide. He had assured Liliane that he would be preparing all manner of distractions to occupy the mortals' media hounds, a score of scandals to fill the morning papers. He had positioned ghouled mortals in key locations to place phone calls to the police and to commit petty but dramatic, easily noticeable crimes in faraway neighborhoods to draw as much attention away from Fresh Pond as possible.

Ariadne and her crew rode to Fresh Pond in silence. Even Bourne seemed preoccupied. Ariadne stared out the passenger window, watched the red and white pairs of lights on the Alewife Brook Parkway pour toward the spiral in the rotary. Each car held a world, a set of lives, to which Ariadne knew she would never be privy.

Ariadne remembered a wizard's conversation with Liliane once, on the topic of private universes. Ariadne could believe they existed. For a moment her mind wandered as she tried to imagine all of those shopping lists, bills to pay, loves sought and lost, yet she could not form more than a few vague sketches on her mind's easel. Even something as large as a universe could vanish, could hide in plain sight.

Suddenly she caught sight of the Fresh Pond Motel, felt mothlike before the flickering summons of its vacancy sign. The crumbling concrete of the building's facade reminded her of some squat Soviet living complex dropped in the middle of Siberian wasteland. The "tundra" around the hotel consisted of rail yards filled with sawdust and disused boxcars. By day, this area saw passengers shuttle to and from the suburbs. By night, it was a forgotten graveyard for the industrial hopes of urban man.

Somewhere within that train yard was the base of operations for the man Ariadne was charged with eradicating. Somewhere within that motel was the man Ariadne could not banish from her own thoughts. She scanned the pattern of lit windows, trying to sense which one was Andrei's, as if the rising rush and churn in her gut could serve as a magic compass.

Po-Mo interrupted her thoughts. "What I don't get is why Roarke ain't out there just Embracing like a madman. Building an army. I mean, he obviously doesn't care about the Masquerade."

Ariadne and Bourne both stared at him.

"You wanna take the newbie, boss," asked Bourne, "or should I?"

"Siring a childe takes a lot out of one of our kind," said Ariadne. "He'd be weakening himself, and all he'd be creating would be a near-helpless neonate who would need training in the basics of Kindred existence."

"Waa, waa," Bourne snickered. "Goo-goo. Feed me blood. You do remember your own first nights like that, don't you, son? Even though they were, heh, oh so long ago."

"Screw you, old man." Po-Mo puffed himself up. "I was *born* blood-suckin'. Becomin' a vamp just made me better at it. But a sire, he can, like, control other Licks he makes, right?"

Everyone shifted uncomfortably.

"Hey, I'm just askin', here. My sire got himself axed by some pissed-off elder before he could teach me much. That's why I came here."

"I don't exactly know," said Ariadne slowly, "but I don't think siring a childe fully guarantees its obedience. Not without further measures."

"The hell it doesn't," said Po-Mo. "I remember when my sire told me to jump. I couldn't even bring myself to ask how high before my feet started bouncing. Bastard."

"Elder Kindred have very powerful methods of domination," said Ariadne, "and, yes, they seem to know just how to use them on their childer. Some actually practice the Vinculum, but sometimes it's just the right tone of voice or knowing the right strings to pull."

"Bastard sure had some way of doing it," Po-Mo spat. "Damned shame that other geezer got to him first. I wanted to be the one who wasted him."

"Exactly my point," said Ariadne. "You fostered thoughts of rebellion. Sooner or later, you would have found a way to put them into action."

At the thought of rebellion, Ariadne again found her thoughts invaded with plans to see Andrei. But she was no Roarke. She dug her claws into her palm, pain forcing her attention back to the mission.

"Enough. We're moving out."

The squad abandoned their vehicle in the parking lot that lay in the shadow of the triple-monolith of Rindge Towers. Ariadne shot a few well-placed darts to smash the nearby

floodlights, and the towers themselves blotted out the moon. Her squad moved through near-total darkness, scrambling over the high fence and down a steep hill to the waiting train tracks. An airplane soared overhead, the boom from its engines making Ariadne's blades vibrate in the guitar case across her back.

The five Kindred walked across the tracks and under the parkway, spread out, hands on their weapons. Po-Mo, as planned, crept ahead to reconnoiter at the power station. He returned minutes later to report three guards weaving through the maze of giant cylindrical transformers, lightly armed, and one more stationed at the master control booth.

Ariadne held up a hand, motioned in the appropriate directions. Ella and Brian took off, skirting along in the shadows, using boxcars for cover as they ran from one to the next. They would create a diversion while Ariadne, Bourne, and Po-Mo circled around the back.

Behind the train yard was the power station and its array of transformers, Ariadne caught sight of a muzzle flash. Brian and Ella's guns were silenced, so this served as her only signal.

She pumped her fist. Po-Mo and Bourne fell in behind her and the three of them charged forward. They wove in and out of the rows of tall gray transformers, surprising the already flustered sentries from behind and dropping them with silenced bursts of gunfire.

Alerted to the chaos that had suddenly sprung up around him, the guard had just begun speaking into a walkie-talkie when Ariadne fell upon him, slamming him to the ground and sending the radio flying. Po-Mo rushed to retrieve it, then crushed it with his bare hands.

Ariadne's captive was strong beneath her, bucking wildly. With one hand over his mouth she had a hard time keeping on top. He was driven by a will to be free, to extend his existence one more day. It was a powerful, animal drive, woven into the genes of every living thing, and unlife had not cleansed him of it.

Liliane's voice, from her nights of training, echoed in Ariadne's mind: *So your will must be even stronger.*

The Silent Knife's free hand drew a knife from her belt, the steel glinting in the dim starlight. She relaxed her hold just enough for her captive to rise, head lifting to lead the body. The exposed neck, reaching for freedom, presented an easy target. She drew the blade across his throat, slicing the neck cleanly. As he fell back, coughing and sputtering, she rose, drew one of her swords from the guitar case, and finished the job with a clean slice. The head tumbled into the darkness, and Ariadne rose to her feet.

Po-Mo seized the headless trunk, already beginning to decompose inside its uniform. "Hell. I wanted some flesh and blood."

Ariadne shot him a glare as sharp as her blade, then motioned for him and Bourne to take up positions on either side of the door to the power station, guns drawn. Ariadne signaled, and Bourne tossed her a large metal egg. It felt innocuous and light in her hand, like a case of pantyhose. She pulled the pin and tossed it underhand through the glassless window of the door. Then she dove for the ground.

The incendiary grenade's explosion made a *whumph* noise. Windows shattered, and heat blew overhead in a wave. Ariadne's fingers dug into the earth, grinding deep depressions that cracked the dry, packed ground.

Her skin crawled with every Kindred's visceral terror of fire. But Liliane had taught her to master terror. Had Roarke been as effective with his own disciples?

Brave or not, they would have to flee. Whether they left out the front or the back, she had them covered. Bourne and Po-Mo tensed, teeth gritted against their own fear of the

flames from which only a few sheet-metal walls protected them. They stood their ground on either side of the door, weapons drawn, ready to cut down anyone who emerged.

They waited.

And waited.

Ariadne heard no sound of commotion from the front. Roarke's forces couldn't be waiting her out. Nothing Kindred or kine could stand that heat for long. Had the blast killed them all, or did they have some other escape route?

Damn it.

She signaled to Po-Mo and the two of them began circling the burning power station, meeting up with Ella and Brian, who had dispatched the front guards—both ghoulded humans, blood-addicted footsoldiers—but reported seeing no one else.

"One Kindred, two Lick-sticks?" said Bourne. "That's hardly an army."

Ariadne's team split up and started searching the surrounding boxcars, weapons drawn and ready. They searched the dumpsters, the large cement waterpipes. They found no one.

Alarms began ringing.

"Maybe we got them all," said Brian. "Maybe we should go."

"You afraid of the cops?" Po-Mo postured. "Fookin' piggies put me in the cooler for two years back when I was alive. I'm up for a rematch."

Bourne drew himself up. "Both of you wankers, shut up! Disable that alarm. No, I *don't* know where it is. Find it!" He turned to Ariadne. "This thing's gone south, kid. I don't care what Archibald says, the fire department and the cops are gonna be here any minute."

Ariadne was not listening. She knew what had to be done. Steeling herself, she shed her coat, her Kevlar vest, and the other incendiary grenades on her belt. Ahead, the flames licked up and out of the power station.

"Ariadne? We have to go!"

She didn't pause to think, didn't stop to heed the cautionary words from the others. Building up speed, she crossed her arms in front of her face and charged, pretending that the rush of wind in her ears was some sort of protective cocoon. She barely felt the clang of the metal door as it gave way before her. A moment later, the burning hot backdraft blew her to the ground.

Ariadne's body had no cough reflex, no need for one. If she chose to look up, she knew, on an intellectual level, that the acrid smoke wouldn't be much of an obstacle to her vision. But for a moment she lay frozen, face pressed to the ground, unable to bring herself to rise. Despite the blazing heat, she was shivering. She was seized with a fierce urge to start biting and gnawing at her own arms.

Fire. The Kindred's eternal bane.

She tried to recall Liliane's teachings, but the sound of the flames drowned out the Prince's words in her thoughts. In the space they left, new words bubbled up:

Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. A memory of Ariadne and Andrei sitting together, a tangle of arms and bare legs in the sand by the edge of a lake. They were reading "Ligeia." Ligeia, Poe's dark lady, whose will and passion let her rise from the grave.

Ariadne had done that much already. Couldn't she rise from this floor?

Reflexively, like some young simian reaching out to hold the limbs of a tree, surprised at how natural the action felt, Ariadne's mind clung to the newly recovered memories of the sand beneath her bare knees, the smell of the leatherbound poetry volume, the smell of Andrei's cologne.

Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.

She pulled herself up, hand over hand, along the ladder of memories, and her body followed suit. Ariadne rose to her feet, billows of heat crashing down around her like invisible surf, and surveyed the scene before her.

The power station's control room was full of wooden planks and reams of paper records, all feeding the hunger of the fire. There was more. Tables, desks, blackboards, computers—yes, this place had been a base of operations. But the file cabinet drawers ajar, the computer cases torn open, these and a dozen other signs all spoke of a hasty departure. A scout must have noticed her squad's approach after all.

Where could they have fled to? Gritting her teeth so hard she feel the enamel chip and fragment, breaking small, bitter-tasting, flakes into her mouth, Ariadne crouched low to the floor, feeling for trap doors, secret levers, anything.

A safe. Tall, man-sized. She grabbed the handle and was rewarded with a searing pain in her hand. When she pulled away, some of her flesh remained upon the metal.

The room started to spin and blur. She couldn't stay here much longer. Bearing her claws, Ariadne did what she should have done first—tear off a strip of her bodysuit and wrap it around her hand. Wincing, she tugged with her shielded hand at the safe door. It resisted her.

A door had no will. Ariadne did. Bracing herself, she heaved. She felt the door protest, its lock struggling to hold fast.

Her head turned, her eyes gazed longingly at the doorway. It would take five steps, three seconds, to return to the lovely cold outside.

No.

Ariadne put both arms to the task. She strained, wondering for a terrifying moment if the handle would break before the door.

A ceiling beam fell with a crash. A wall of flame rose up between her and escape.

The metal in her hands whined and screeched. The door buckled at the hinges and clattered free. In its wake, a rush of cool air welcomed her. She dove for it, and blackness swallowed her whole.

Chapter Eleven

As Ariadne fell, something hard and metal slammed into her back, then continued to slam her again and again, dealing pain with every foot she traveled, until she hit the bottom.

A ladder. This had been Roarke's escape route.

Shielded from the flames, able to focus again, Ariadne struggled to her feet and pulled out her walkie-talkie. She spoke through a haze of static, telling the others to track her signal as long as they could, to try to follow aboveground and be waiting wherever it was that Roarke and his men would resurface. The plan to trap them from two sides could still work.

She began walking into the blessed cool and dark, smelling of sweet moist earth. Stealthily, aware of each footfall and the earth it displaced, Ariadne moved through the tunnel. Its edges were smooth, almost glasslike. What kind of digging tool could have accomplished this? Then her mind turned to the more immediate concerns: How much of a head start did Roarke and his men have? How much weight were they carrying?

Ariadne tested the handle of her blade in the grip of her burned hand. It was healing too slowly. Grimacing from the pain, she switched the weapon to her left hand and hoped for the best.

A soft glow beckoned from up ahead. She slowed and listened for voices. Rounding a corner, she saw dim flashlight beams stabbing into the dark. Ariadne sensed the Kindred close at hand and smelled the ghouls' fear. She heard their footfalls.

Half a dozen of each of them, and something else. A presence.

Their footfalls stopped. "Move on, boys," said Roarke's voice. It was full, throaty, and rich, like a preacher's. "You've got work to do. I'll be along shortly."

Ariadne's vision worked fine in the near-darkness, but deprived of the distraction of light she noticed other sensations, feelings she couldn't quite name. Roarke radiated an elder's power, different from the silky shimmer of Liliane's. His was a rusty, burnt, mulchy vibe. He was like a pillar of the earth itself, at home here beneath the surface of the planet.

His bulky form, clad in plaid shirt, jeans, and hiking boots, moved cautiously down the tunnel toward her. Ariadne readied her blade, cursing how slowly her right palm was healing.

"Hallo? Now just whom do I have the pleasure of addressin' here?" His voice was warm, throaty, resonant.

Ariadne did not answer.

Roarke's mouth broke into a wide smile. "Ariadne? Lil' girl, I gave you the chance to turn on your pretty little heels and just walk away once before, an' I paid a hefty price for my gentlemanliness. Still, I've always been somethin' of a fool. You can still leave me be. Ain't nothin' but death to find in these here parts."

"I am the Prince's Hand," Ariadne announced, not without some pride. Liliane's words sang in her ear: *What Roarke has spurned, you shall be given.*

"An' if my right hand offends me, I will cut it off, rather than I should in anything offend my God. Is that it, now?" Ariadne could not tell if Roarke sounded amused or impatient.

Only a few body-lengths separated the two now. Ariadne readied her sword.

"There's so much I could teach you," he said. "So much I coulda learned if you hadn't done gone and destroyed the grimoire. If Liliane hadn't done what she done to poor Nadine."

"There's a reason that book was banned," said Ariadne. "We're Kindred, but we're not monsters. That book's turned you into one."

"Hoo-ee." Roarke ran a hand through his hair. "That's Liliane talkin'. This whole New Jerusalem bit. The meek shall inherit. Be good little monsters, play nice together, and God'll toss you a last-minute rope when He ends the world."

Roarke rolled his eyes. "Damned shame, it is. If you sucked blood for a few more centuries, you'd realize that God packed up and skipped town ages ago. Ain't no world I ever seen but this one, and ain't but one way to master it."

His left arm rippled and burst like a rotting fruit, flesh falling in liquefying sheets to the ground until the limb became the bone-sword Ariadne remembered from the day she first fought him.

"I reckon this is where we have to tussle until one of us is mush, yeah?"

Ariadne leapt forward, swinging her blade. It sailed through the darkness toward the traitor's head—and met Roarke's right hand.

Roarke turned the blade aside, wrested it from Ariadne's grip with such strength that she felt her arm about to be wrenched from her socket. The weapon fell to the ground with a dull clatter.

Ariadne blinked. It had all happened so swiftly that she almost failed to avoid Roarke's bone-sword, ducking just in time to avoid losing her head.

The two danced up and down the tunnel, Roarke's blows fast and powerful but unskilled, Ariadne's precise and deadly but ineffective. He failed to score a hit on her, but her fists and boots felt as if they hit stone every time she landed a blow.

Ariadne finally found an opening to draw her second blade, this time with her right hand, pain be damned. An angry flurry of clashes commenced, ending when Ariadne sliced Roarke's bone sword in half. The severed portion sizzled where it lay in the earth.

Roarke cried out, a beastlike bellow that echoed throughout the tunnel. As Ariadne moved in for the kill, he ducked, threw his good hand out and slapped his palm against the cavern wall.

"Pears you've got the Devil in you, little daisy," Roarke gasped. "Since I seem to have a habit of goin' to pieces around you, it's best I give you a right proper dance partner."

The wall rippled and bulged where he touched it, as if made from gelatin. Ariadne leapt back as the wall ballooned impossibly, pushing forth a man-shaped form twice Roarke's height and build. The shape stretched its limbs. Clods of dirt flew to the ground.

Ariadne readied her blade.

Roarke crawled to a position behind the figure, using it as cover for his retreat. She watched as he picked up the katana that she had lost in the fight.

“If you last the night, Ariadne, be a nice girl, will you, an’ go back an’ tell Liliane that this ain’t done? Killin’ my Nadine was the biggest mistake o’ her unlife, an’ some night soon she’s gonna get her just reward.”

Her sword in his remaining hand, Roarke pulled himself into a crouch, then a run, as Ariadne gave ground to the hulking earth-shape. As it advanced, she circled, fainted, tried to draw it out and take its measure. The looming homunculus remained silent. It did not jump at her bait, only moved slowly forward, forcing Ariadne to retreat.

With lightning speed, Ariadne struck. Her blade sank into moist, gooey clay, unbalancing her. Her strength seemed insufficient to dislodge the sword.

Seizing upon her moment of distraction, the earth golem hurled a giant fist that Ariadne barely had time to dodge. She came up under its arm and tried to slip past, abandoning the stuck blade. The creature swiped her with its other arm, bending the limb backward in a way that no human arm could move. The impact jarred her to the teeth, sent her skidding to the edge of the corridor.

Ariadne rose to her feet to find the golem covering the distance between them. She dodged its next blow, grabbed the sword stuck in its chest, tried to pry it loose, wound up forcing it deeper into the creature. The golem impaled itself as it charged; Ariadne’s blade sunk nearly to the hilt, and she let go lest her arms be taken with it. Rolling out of the way, she ducked a punch so powerful that it left a massive divot in the cave wall. The golem could be solid enough when it wanted to, apparently.

Ariadne moved back and reached to her belt for one of her incendiary grenades; since physical blows seemed useless against Roarke’s creation, perhaps fire would serve her better. But then she remembered she had shucked them before entering the burning power station. The potentially helpful fires were far away in the darkness, in the opposite direction from Roarke’s flight, and by now the inferno above would spell certain destruction for Ariadne.

Another barely dodged blow from the golem reminded her that standing her ground was no option, either. She turned and took off at a run through the tunnel. She was followed by the *pound-slap, pound-slap, pound-slap* thunder of the creature’s pursuit, coupled with the scraping of its clay head against the tunnel ceiling.

Ariadne felt the heat long before she reached the staircase. The moment she smelled the smoke, instinct stopped her in her tracks. Even as she cursed her sudden pause, the golem capitalized on her hesitation, plowing into her, its giant arms enclosing her and beginning to exert crushing pressure. It was painfully solid now, unyielding against her. Ariadne felt her bones strain and crack. She pushed desperately with all her strength, feeling as if she were being buried alive.

Her legs staggered and twisted uselessly. Even as her conscious thoughts fled in the face of pain, her training took over. Ariadne bent her knees, threw herself forward to pull the creature off-balance. She felt a crushing weight on her back, and she knew she had succeeded in using the golem’s own mass against it. The creature threatened to fall on top of her, but she was already dodging the worst of the impact. She rolled left, partially out of harm’s way. As the golem hit her and the floor, it turned soft and claylike, splattering in a thousand directions.

Gasping and clawing her way up through the muck, Ariadne seized her sword, freshly liberated from its chest, and leapt for the ladder. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the creature reforming, taking on its mocking shape of a man, but she had bought the time she needed. Ariadne barreled up the ladder and through the portal, out into a red and orange hell.

She felt her clothing catch fire, then her skin, and could not keep down a scream. She had no conception of up, down, left, right. She picked a direction and ran, trailing flames. She was unaware if the monstrous thing was behind her; her entire universe was the flaming scene she was fleeing.

Out she ran into the night, her body a torch as she hurled herself to the ground, rolling and batting madly at the earth beneath her to quench the flames. She heard sirens, voices, but could not place them. The creature that she had become had lost its mind, but as the folds of its psyche pulled away, other layers, other selves, were revealed in vivid flashes of memory:

Ariadne is seven years old, watching a mottled calico cat freeze to death—why can't she remember its name?—beneath her family's Cadillac Coupe de Ville. She had been building a snowman when she heard the faint, desperate mewling, had rushed to investigate, only to find the poor thing moments from death. She tugs at her father's sleeves—why can't she remember the color of his eyes?—and begs him to make the cat better, but one look and he knows the creature's soul is swiftly fleeing. Ariadne rages at the kind of God that would allow such an innocent creature to die in such paws-shivering agony, the kind of deity that would make her have to watch, helpless, as its life bled away with every passing breath ...

Ariadne is nineteen years old and Andrei is carrying someone in his arms. A man? No, his burden is barely more than a child, clothed in a tattered coat and blue jeans buried beneath fabric patches. They'd found the child shivering outside the concert he had saved for weeks to take her to. The boy's face had been so ugly, so caked with grime and mucous, that Ariadne, like everyone in line, had turned her head aside, kept her gaze elsewhere, erased his existence. But Andrei had refused to pass by, had refused even to flag down anyone in security, but instead carried the child to the first-aid tent and waited, waited through the entire first half of the concert, until the ambulance came. She stands with him in silence, her face hot and red despite the cold. She is unable to speak, and that silence lasts forever ...

Ariadne hears a song—Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da—feels the pain behind those notes, knows that if she just listens a moment longer, she will remember where it comes from—

"Ariadne! Hey! And they say I'm off my rocker! Didn't anyone ever teach you not to go into flaming houses?"

She became aware of Po-Mo's form above her, batting at her clothing. She opened her mouth to tell him to stop, to beware, that she might soon be followed by the monstrous earth golem, but her mouth refused to open. Her tongue felt as if it had burned to ash.

Fire engines had laid siege to the scene. Water and carbon dioxide sprayed from a dozen directions, combining with the smoke to create a roiling, impenetrable fog. Firefighters registered as ill-defined shapes moving through the miasma. Even the lights of the Fresh Pond Motel had been obscured.

Then, like a raging seraph, a man-shaped fireball careened out of the mists, rushing madly toward them. Po-Mo let go of Ariadne and reached for his submachine gun. The charging beast collided with him, knocking him clear across the yard.

Ariadne heard the report of Ella's and Brian's firearms as tiny pops in the roar of the flames. They each unloaded an entire clip into the creature. Ariadne spotted the dim figures just in time to see the golem grab one of them with each burning hand and bash them together like dolls, setting their bodies alight in the process. They fell to the ground, still covered in fire, their skulls shattered.

Bourne. Where was Bourne? Ariadne could barely get her own bearings, let alone determine Bourne's. She rose shakily to her feet, patting out the last smoldering embers on her clothing. The

creature was charging at Po-Mo again. Ariadne refused to look at the smoldering forms of Ella and Brian, deciding there was nothing to be done. Field tactics were clear—save the men you could.

Ariadne saw the flaming monster had shrunk, its clay burned away. The process of its destruction had begun, but she needed to see it through. As Po-Mo dueled the golem, Ariadne ran to Ella's decomposing corpse, seizing the lone remaining incendiary grenade from her belt before the fire set it off.

The clouds of smoke and vapor rendered her eyes next to useless, and it took her long, painful minutes to find her way back to where Po-Mo and the golem were fighting. Along the way she came within arm's reach of the firefighters as they stumbled through the fog. Someone stopped and asked her if she needed help, but she pushed him away. She hoped the smoke hid her presence from them as thoroughly as their helmets and masks hid their faces from her. The way most of them passed her by, it felt as if they occupied different dimensions.

Ariadne dimly remembered a time when she's imagined firefighters as smiling, good-looking men who charged in cavalry-style to save helpless maidens. Now, standing in the burnt tatters of her leather jacket and bodysuit, scorched sword held point-downward, hair and face caked with clay and soot, Ariadne felt nothing of maidenhood.

She sped away from them, clambered atop a disused train car, finally got enough height to see where the battle was taking place. Po-Mo was dodging among the railway detritus, brandishing a tire iron, trying to get in position to use it.

Ariadne put all the energy she could into her own charge, but she had been weakened by blows and by flames. Her step was uncertain, and she staggered and tripped as she ran. She reeled back her arm, grenade in hand.

"Po-Mo!" she shouted, her voice broken and raspy. "Get out of the way! I'm tossing a flamer!"

"Stay back! I can handle him!"

Po-Mo made a valiant but stupid stand, lashing out with the tire iron only to watch it sink uselessly into the golem's bulk. To toss the grenade now would mean Po-Mo's death. To not intervene would mean his death as well. Roarke was long gone by now. It was only a matter of time before the fire crews got the chaos under control enough to notice the other weird happenings, or the police finally arrived to secure the scene. She marveled at the fact they'd escaped detection even this long.

And, damn it, where in the hell was Bourne?

Shouting every curse he knew, Po-Mo finally pulled back. Ariadne managed to run up to him, pull him aside. The flaming arms of the golem reached for them, and they dove to the side.

"Get out of here!" She seized Po-Mo by the shirt, tossed him back with mad strength. "Track down the rest of Roarke's men! The longer we stay here, the more time they have to get away."

She turned back just in time to duck the golem's next swing.

"Okay. Sure." Po-Mo started backing away, never taking his eyes off the fiery monster. "Hope you have a nice burial plot picked out."

Ariadne had no time to watch him go. She dodged several more lunges, fingering the incendiary grenade in her hand. She needed to get some distance between them.

The golem wouldn't allow it. Wherever she ran, it followed. Her legs wobbled, her feet tripped over piles of metal scrap. Down she fell, grenade falling from her hand and rolling down an incline. The golem bore down on her, giant fists joined together in a piledriver.

Ariadne rolled, but the impact still sent up sparks that caught along her jacket. She grabbed a nearby railroad spike and hurled it with such force that it imbedded in the monster's chest. As the golem swiveled and swung its fists, Ariadne had to weave so the spike did not smash her across the face.

Its chest was at that level now. The golem had shrunk as the flames consumed its clay form. The incendiary grenade would finish the job, if she could only retrieve it—

Then the golem's flaming backhand finally connected, sending her spinning off her feet. Her neck could be broken for all she knew, but her body still obeyed her commands, landing catlike on all fours a few feet away.

The golem bore down on her, giving her no respite, and she barely dodged its next blow. As it got smaller, it was getting faster.

As Ariadne rolled, her foot connected with something round and hard. The grenade! She scooped it up just as the golem launched itself toward her. She wouldn't get that distance she needed, but at least she could take the golem out with her.

In the time it would have taken her old, human self to blink, Ariadne had popped the firing mechanism and hurled the small metal egg forward. It erupted in a blossom of red and white death as it connected with the golem's chest. The hulking thing collided with her, sent her crashing through piles of wood and metal. Some pieces punctured her skin, her muscles, her lungs.

The golem was barely visible in the heart of this bright new torch that made the night sky momentarily seem like day. Ariadne hadn't seen day in ten years. She had forgotten what the outside world looked like when illuminated. Insanely, she grinned, even as pain washed over her in a brutal wave. She forced her eyelids to remain open as the blazing beast turned to her, took one step forward, then another, started to run with its arms outstretched.

Then it crumbled at the knees, its legs shattering into flaming chunks. The legless torso fell inward, breaking into a shower of orange sparks. Its arms flailed uselessly, spraying out into clods of burning clay that fell within kicking range of Ariadne's boot. The head rolled forward, and Ariadne brought up her sword, knowing the gesture was lost on its eyeless brute intelligence. Nevertheless, Ariadne slammed the tip of the blade down, splitting the smoldering head into a hundred chunks.

That action seemed to finish her as well as the golem. She stared with giddy detachment at her body, her chest and waist flayed open in places by the battle. Charred organs and bone lay exposed to the night. She and all of her soldiers had drunk to their fullest before the battle began, but there was a limit to even all that Vitae's power. Ariadne closed her eyes, willed her body to mend itself, opened them to see the job, at best, half-done. Full recovery would take time that she didn't possess.

Her vision swam. She heard shouts of alarm, barked orders. She tried to rise, using her sword to steady herself, and made it only to her knees. The flames, the fight, the injuries, had all driven her past her limits. Roarke had fled, the mission was a failure, Bourne had abandoned her.

The kine were coming. Painful minutes ticked by as Ariadne watched the fire shrink and the fire crews and newly arrived police continue to swarm into the area, trying to get control of the scene. She had moved far enough away that the perimeter had not yet expanded to encompass her, but it soon would. Although some wicked part of her was eager to see the uncomprehending reaction on some young paramedic's face when he tried to take her vitals, Ariadne remembered the Masquerade. The chaos of the fire had covered an entire skirmish between supernatural forces; to have her lone body lead to exposure now would be cruel irony.

Ariadne rose, tried to stagger away, only to feel her knees buckle. She pitched forward, sword flying from her hand. Again she picked herself up, walked a few more steps, and then collapsed. Her body, undead puppet that it was, had expended too much of the vital forces that kept it moving.

Above her, Venus was shining in the sky. Dawn was coming.

A few more abortive tries convinced Ariadne that getting back to East Boston was a fool's dream. Her only hope was to find some dark, secluded place to spend the coming day. A dumpster or a sewer pipe. Maybe one of Roarke's hidden tunnels. No, the firefighters had swarmed the control room. Then where?

She gazed up at the glowing red sign of the Fresh Pond Motel, pale and pathetic compared to the bright flames that had raged beneath it.

That had been her original plan, hadn't it? Slay Roarke, then find Andrei. It appeared God laughed at the plans of Kindred as heartily as at the plans of men.

Ariadne literally dragged herself to the motel loading dock, punched through the lock on the back door, stumbled across the molding brown carpet reeking of cigarette smoke and beer. By now she had healed herself enough that she appeared to be, perhaps, a ragged, recently beaten vagabond. The desperate and the staggering must be familiar sights here, but Ariadne imagined her appearance went beyond the pale. She willed the doors not to open, the heads not to poke out.

She spied a maintenance closet door slightly ajar, tried to pull the stuck door open, succeeded only in moving it a crack. The gap wasn't big enough for her to fit into, but at least it could admit her sword. She heard the blade clatter in the darkness beyond. She would retrieve it when she could. For now, she needed shelter.

There was only one clear option. Hugging the wall, she hauled herself to the door that bore the faded outline of a number 12. That was Andrei's room: 12. All the plans she had constructed for use when she appeared at this door now seemed ridiculously irrelevant. The best she could come up with was just to open it.

Her limbs mocked her commands. Her hand rose to only half its normal reach, the door-knob tantalizingly out of her grasp.

Then, as if by force of her will, the knob turned on its own. The door pulled open.

A man's face stared down at her, piercing blue eyes filled with shock and pity. She heard a word, felt a warm, distantly familiar hand touch her skin.

In the instant of contact, her world crumbled away like Roarke's golem, falling into chunks, then ashes, then nothing at all.



Part Two

Love never dies a natural death.

—Anaïs Nin

Chapter Twelve

Ariadne writes a letter under a covered bridge at the edge of campus at night, by the dim glow of a police call light. Her sweat makes the felt-tip pen slip in and out of her thin fingers. Her wrist smudges the blue ink with every motion.

Andrei has just severed the ties between them. Her tears, her pleas, only made him turn away faster. If spoken words will not reach him, perhaps written ones, read in the light of a new day, will.

The scratching sounds of the pen compete with the rustle of the leaves whipped by the cold winds. The sounds of the wind's rush seem as solid and well defined as footsteps.

A shadow falls over Ariadne. She shifts unconsciously, trying to find more light.

She will not give up so easily. She calls upon every poem, every metaphor, tries to write a symphony. She has to convince him it isn't too late. His fears are unfounded. The two of them can return to what they were. Anything is possible. He shouldn't ever forget that.

As she writes she begins to shiver, a visceral response, a prickling beneath her skin from cells with DNA that still remember the savannah. Something wicked is near. But so much is prickling within her that these cries go unnoticed, unheeded.

Now she consciously recognizes the presence, like a cold blanket pulling around her skin. Chemicals explode in her brain, flooding into the mix of grief and yearning. She pulls her coat tighter around her. She feels some inexplicable urge to run, but forces herself to stay rooted, to finish the letter. She cannot give in to any fear, of the world around or of what she has to put on the page.

It's close enough now to elicit a kind of nausea in her, this hovering shadow that seems to be waiting, measuring what Ariadne will do. Perhaps it wonders why she isn't running.

Curiosity and hunger battle behind the gaze that regards her. Eyes watch, fascinated. It can taste her emotion in the warm breaths she exhales with every pen stroke.

Ariadne rises, her stumbling pace toward the dull green campus mailbox quickening. Whether it comes from within or without—she cannot tell, even now—she cannot deny the imperative in her every nerve to move swiftly. The watching presence senses this, knows the time to spring has arrived.

Her slim white hands open the mailbox, let the letter slip in. The metal creaks. She wishes the letter Godspeed, straight to Andrei's hands, his heart, to whatever switch will turn his affections back to her.

Footfalls, like the padding of wolves, rush up from behind.

Ariadne turns, eyes wide, tears forming a veil between her and the thing bearing down on her. She feels an explosion, but she cannot tell if it comes from her neck or her heart.

She lets loose a scream that lasts for ten years.



Ariadne felt a weight on her body like the press of grave dirt, and with frantic gasps for breath, mere reflex from lungs that no longer functioned, she flailed her arms, hurled the heavy sheets and comforter from her body. She tried to spring into a sitting position, but every limb ached so much that all she succeeded in doing was twisting her limbs and rolling onto her side.

In the dim light she could see the dismal motel room, the brown-paneled walls and stained gray carpet that perhaps was once white. She saw the heavy cream-colored window shades that stank of tobacco, the cracked mirror above the chipped dresser that reflected the image of a man.

Andrei.

His back was to Ariadne, but she could catch glimpses of his face, watch his motions as he bent over a hotplate. Boiling water? Immediately her mind coughed up memories of the times in college when she or Andrei had taken ill with a headcold and the other one had leapt at the chance to brew teas and apply compresses and pull covers around the beloved's neck, excited at this chance to play nurse.

If the two of them had only seen what Ariadne had seen in the last ten years. Draining the blood of the terminally ill in hospital wards made for easy, suspicion-free feeding. Deaths were never questioned there. In those wards she saw the desperate pain of lovers tending to afflicted dear ones, the pity and the pain and the revulsion, the smell of uncontrolled bowels and decaying flesh that had already outlasted decaying affection. Occasionally Liliane would make Ariadne linger in the shadows to watch the loved ones leave the hospital room, to see the gratitude and relief in their faces, to watch as tears of joy, not grief, came from their reddened eyes. Now their lives could resume.

Ariadne sometimes wondered if Andrei had felt like that when he broke off their relationship, let her go from his life.

"Ari? Are you awake?"

Ariadne remained silent. Every rise and fall of Andrei's shoulders as he approached, every twitch of his mouth, every tone of his voice, lit firecrackers of memory within her. Random bits of Ariadne's past had been hurled behind a wall of fog ever since her Embrace. She could not remember her mother's maiden name, or the breed of dog her grandmother used to own, or even whether or not she had any brothers or sisters. It all seemed like useless trivia, exiled to the same land to which facts learned in high school vanished. But Andrei—everything about him stayed, stayed too well, too loudly, as if the memories of him were drowning out the memories of everything else.

His face had grown fleshy. His eyes, still deep and blue, had developed small bulges beneath them, and his mop of blond hair was thinner and had begun to recede. His clothing, always pressed and coordinated in college, now looked weatherbeaten. But somehow he was more the Andrei she remembered than ever, especially when he sat by her side and let loose a sigh. It was the same sigh of frustration that he would express after she had

“embarrassed him” in front of the dean or a student senator or someone else he was trying to impress. She had always been saying the wrong thing, at the wrong time.

Ariadne began to feel her fists clenching, drawing up bunches of linen in her hands. In all her battles, had she ever felt anger quite like this?

“Ari, what on earth happened to you?”

Where could she begin? Fury rushed through her as if her blood still circulated. What had happened? Wasn’t everything, from the throat-ripping Embrace on that covered bridge, through Liliane’s loving torments, right up through the flaming power station last night, wasn’t this all a result, a *direct* result, of what *he* had done when he had broken her heart?

Ariadne tried to spring, tried to launch herself from the bed, rend him with her claws and teeth, but her limbs refused to obey her commands. Her fingers splayed and clenched madly, seeking a sword that wasn’t there. Ariadne hissed, and Andrei backed away, face growing pale.

What was happening? Why was she so weak?

Ariadne thrashed and moaned beneath the bed covers, to no avail. A low, rumbling howl issued forth her throat, an animal cry of indignation. All the words she wanted to say, all the depictions of the hells in which she knew she had been forged and tempered anew, were clotting inside her throat.

“Easy, Ari,” Andrei said, drawing tentatively closer. “You must have a fever or something. You’ve been fading in and out all night and day.”

Day? Ariadne glanced in terror and desperation at the curtains. If they should open, if they should open ...

Andrei followed her gaze. “Don’t worry. I’m keeping them closed. Even with the clouds out there today, you were screaming fit to wake the neighborhood whenever I tried to get some light in here.” He glanced around, eyes lingering on the dents in the wall paneling. “I guess we’re both lucky this neighborhood is pretty used to screams.”

Daytime. That explained her physical weakness. Was that also why her rage was now fleeing as suddenly as it had come? She became absorbed in watching Andrei scratch at his neck—that habit hadn’t changed, either—which meant he was searching for an appropriate euphemism, some way to politely say what anyone else would just put bluntly.

“I took the day off from work to take care of you. Ari, you ... you need some help, obviously. You told me you didn’t want me to call 911, but I’m really worried. You look like you got caught up in that huge fire last night. Please, tell me what’s going on.”

Pity. In his eyes. For her. Even now, after all she had become, he saw her as weak. This would not do.

Ariadne summoned what strength she still possessed, pulled the covers to her body and stepped off the bed. She stared into Andrei’s eyes, attempted to take on the posture of the Silent Knife.

Then she smelled him. The scent of his skin and sweat crumbled her. So much had changed—the brand of shaving cream, the lack of his characteristic cologne, the saturation of the mold and cigarette reek of the motel—but enough remained. Ariadne found herself throwing her arms around him, burying her face in his chest as she fell forward. His body was a sponge, absorbing her own.

Somehow he brought them into a sitting position on the bed. He held her awkwardly around the shoulder, swiveling to face her.

Shivering, he shook his head. “God, you look the same. You haven’t changed at all.”

“At the moment, I probably look like shit.”

“No,” said Andrei, reaching out, stroking her long black hair, all tangled and matted, “you look beautiful.”

Ariadne looked anywhere but at him—down at her torn, tattered, and burnt clothes, at the soot and clay on her skin that had flaked all over the bed and the floor beneath her.

He suddenly withdrew. “Ah ... this is ... um ... strange. I ... I shouldn’t have said that. Or touched your hair like that. I’m sorry. This is just, ah—”

He scratched his neck again. “This is a very confusing time for me. You have no idea what I’ve been through in the last few years. And it looks like you’ve been through even worse.”

Andrei rose to his feet, backed up. “I mean, you probably have a boyfriend, or maybe even a husband. Just because you don’t wear a ring, I shouldn’t assume. Someone’s surely worried to death about you right now. Now that you’re coherent, you can use the phone, call him up.”

“There’s no one out there looking for me,” said Ariadne, which couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Andrei’s eyes kept wandering all around the room, but then returning to her. “You can use the shower. The towels aren’t very clean, I’m sorry to say, and the hot water’s unreliable, but, ah, I wasn’t expecting to have guests. Certainly not you.”

He blinked. “Ari, am I going crazy? Are you really here? How did you know where to find me?”

Ariadne said nothing. She planted her feet on the ground, noticed they were bare. Had he taken off her boots? Why did her feet look so small and delicate? She rose, feeling dizzy, off-balance. She suspected she would not feel herself until night fell in earnest.

But a shower couldn’t hurt.

Andrei backed away, gave her a wide berth, but even with her back turned she could tell his eyes were following her.

“If you need anything—more shampoo, a razor ...”

She waved him off and staggered into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She turned to look at herself in the mirror.

Nothing but a blur, of course. Why had she even for a moment suspected otherwise?

Through the thin wall in the adjoining room, Alanis Morissette crooned out the lyrics to “Uninvited.”

The cold shower bit and tore at Ariadne, washing grime and dried blood and burnt flesh into a murky brown slurry at her feet. She saw her skin had healed the gashes, the punctures, the worst of the burns, but that was as much as her body had been able to accomplish. The damage inside had been done, and some of it could not be undone until she fed. But strangely, she didn’t feel the thirst.

Stepping gingerly out of the shower, Ariadne reached for a comb and brush Andrei had laid on the toilet tank. All of his things were lined up in neat little rows, just like in college. It looked so familiar, yet so bizarre when she added the cracked porcelain of the sink in this dive motel.

Ariadne began running the comb through her hair, tearing through knots as if someone else were moving her arms on puppet strings. She picked up Andrei's deodorant, studied it as if it were a fragment of some fallen meteorite. Ariadne hadn't touched the stuff, hadn't needed to, in ten years. She uncapped the roll-on stick, brought it close, up to her armpit, centimeter by centimeter, until she felt the cold prick of its head, and shivered.

She now remembered how annoyed Andrei had always got when she used his deodorant or toothbrush. He had called it unhygienic. He hadn't understood how doing so used to make her feel closer to him.

Slowly, she capped the stick and replaced it in its place in Andrei's neat row. Then she wrapped a towel around her dripping form and stepped out into the motel room.

Andrei was shaking out the sheets over the wastebasket, watching the cascade of detritus Ariadne had left there billow out in small clouds as he did so. She gave the environs a good, long survey. For all the stains in the carpets and the dents in the walls, Andrei had done a valiant job of creating an island of order here. Shirts and trousers hung at attention in perfect rows in the closet. The desk, its trick leg propped up on a phone book, boasted organizers, fil-o-faxes, a laptop computer. Small framed photos surrounded the workspace, photos of a smiling blond-haired child.

Andrei had just begun to make the bed when he turned around and noticed Ariadne. "Oh. I didn't hear you come out."

"No," she said. "Of course not."

Andrei sat down on the bed, hands folded in his lap. Then he spread his hands and looked down at the floor. In this light, from this angle, as he sat in that posture, she could again see how *old* he had become. How many differences existed between the Andrei burned into her memory and this one. Reality and memory fought, and memory, as always, won. Reality simply had to be wrong.

Andrei took Ariadne's silence as an invitation to speak.

"I know things look kind of bad now. It's temporary. I'm, ah, in a bit of a pickle right now. Doing some freelancing work, with the taxi bit as supplemental income." He laughed weakly. "Just until I can get back on my feet again."

Ariadne was convinced that, had she met Andrei in some corporate boardroom wearing a three-piece suit, lecturing the executive committee of his dreams, she would have sprung, struck, slashed him from gut to neck. She would have braved legions of security officers, faced the scorch of sunlight itself, just to savor that expression of shock when she unseated him from his summit of power, the one to which he had climbed, tossing her aside like a used-up tank of oxygen.

Or if she had come upon him at a five-star restaurant atop some glittering hotel in the financial district, out with a beautiful wife wearing a diamond necklace and, two angelic young children at their sides, then Ariadne the Silent Knife would have delighted in ripping their tiny little lungs and kidneys, forcing Andrei to watch and scream helplessly as she devoured them. She had lost her tolerance for innocence long, long ago.

But seeing Andrei here, wearing a stained polo shirt, eating the remains of leftover Chinese food, stuttering and apologetic, Ariadne found she couldn't move. If Roarke stormed the room at that moment, she wondered, would she still have been powerless to move from that spot, standing dripping in her towel?

“When you left school, Ari,” he was saying, oblivious to her thoughts, “it was like you vanished. Your parents told me they didn’t know what happened to you, but I wasn’t sure if they were just saying that so I wouldn’t find out. Sometimes I used to wonder what I’d say if I ever saw you again. This ... this wasn’t in any of my scenarios.”

Ariadne nodded, mouth half open.

“Please, Ari. Say something. Tell me something about where you’ve been all this time. What your life’s like right now.”

“My life story’s a little complicated,” she said softly. “I wouldn’t know how to begin.”

He paused, waiting. Finally, he offered, “Why are you here?”

Ariadne became keenly aware of the paleness of her skin, the tautness of her muscles. Her body felt ugly, corpselike, brittle. “Do you have any clothes?”

“Hm? Oh, sure. I’m sorry. I should have offered earlier.”

He scrambled to a drawer, pulled a T-shirt and some slacks out of the meticulously organized piles, offered them to her. She took them, keeping one hand tightly closed around the towel.

Why did she care if he saw her naked? He’d seen her naked a hundred times. But not after she became Kindred. Even now, he must have been able to sense how she had changed. It showed in the distance he kept from her, the awkwardness, the slight tingle of fear and pity in every one of his actions.

Pity? No one pitied the Silent Knife!

Ariadne snatched the clothing from his hand with a speed and ferocity that made him flinch back. She swept into the bathroom, slammed the door.

This was ludicrous. She should show him what she was capable of now. She could smash the steel radiator in the corner of the room with her bare hands, could slice his limbs off so quickly he wouldn’t even see or feel the motions of her sword. She wanted to *see* his reaction, this man who had judged her and found her wanting.

Dropping the towel, she stared at her body. It was frozen in the prime of youth, everything still smooth and firm and blemishless, if you discounted tonight’s battle scars. Ariadne remembered the men at the dance club, how she could bend any of them to her will if she chose. Andrei should have been begging for her to fall back into his arms!

She fumed alone in the bathroom, pulling his too-large clothing over her body. It smelled like him, and the smell sent her angry thoughts fleeing in an instant. She was twenty again. She had never left being twenty, had she? At twenty she had been Andrei’s, often whether he liked it or not.

Ariadne stepped back out as Andrei was blowing his nose. She saw a small chunk of tissue break away and go sailing to land on his worn but polished loafers. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Hi again,” he said.

Ariadne waved weakly. She stood in the bathroom doorway as if in a trance.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t even offered you anything to eat or drink.” He pointed to the pot of boiled water. “I’m fresh out of instant coffee, and there’s nothing but beer and little leftover lo mein in the fridge, but I can run out and get something if you want.”

Ariadne shook her head silently.

He rubbed the back of his neck again. “Please, say something. I’m ... I’m acting like an idiot here. I haven’t seen you in, what, ten years? I don’t know what to ... to ...”

Ariadne tried to open her mouth, but an infinite queue of questions had formed a log-jam behind her lips. *Why did you leave me?* would have been the first out, if she had been able to speak. *Why did I come here?* might have been the second.

She had come to Andrei seeking to feel, to feel in the ways she used to be able to feel. But now that she was here, it had come out all backward. Were anger and self-pity all she was capable of now?

Unable to speak, Ariadne just stared, posture slouched, arms held behind her back, eyes staring up into his with the kind of hopeless expression he probably had only seen before in injured animals along the roadside.

She found herself crumpling into his arms.

“Ari.” Andrei breathed softly into her hair. “This is, ah—”

“Just shut up and hold me.”

He pulled her to him. Despite her admonition, he spoke. “Everything is going to be okay now.”

They sank to the bed, laid together side-by-side. It was just like in college. Except this time, he wouldn’t run off in a few minutes, off to work on some “vital” project. She knew that this time, he would stay.



With nightfall, Ariadne felt some of her strength returning. She and Andrei had lain together the entire afternoon, and even now that she felt the call of the blood in her veins, she resisted leaving his embrace. When he got up to use the bathroom, she rose to her feet, casting off the covers.

She walked to the window. Drawing the shades aside, she peered out into the night.

Lights twinkled from the city skyline, each one of them denoting a room, a scene, a small stage where human actors danced out their little dramas. In her old life, she would always linger at lit windows she passed at night, curious to see what kind of lives they would reveal.

There was a war going on out there right now, but you couldn’t see it. Not even if you stared into those windows. She could shut the shades and the world itself would vanish, leaving only this motel room.

“I shut my eyes,” she whispered Sylvia Plath’s words, “and all the world drops dead. I think I made you up inside my head.”

She walked to the television, thumbed through the miniature cable guide, hit the button on the remote and flipped through the channels. Action dramas. Nightly news. Sit-coms. The world she had left behind. Watching it felt like getting back on a bicycle. As wobbly as it all felt, she was confident she would soon regain her balance.

Andrei emerged, walked over to her, put an arm around her shoulders.

“I half expected you to be gone by the time I got out. I fought getting up as long as I could because I was afraid of that.”

She turned to him and smiled weakly. “I’m still here.”

“Yes, you are. Will I see you again after tonight?”

“Do you want to?”

He nodded. “When will you—?”

“I don’t know. Will you still be in this motel?”

“Unfortunately, yes. But not for much longer. I’ll get an apartment soon enough. I just need one or two more big contracts with the freelance work. I—”

“This is fine.” She gestured to the television. “You have cable here.”

Andrei stared at her, then decided she had made a joke and laughed.

“Ari, it feels like we never left.”

“I know.”

“I have so much to tell you,” he said. “So much to explain.”

“Not now,” said Ariadne. As desperate as she was to know, the night was washing a bucket of cool water over her. Every passing minute it showered her with reminders, reminders that tensed her muscles, that made her fingers clench around absent sword hilts. She was the Silent Knife. This world in the motel room was a dream from which she knew she would wake very soon.

Ariadne turned around, shushed him with a finger on his lips. “Let’s not talk right now. Please.”

They sat in the glow of the television, side by side, staring ahead.

When Andrei dozed off, Ariadne gathered together what remained of her jacket and bodysuit. They felt itchy, foreign, the wrong size for her. She stared down at Andrei sleeping, listened to his chortled snores and tiny chokes, sensed the life as it beat in his veins. Her fangs tingled and pulled to get loose from her gums.

She found herself by his side, close enough to his neck that she could see the pulse of his veins.

Ariadne gripped the sides of the bed. With effort, she pushed herself back up to her feet, turned and slipped out into the hallway, closing the door gently behind her.

She saw the glint of light off her discarded sword from within the maintenance closet. A thick, sturdy-looking woman in a stained blue maid uniform was approaching, changing the bag in the hallway trash. Her iron-gray curls shook back and forth as she moved her head.

The woman looked up as Ariadne drew near.

“Hello,” said Ariadne.

“Allo,” said the woman perfunctorily, refusing to meet Ariadne’s gaze. Her accent was unplaceable. Her arms were thick and sinuous as they went about their task, yet Ariadne could not help but think them motherly. It seemed as if one embrace from those arms could quiet any of a thousand fears.

Ariadne stepped forward and her new proximity made the maid look up. The maid smiled tentatively with yellowed teeth, some missing their neighbors.

“You ... are okay? Yes?” Caution and concern mixed in the older woman’s eyes. Ariadne realized she still looked a mess.

The woman moved toward the closet, began to open the door. Ariadne rushed up just as the maid saw the sword, cocked her head quizzically.

Ariadne shoved herself into the doorway, almost collapsed into the maid’s arms. Some reflex of human kindness in the older woman made her rush forward and reach out.

Eyebrows raised in confusion, she nevertheless kept her arms around Ariadne. Maybe she was used to such things from the clientele here, or maybe something in this girl young enough to be her daughter demanded caretaking.

“You need help?”

Ariadne looked up, her own eyes full of endless black yearning. She opened her mouth uselessly. No words came.

The older woman hugged her a little tighter. “Going to be fine-fine, yes?”

Ariadne drew herself up a little, smiled weakly, not without some embarrassment. Her hands rose up the woman’s back, gripped her firmly. Her eyes gazed to the hallway, found it otherwise empty.

In one swift motion, Ariadne pulled the maid inside the closet with her and slammed the door. At the same time she drove her head forward. Fangs extended into the other woman’s throat. A wild splash of red flew across Ariadne’s eyes.

She guzzled, filling herself with no regard for the taste or texture of the blood. The older woman’s eyes froze wide in shock. Her lips parted in a scream that had been suddenly denied the breath to make it.

The shivers of the woman beneath Ariadne resonated throughout her own muscles, making them spasm in rhythm to her victim’s palsy. Ariadne could feel her skin knitting, the bruises smearing and fading back to white, the cracked ribs swelling and solidifying.

The maid lay pale and still beneath her, ashen face frozen in a moment of terrified betrayal. But she would live. Ariadne was in control again. She licked the wounds she had made, sealed the punctures, mopped up the mess. Then she placed the semiconscious maid neatly atop a pile of toilet paper rolls.

Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da ... da da da ta-ta-ta-ta ...

The song. Ariadne found that she remembered almost a whole measure. It hadn’t hit her like a bolt; the memory was just there, more complete, as if it had always been there. She still didn’t recall precisely where she had heard it, in life or in undeath, but she hummed it softly as she donned the maid’s clothes, as she wrapped her sword in a plastic garbage bag. It *was* about yearning, but also triumph, renewal. It seemed a shame to let the memory go when it came time to leave.

Ariadne closed the closet door without making a sound. Then her feet passed silently over the cement beneath a sliver of moonlight that seemed to dim complicitly.

Chapter Thirteen

Silas was crying.

Whatever it was that Ariadne was expecting when she returned to Liliane's sanctuary by night's end, it wasn't the sight of the elder bunching his bony hands against his eye sockets, weeping bloody tears over a tattered pile of wood and canvas at his feet in the drawing room.

The drawing room itself looked as if someone had converted it into a miniature warehouse. All around Silas, Liliane's house-servants were hauling boxes and sorting through burnt and twisted *objets d'art*. No one seemed to notice Ariadne as she entered.

"Animals," the elder hissed, limbs quivering. "Barbarians! Life is fleeting, but art? Art is eternal! How could they have m-m-m ... *massacred* Renoir like this? I watched the man paint these himself!"

Ariadne stood in mute disbelief. It was as if her one day with Andrei had unwoven the finely bound threads that kept the universe as she knew it intact.

She didn't feel like approaching Silas in this state, so she managed to take one of his men aside. He explained that Roarke's forces had hit Silas's safehouse, killing all his retainers and demolishing his priceless collection of French impressionist paintings.

Despite her best efforts, Ariadne could not escape the room before Silas looked up at her. The hate and pain blistering in his crimson eyes seemed to shoot out directly at her. She hadn't intended to step in at this very moment, to bear witness to this rare moment of weakness. But neither was she going to cower and apologize and slip away.

Ariadne remembered her momentary vision of Silas crumbling to dust at a wedding ceremony, the top hat all that remained to mark his passage. Then she remembered the claws and teeth of his hound as it mauled her on the Boston University Bridge, and any sympathy she might have felt fled.

She bowed her head in simple deference. "Roarke will pay for all his crimes."

Silas laughed a scratchy, bone-tearing laugh. "Really, now? You've done such a fine job, young Seneschal, of halting his efforts thus far. What will burn next while you're out trying to make him pay?"

"Roarke lost his primary base of operations," said Ariadne. "I destroyed it personally."

“Ah, I see, then,” Silas sneered. “This is your revenge. Drawing back our defenses from my personal holdings. Well-played, youngling. And here they were all mourning what they thought was your loss. So you’ll have their sympathy, too. Idiots.”

Ariadne let his words wash over her, as she had so many times in the past, and it worked, too, right up until he said, “Wherever you were yesterday, you weren’t where you needed to be. Roarke still moves with impunity through this city—the demesne Liliane and I and the others spent decades building with our blood, parleying with the wizards as if they were our equals. All you see is the end result. Little wonder you care not if it falls!”

Behind her mask, Ariadne flinched. Silas was a fiend, but he was right. She had been gone for a full night. A night was an eternity during wartime.

With a silent bow of departure, Ariadne left to seek the Prince. She walked as slowly as she could. Silas’s howls of pain and frustration echoed throughout the halls.

She half-expected Bourne to be here, lording her failure over her. But Po-Mo had checked back in long before Ariadne’s return, reporting Roarke’s trail cold and Bourne to be missing. Had he been a victim of Roarke’s forces during that fight in the train yard, slain while she was still in the subterranean depths? Had he simply cut and run? If so, he certainly would not be returning. Liliane reserved her most creative and protracted punishments for those who committed treason during times of war.

Treason. During times of war.

Ariadne swallowed hard.

She moved through the halls, passing among cots where wounded men and women, Kindred and conscripted ghouls alike, lay writhing on blood-soaked sheets, their bodies slowly healing wounds from fire and iron, from stakes and from explosive shells. It would appear that, over the course of this one night, the war had erupted into an all-out conflagration.

“Roarke’s on the offense,” someone was saying.

“Last ditch hope. He knows he’s done for, wants to go out with a bang. Bring it on!”

“Wizards aren’t going to like this. Heard some of them have declared Kindred fair game. Any Kindred.”

“Let ’em try.”

“Help. Please, I need some blood—”

One night. She had only been gone one night. Not even a full night.

Ariadne felt as if she were walking through a humid wall of tension. The silken chatter of the socialites was no more; everyone was swapping battle stories, some with pride and some with shellshock. She saw one of the jet-setter ancillae rocking back and forth, hands over her ears, while another young Kindred futilely tried to draw her out of her stupor. These vampires were predators, but they were not soldiers. There was a difference.

“Make way. One side. Coming through ...”

Ariadne felt a bump from behind and wheeled around in time to see the house steward, that diminutive, bald-headed ghoul who tended the maintenance of the facility, shout and try futilely to catch a number of ceramic urns that were falling off the tray he had wheeled into her. They shattered on the ground, pouring fourth piles of black ash.

Cursing, the house-steward scrambled, trying desperately to sweep up the piles. Ariadne knew the reason for his fear. Urns such as those contained the earthly remains of

fallen Kindred. Liliane insisted they be treated with the utmost respect. She severely punished those who failed to show that required respect.

Ariadne bent down to help him with his sweeping, and as she stared at the ashes—ebon, charred—she recalled Hera’s fate.

What was going on here? How had the world spiraled away from her?

There was no time for questions. Ariadne finished her trek to Liliane’s study, hand wavering tentatively over the doorknob. She had tried to rehearse the explanation she would give a thousand times, but the practiced words rang hollow in her mind now.

“Come in, Silent Knife.”

Ariadne was on the other side of the door, but her Prince knew she was there, knew her secrets, knew everything.

The door opened. Liliane sat on her divan, radiant. Ariadne had never seen Liliane’s skin so vibrant, practically glowing. Her movements seemed to have a lift to them, an energy that suffused her practiced poise. Liliane’s crimson lipstick was freshly applied, and her white suit replaced with a sparkling, diamond-studded evening dress that glimmered even in the soft light of the study.

“My lady.” Compared to this vision, Ariadne felt like nothing. Even to take in the sight of the Prince with her eyes seemed to profane the image.

Ariadne fell to her knees.

“Forgive me.” She stared at the floor. Long seconds passed.

“Your lady isn’t in a position to do much of anything,” said a gruff male voice. Ariadne raised her head just enough to locate the speaker.

Mister Rose moved into view behind Liliane, his thick hands falling slowly upon the edge of the divan. There was rage in his eyes.

“‘The situation is under control?’” His basso voice shook. “Indeed not! There are fires throughout the city. Even if the Ravens bury nine-tenths of it, it will still be the worst breach of the Masquerade in years. As of this moment, for the sake of us all, the Council is seizing control of this situation. And this demesne.”

Chapter Fourteen

Liliane, her back to Rose, sighed a small sigh of disappointment. She did not turn around, speaking instead to the air in front of her. “Is the Council so eager to pluck the fruit of our long years of labor?”

“Once we clear the maggots out of it, yes.”

Mister Rose strode around the edge of the divan until he was facing Liliane. He seemed to take no notice of the kneeling Ariadne by his side.

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” said he said. “It’s not your fault. What you have here is a gaggle of misfits, rejects from a dozen other coteries who found refuge in the shadows of wizards’ capes. It should come as no surprise that, sooner or later, the city would fall to chaos.”

“A few fires in East Boston do not equate with a city in chaos,” said Liliane.

“I beg to differ,” said Rose. “East Boston may be one neighborhood, but it’s *your* neighborhood. If you can’t control your own backyard ... well, look, this is the way it is. I have a squad of soldiers a phone call away. They’ll move in and finish off Roarke’s men before dawn.”

“Will they now?”

“You can bet on it.”

Liliane smiled sweetly. “And, of course, they will not leave once their task is accomplished.”

“They’ll stay for a period, yes. To ensure security and make certain no ripple effects from these incidents compromise the Masquerade any further.”

Liliane sighed, but her smile remained. “It must be very satisfying, the prospect of ruling a city that has eluded the Invinctus’s grasp for generations.”

“Let’s focus on the present for the moment,” said Rose. “Besides, this is business. I think we’d all be happier if we left the personal factors out of it.”

“Left the personal factors out?” Liliane cocked her head, and Ariadne felt a small frisson move through the room. “We have never done so in the past. When the emissaries of the wizards’ Ebon Noose first came to parley with me, they reduced one of my lieutenants to dust with a finger-snap before we settled on terms. We took that personally.”

“Well, wizards have always been a hassle. All the better, then, that we move in and—”

“When we debated theology with the wizards’ White Putnams for two-score hours, uninterrupted, until a concordance was reached—” Liliane’s voice took on an edge as she interrupted him “—we endured the pain and lethargy of day itself, and we took that experience very personally.”

“Don’t think the Council doesn’t appreciate the pains you took to secure alliances,” Rose began, “but nevertheless—”

Her voice became sharper still. “When our trusted Seneschal Roarke rebelled, we took it so personally that we decided not to rest until his ashes were scattered to every corner of this demesne.”

“I’m not sure I like where you’re headed with this.”

“And now that the Invictus Council has decided to play the hyena and steal the lion’s kill,” Liliane’s voice, after reaching crescendo, suddenly eased off into a sweet, dulcet whisper. “We take it very personally indeed. We reject your kind offer of assistance.”

Mister Rose blinked. “Excuse me?” A rumbling shook his formidable frame. “You *reject*? Prince Liliane, your sense of humor falls here on deaf ears. We have authority, we have jurisdiction, and—”

“You have one man,” said Liliane.

The room grew ice cold. Ariadne, still bowed to the ground, looked from her Prince to the Invictus Councilor and back. Everyone in the room remained frozen for a moment. Then Mister Rose shifted uncomfortably.

“I will pretend I did not hear that implied threat.”

“You have one man,” Liliane repeated softly, “and you presume to dictate terms to us, in the heart of our power.”

“Liliane.” Mister Rose took a deep breath, and the absence of his use of her title as Prince was marked. “They say many things about you, not all of them complimentary, but no one would call you a fool. I know you well enough that—”

“You know nothing about me,” Liliane whispered. She was no longer smiling. “I was old when your sire was not yet born.”

Rose closed his eyes, tapped his nose with one finger. “You’re just embarrassing yourself. Show some dignity. I’m going to make a call now, and this will all be over.”

Liliane gave a small, ladylike shrug. “Then I suppose you leave me no choice but to prevent you from making that call.”

Ariadne had been coiled for long seconds now, and before her Prince had even finished the statement, she leapt up at Rose, not stopping to think of the consequences. Her Prince’s word was law, not to mention how this unspoken order gave her a chance to redeem herself.

Rose, for his part, was not stupid. He was ready for the attack. He seized Ariadne’s arm as she struck, attempted to turn the charge aside and hurl her to the ground. He was only half successful.

The two tumbled to the finely woven carpet, each struggling to gain leverage. For all his bulk, Rose was nimble. Ariadne couldn’t pin his limbs. She could only wrestle him to a nervous stalemate.

Ariadne heard a hiss of air, felt a shiver transmit through Rose’s limbs to her. Then a force beyond her reckoning hurled her from his body, across the room, to impact painfully with the wall. Plaster and a chunk of brass candelabra exploded out from around her.

As she fell, Ariadne dropped catlike to her feet, hand flying to her back to draw her sword. It was dulled from last night's battle, but it would have to do.

Rose drew his own blade from the scabbard beneath his jacket. A thin trickle of blood ran down his arm and landed on the blade, sending crackles of electricity arcing across the tip. Ariadne remembered his claim in the parking garage that, once charged with blood, the weapon stole souls with its next touch.

"Call her off." Rose's voice shook slightly, but his sword did not. "Call her off, Liliane. This is treason."

Liliane remained on her divan, sitting ramrod straight but otherwise placid. "Hrm? Call her off? How can we, Mister Rose, when you just informed us that we are no longer in control of the situation?"

"Stop it! Stop it this—"

"Goodbye, Mister Rose," said Liliane, and inclined her head in Ariadne's direction.

Ariadne charged, her sword held high. Rose brought up his own blade in time for a parry. A bright burst of light accompanied the clash, and Ariadne felt a wave of static buzz uncomfortably through her.

The two took one another's measure, the slight young woman and the large old man. His sword was shorter, so Ariadne tried to keep her guard tight, force him to stay at a distance. Every time he lunged, the sheer power behind his stroke pushed her back a step. If his sword really did drink souls, then she couldn't allow herself to be cut even once.

"I will give you one more chance to join us." Rose bared his fangs. "Your loss would be a waste."

Ariadne let her sword speak her reply. She and Rose clashed once, twice, and on the third meeting she managed to get inside his guard and slice into his side.

Immediately she realized her mistake. He had drawn her in, and now she was vulnerable. His sword came jabbing toward her gut. She threw herself aside and down, missing the blow but falling into an indefensible pile on the ground.

Gunshots sounded, and Ariadne heard Rose hiss. One of Liliane's soldiers had charged into the room and was emptying his pistol's entire clip into Rose's chest.

Rose simply walked into the hail of bullets, his body shaking slightly with each impact. Ariadne could see some of the shells tear through him and embed themselves in the library books at the far wall, sending forth little cloudbursts of paper and dust.

"As an Invictus Councilor, I order you to stand down."

"Where the hell was the Council when my sire got wasted by Lupines?" the soldier spat, madly reloading. "Liliane took me in, and—"

Rose's swift downward slice cut off the soldier's hand at the wrist. Immediately, the other vampire's body lost all rigor, flopping to the ground, where the skin and bone began melting into the carpet.

So Rose's boasts about the sword's power were true.

Rose kicked the door closed with such force that it wedged in its frame. As the sound of pounding fists thudded from the other side, Rose turned with a growl, slashing his blade left and right through the air as he advanced upon Liliane.

Ariadne rushed between them, sword in hand again, blocking his strike just before it reached the Prince. Liliane did not move a millimeter. The clang echoed throughout the room.

The dance began again, Ariadne leading Rose as far from Liliane as she could. The Seneschal dropped into a crouch just in time for Rose's sword to graze the air above her in a tight arc. She felt the wind muss her hair.

Ariadne kicked out from her crouch at his knees, but Rose leapt up to avoid her blow. He slashed downward as he landed, slicing a path through the carpet just as she rolled out of the way.

The Silent Knife took over. A centrifuge spun thoughts of Liliane, Roarke, even Andrei, to the edges of her mind. All that was real was here, now, two Kindred and two swords.

Ariadne scrambled to her feet, and the duel resumed. They circled and matched blades while standing on chairs, on tables, now one giving ground, now one taking it.

"Enough, little one," Rose said as he maneuvered her toward Liliane's little Japanese rock garden. "You can't win."

Ariadne ignored the words, focusing instead on the rocks beneath her feet. Soccer style, she slid her toe beneath one. As Rose made his next thrust she kicked it into his chest.

The impact threw off his strike. Ariadne moved in, slicing clean and true through his torso. Blood sprayed over the rocks, over the back of the Prince's divan. Unfortunately, unlike his blade, hers, dulled as it was, didn't kill with one blow.

Rose bore down on her, but now he was wounded, sloppy. Ariadne, still in trim, pressed her advantage before his wound, already knitting, could heal.

She forced him backward, cut him twice more across the arms. He continued to give ground. To him, this was a mission. He wanted to get out of this room alive more than he wanted to kill Ariadne. To her, this was redemption.

A savage swing severed Rose's ear. As he cried out, Ariadne grabbed the edge of Liliane's bookcase with both hands, letting her sword fall even as she heaved with all her might. Rose threw up an arm uselessly as dozens of books pelted him. With a final heave she toppled the heavy wooden frame over onto him, pinning him to the ground.

Only his head and shoulders protruded from beneath the bookcase. Ariadne searched madly for her sword. If she couldn't find it, she would simply crouch down, seize Rose's head, and twist it off with her bare hands.

Rose began to rise, bookcase and all, only to find Ariadne's blade by his throat. He sank back down and growled, a fox in a trap, all professional graces gone.

"Enough."

The Prince had risen and stood beside Ariadne. Her voice tugged an invisible leash, reeled Ariadne back as if on a choker. Ariadne froze, fangs still bared.

From the ground, Rose turned a blood-soaked face as best he could to look up at the two women. His bushy beard was matted red and brown.

"You'll pay for this," he rasped, and then burst into a fit of coughing. "You're signing your death warrant to oppose the Council so nakedly!"

"The Council is no longer your worry, Mister Rose," said Liliane. "We have done you the great service of relieving you of the burdens of your duties. It was the same blessing you wished for us, was it not?"

"You're finished! Whatever happens to me, you're still finished!"

"Believe us, Mister Rose, when we say we have barely begun."

At that moment the door burst apart into shards. Liliane's soldiers piled into the room, weapons drawn. Po-Mo was among them. Upon seeing Ariadne he burst into a proud smile.

"We are well, children." Liliane turned to face her brood. "Though victory was not without cost."

All eyes turned to the decaying remains and the crumpled clothing of the fallen soldier.

"See to the mourning rituals. We will join you shortly, after some further business with our distinguished guest."

One by one they filed out, some lingering just long enough to stare at Rose's trapped form, at Ariadne, standing tattered but triumphant, by her Prince's side.

"As for you, my Silent Knife," Liliane said as Ariadne watched the last of them depart, "stay with us."

Ariadne felt the victorious song in her blood sink into the minor chords of a dirge at the Prince's words.

"We have new things to discuss."

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Staked to the ceiling, pale to the color of slate, hung Mister Rose's body. Liliane gestured. Drop by drop, his blood ran from the small funnels implanted here and there in his body. Below where he hung, a cistern much like the one in the dining room greedily sucked down the hour's accumulated pool.

Below, Liliane embraced her Hand. "We rejoice to see you are not lost to us."

Abruptly, the Prince pulled back. "Your absence has been acutely felt." The edge Liliane gave to her words was unmistakable. "As you can see, circumstances have grown more ... complex." She gestured toward Rose hanging above, half-insensate. "Knowledge is crucial. You will tell us everything."

Ariadne swallowed hard.

She began describing the battle, the rout of Roarke's forces, the golem that covered his retreat, the flames that raged out of control and beyond the reach of the Masquerade. And then ...

She explained how, wounded, she took refuge in a maintenance closet. Healing took longer than she had expected. The lies and half-truths poured out of her mouth as if possessed of their own intelligence, weaving themselves and using Ariadne's lips and tongue merely as tools.

Liliane's cold blue eyes remained fixed, evaluating. Ariadne knew she was betraying the Prince who had placed such trust in her, betraying it not for some beautiful divine goal, such as New Jerusalem, but for whatever it was she had felt when she was in Andrei's arms, a feeling she couldn't even put name to. Some small voice momentarily wondered whether saving the Prince's life from Mister Rose wasn't atonement enough for her betrayal. Then that voice got lost in the din of her rallying loyalty to her Prince.

She had been unprepared for Andrei, that was all. Her schemes had gone awry. If it happened again, she would be ready.

"I had a moment of weakness," Ariadne said, referring aloud to her fictional refuge in the closet. "It won't be repeated."

“Of course not, Daughter.” Liliane smiled serenely. She ran a lacquered nail through Ariadne’s hair, sniffing the air slightly. Could the Prince smell Andrei on her?

The Prince had called Ariadne daughter, as she always did, as if she were Ariadne’s sire in fact and not by adoption. But it was just like Liliane to glaze her cruelty with love. And the timing made sense. If punishment was coming, she was going to mete it out here in private, so no one would question the Prince’s wisdom in trusting a woman who had failed her. Discipline would be hidden to preserve decorum—one simply did not punish a Seneschal in public—but it would be no less painful, or shameful, for that.

Ariadne had not been disciplined in years. She remembered the raking of claws across her eyes after she spoke to an elder without first being beckoned, the removal of her tongue for speaking out of turn, and of course, the ants ... the ants ... oh God, would Liliane use them on her, for the first time in half a decade?

A confession was right upon Ariadne’s lips when Liliane spoke again.

“Fix this. All of it. Speak with Archibald, speak with whomever will help you achieve our goal. But thanks to ... whatever happened last night, we are now fighting a war on two fronts. You will fix this.”

The Prince did not have to speak further. Both women knew what the alternative was for Ariadne.

Ariadne could fix it. She knew she could. It was what Liliane had built her to do. Back in her cell she sharpened her sword. With an easy flick of the wrist, she spun it in an arc, the blade whistling sharply in the air. Lightning fast, she spun around, stabbed a phantom foe in the heart, spun again, lopped off an invisible head with a clean sweep.

She was *not* that weak, simpering girl from the pictures in the album, mooning over poetry and desperate for a loving grasp of Andrei’s hand. How could she have ever forgotten that?

Ariadne labored until dawn, poring over intelligence reports and drawing up plans, so intent on her studies that she almost failed to hear the screams of the house-steward, upon whom Liliane was finally enacting punishment for his earlier clumsiness with the urns.

His cries shocked her out of her pre-dawn sleepiness. This was a huge task. Defeating Roarke was one matter. That was a question of tactics and strategy; judging from field reports, her choices there were still working. Roarke’s headquarters had been destroyed. His ranks were decimated. Roarke’s attack on Silas had to have been a last gasp. One more good strike would end his rebellion.

But now that the Invictus Council was involved ...

There was no way Liliane’s court could stand up to them. And what had been done to Mister Rose could not be undone. Ariadne had to move quickly, stop their intervention before it moved forward again, before they came looking for Rose. Short of that, Ariadne had no idea what course of action to take. There were just too many variables.

The battlefield had become political as much as tactical.

Ariadne wracked her brain for every possible alternative, and when she came up short, as she knew she would, she began looking for Bourne.

Chapter Fifteen

Ariadne was no stranger to disturbing sights—to blood and gore, to dismembered limbs and disemboweled torsos. But she turned away from the vision of Bourne’s rolling waves of flesh spilling out from the small towel he wore as he sat at the edge of the marble platform in the subterranean Turkish bath.

Aside from the two of them the *hamam* was empty. It was easy to feel small inside the cavernous room, a few stubborn turquoise tiles clinging to its otherwise denuded, sloping ceiling. Clouds of steam hung languidly around the chipped and neglected statuary, fogging the warped and half-shattered shaving mirrors. The heat wilted Ariadne’s clothing, frizzed her long hair.

Bourne was trying very hard to look nonchalant, but Ariadne could sense his anxiety. He had not expected her to find him here. As she drew near he remained still, bared his fangs.

“Where the hell did you go last night?” he demanded.

“I could ask you the same question, Bourne. You deserted us at the train yard.”

“No.” He shifted, revealing a glimpse of ashen, vascular thigh. “While you were playing spelunker, I got a phone call from my sire that his—*our*—safehouse was under attack. That took priority.”

“No, it didn’t,” she snapped. “You had orders from the Prince’s Hand.”

“Don’t lecture *me* about politics, girl. This was my sire. But you can’t ever understand that, can you?”

Despite herself, Ariadne felt a pain inside. In all of their verbal sparring over the years, even Bourne tended not to hit that spot.

Ariadne stiffened. Coming here hadn’t been an easy thing to begin with. She’d had to grill one of Silas’s retainers for Bourne’s location. She’d had to travel halfway across town to this decommissioned bathhouse. Whatever doors of diplomacy inside of her she had forced open had already half-closed, and Bourne wasn’t doing much to keep them ajar.

Ariadne force herself to continue: “While you were here luxuriating, Mister Rose and the Council tried to close us down.” She began to describe the events of the night, only to have him interrupt her.

“Oh, I’m well aware of all that,” he said.

"If you know why I've come, don't drag this out."

"Why not?" Bourne leaned back, put his meaty arms behind his neck. His sneer belied the way he laid himself bare and vulnerable. "Goading you is all the pleasure I get these days."

"Besides this." She indicated the bathhouse with a gesture.

"This?" Bourne's face took on an expression of wounded dignity. "This isn't relaxation. This is important business. I'll have you know I'm meeting Archibald here in half an hour. The man won't talk at length anywhere other than here. Says the wizards warded it against spying. There's always room for one more. Of course, you'd have to dress for the occasion."

Ariadne narrowed her eyes. "Bourne, I am trying ... to ask you ... a favor."

"No such thing as favors, love. There's always a tradeoff. First rule of politics."

"You have a duty to the Prince's court. I shouldn't need to do anything other than order you to help me out."

"Sure. You could also order a turkey sandwich. Ever sent back a sandwich at a restaurant? The chef'll make you a new one, sure enough, you're the boss. Here's a hint, though. Don't look between the slices. Spit tastes better when it's invisible."

"I knew this was a mistake." Ariadne spun on her heel to leave.

Bourne let her get within one stride of the exit before calling out to her. "Tell me where you were last night and I'll give you all the help you could ask for. I'll be your Bernard Baruch." At her blank look, he added, "Financier, advisor during both world wars, confidante to presidents. Before your time, I guess."

Ariadne gathered her thoughts. What had happened with Andrei last night had been confusing and uncontrollable. It hadn't given her what she was looking for, and it had turned out to be a serious mistake as far as the war was concerned. But Andrei was *hers*. What they shared had happened before her death, had taken part in the daylight hours. The fact that very sun would burn Bourne to a crisp proved that he had no right to any part of that world.

Of course, neither did Ariadne ...

A memory came to her, unbidden.

Andrei leans over her, re-arranging the scattered pile of course registration forms into rows and patterns. He is pointing to the various configurations and block schedules, and she is snapping at his finger with her mouth, giggling harder the more he gets frustrated...

"Well?" asked Bourne. "It's a simple trade. Really kind of unfair to me, too, if you look at it. I get a piece of trivial, not very useful information, and you get a genuine clean-up man to fix your botch."

Ariadne pondered. Bourne wasn't the only clean-up man around. Back in college, Andrei had always been good at shuffling pieces on a playing field, mastering the system. Liliane had authorized Ariadne to use any resource, to speak with whomever she needed, hadn't she?

"Come on, girl. The whole reason Archibald's coming here is to help me help you out. We can be your dream team. Just tell me. I'm waiting."

Some part of Ariadne shouted to her that seeing Andrei was what had gotten her into this mess. But she had seen him with the eyes of a battle-shattered refugee, not with the

cool gaze of the Silent Knife. If she saw him again, she would be stronger. It wouldn't be a spastic wallow in emotion. It would be a simple business consultation.

"Never mind, Bourne," Ariadne called over her shoulder. "Go back to your steambath. Tell Archibald I say hello. I have other resources."

"Hey, come on. Don't be like that. Ariadne?"

Bourne called after her several times as she departed. The increasing desperation in his shouts made her smile.

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"Ari?"

She brightens to hear his voice on the phone. "Dre! How are you?"

"Listen, sweetie, I have to cancel tonight. My interview with VisionTech is tomorrow, and I need to prepare."

Her heart, having not quite settled down from the start caused by the phone's unexpected ringing, kicks into high gear.

"But, tonight's the poetry reading."

"I know, I know." His voice sounds tired, yearning. So much of her wants to reach out and comfort him, to soothe his pain, to tell him his life will work out just fine. "But what can I do? I want to go with you, but this ... this is crucial. This firm only hires two students out of the entire graduating class."

"It's okay," she mutters softly. "It's just ... well ... you told me that the last interview was the important one. Last week."

"It was last month."

"Whatever." She flops down on the bed, conscious of the hard plastic of the phone at her ear, disrupting the softness of her pillow. "It's only your junior year, Dre. How important are these interviews anyway? Aren't they just practice?"

She hears the familiar intake of his breath, a signal of the onset of another explosion. She moves the phone a few centimeters away, then quickly pulls it back. Even to hear the punishing sounds of this familiar rant about how competitive the business-technology program is, to hear his biting remarks about how "not everyone was born into a family like yours, a family that never had to worry about getting ahead," even to have this is to have a little piece of him close to her, is worth the pain. So she grits her teeth and bears the lash of his anger, tries to embrace it in lieu of his warm body. He'll apologize later. He always does.

She stares at the Picasso print on her wall, the poster of Koko the gorilla petting a small white kitten, the flyer from last year's Earthfest.

Andrei finally seems to expend himself. "I got up with you at dawn last week like you asked me, didn't I?" he concludes. "You have to be reasonable."

She offers him vague encouragement. He wishes her luck at the poetry reading. They exchange the routine language of amends, that easy script lovers fall back on when real words are too challenging. And then Ariadne is cast into the abyss of the dead phone line.

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Ariadne and Andrei sat across from one another at a dockside restaurant, where the candlelight from the tables reflected like a thousand small ghosts in the shimmering folds of the river at night.

Andrei's shirt bore the burn mark of a poorly laid iron, an effort at looking neat for her. Ariadne, for her part, had broken into a clothing store in West Somerville on her way over and, for the first time since her Embrace, was wearing a dress. The fabric was soft and shimmery, the cut alluring, but Ariadne still felt ugly and corpse-like.

She pushed those thoughts aside. This was a business consultation. That was all.

Andrei laid down a rain of chatter, betraying his own anxiety. He didn't seem to notice that Ariadne was merely picking at her food and re-arranging it in piles. He kept speaking to some space over her shoulders, or far to the left or right of her. After long minutes of awkward exchanges of pleasantries, Andrei finally looked her in the eyes.

"So your parents didn't know what happened to you either? You really had run away, and they weren't just trying to keep me from learning where you were?"

"Did you even want to know?" Ariadne heard herself ask.

"I ... I don't know." He turned his gaze away again. "I mean, ah, I had other things on my mind then. I had ... plans."

"You always had plans."

"My plans." Andrei laughed bitterly, running a hand through his hair. "Yes, my plans. I'm reassessing them at the moment, given how they turned out."

"How *did* they turn out?"

He reddened, and Ariadne was flooded with memories: How he would storm in, fuming about some defeat, some bad grade or missed opportunity, and she would wait patiently on her bed, sometimes reaching over to massage his shoulders, until it finally all washed out as a story. Here, tonight, Ariadne also found herself letting him ramble on—but only because it would make him feel more comfortable, more pliable to her plans. That was all, wasn't it?

Like a balloon slowly losing its air, Andrei leaked the story of his life. He had graduated from college with honors, landed his dream job with VisionTech, Matthew Legatt's socially responsible technology firm. All the goals he had chanted to her like a mantra during their three years together had finally become tangible reality. Somewhere buried between the folds of long hours, marked by eyestrain and carpal tunnel and a thousand business-class flights, he had met a woman and fallen in love.

Ariadne shivered, something in her clenching into a kind of knot she had not felt in all those sessions with Liliane. This was a new kind of fear, a nausea combined with an adrenaline rush, a pounding demand to hear more. She was in the flaming powerhouse at Fresh Pond again, except this time, the flames were singing to her, calling, and she could not help but walk straight into them.

Andrei continued. Gave a name, described her looks, her mannerisms, her likes and dislikes, casually, as if rattling off the stats of a baseball team. He refused to meet Ariadne's eyes. Andrei and this woman had married, moved into a house, began a family, had a daughter named Cassie.

A frost blossomed within Ariadne and moved to her extremities. She remembered the pictures of the little girl in Andrei's motel room. She felt dizzy. She pushed her high-heel clad feet into the floor beneath her to steady herself.

Andrei's tone, rising with the talk of Cassie, began to plummet, until soon it was entirely flat as he described the stock market bubble implosion, the revelations of accounting malfeasance at VisionTech, the evaporation of his portfolio and his job. The strings upon which his family's life had been strung snapped one by one, and all the pieces of the whirling mobile—house, cars, savings accounts—came crashing down. He moved the family into what his wife decided was a “hovel.” His checks from freelancing failed to keep pace with the calls from his creditors, until eventually:

“I just ... went somewhere,” Andrei said, a hopeless smile creeping across his face. “For weeks, everything just seemed, I don't know, behind a wall of fogged glass. I would forget to eat, forget to take Cassie to school in the morning, forget to turn off the car when I got out of it. The world passed before my eyes, but I just kind of slipped outside it. I'm not sure I'm making any sense.”

Ariadne swallowed slowly, with difficulty.

Andrei wrapped up his tale by relating a litany of lost lesser jobs, the loss of even the hovel, the divorce. His wife took Cassie.

“I made some bad mistakes,” he said. “It's unforgivable, what it did to Cassie, I know. But I'm sorting it all out. The second job is for her. Every dollar I make driving that cab goes to her private school tuition. You saw my motel room. I'm living simply. The freelance jobs are adequate, and soon enough a big one's going to come by. I'm going to fix everything.” He paused. “And you, Ariadne? You still haven't told me what happened two nights ago.”

She steeled herself. This was her whole reason for coming here, right?

“I have something that needs to be fixed, too.” She collected herself and explained, with as many details as she deemed prudent, her situation.

Andrei's eyes locked on her. She had hardly spoken three sentences when she knew the wheels in his brain were turning.

“So let me get this straight,” Andrei said, his posture already fallen into a focused hunch. “Your company's being investigated and you need to get the investigators to leave you alone.”

“Yes.”

“Your ... company. It's not exactly something I've read about in Forbes, is it?”

Ariadne raised her eyebrows, shook her head emphatically. “Consider this a hypothetical situation. What would a hypothetical Ariadne do in a situation such as this?”

“After insulting the investigator?”

“*Grievously* insulting him.”

“Is he with the Feds?”

Another head shake.

“Hmm.” Andrei rested his chin on his wrists, his food and drink entirely forgotten. “Well, anyone that high up in an organization has to have skeletons in the closet.”

“I'm sure he does,” said Ariadne. “Literally.”

Andrei didn't even notice she wasn't smiling. “It's a matter of finding them. Leveraging them against him, persuading him to keep his mouth shut.”

“I think he's not in a position to do that anyway,” said Ariadne. “It's more a matter of his bosses finding out about his ... um ... absence.”

“Absence?” Andrei raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t ask.”

He swallowed, exhaled. “Ari, I have to admit I’m getting a little creeped out at some of the implications.”

“Good. Keep going. We’re still speaking hypothetically.”

“Okay, okay,” Andrei outlined boxes in the air with his hands. “Well, you could go right to his superiors and expose the skeletons—once you find them, of course. Convince them that their man’s the problem, not your company.”

“How do I find them?”

“Speak to co-workers. Sniff around. I used to think corporate espionage was deplorable, but that’s before I saw the kind of folks Legatt would hire to dig up dirt on our opponents. Tobacco executives, corrupt congressmen—exposing them was a public service.”

Ariadne took mental notes. As they spoke, she knew Liliane and Archibald were interrogating Rose, but the Councilor seemed to be willing to let both mind and body turn to jelly before revealing anything useful.

“Andrei—” Ariadne leaned forward “—what if I needed your help ... manufacturing dirt?”

“Manufacturing?” Andrei pulled back an inch.

“This is a really bad guy I’m talking about. Worse than tobacco executives or corrupt congressmen. This is a guy who has friends who, if I don’t throw them off the trail, will do some horrible things to me. Hypothetically.”

Slowly, Andrei leaned back in. “I saw what you looked like two nights ago. Whatever happened was hardly hypothetical.”

She nodded, saw the concern in his eyes. Two nights ago, she had been trapped by his presence. Tonight, it seemed, she was returning the favor, entrapping him by his need to save her.

“You need to go to the police, or—”

“No. This has to be you, Andrei. You have the computer skills. Consider it a freelance opportunity. A paying job.”

She quoted a figure. Andrei could not hide the sudden hunger that came into his eyes. But then he stared at his drink. “No. I’m not going to take any money from you.”

“Look, I understand if you don’t want a part of this. It’s okay.” She began to rise.

He reached out, grabbed her hand. The warmth of his skin made her flinch.

“That’s not what I meant. I mean, I would never need money in exchange for helping you. The timing of this, it’s no accident. You were right, you know. The whole time. Back in school I wasn’t paying attention to the right things. Life could have turned out differently. If I can help now ...”

She had him. She knew she had him. Yet something squirmed inside Ariadne’s eyes, a hot acid feeling that made her jump, made her have to bite her tongue so she wouldn’t scream. Burning wax, or something like it, was working its way down her cheeks.

For the first time since her Embrace, impossibly, Ariadne found herself crying. It felt like slugs creeping down from her eyelids, eating at her flesh. The tears were made of blood.

She leapt up from her seat, knocking over her glass and causing the patrons around to crane their necks. She wiped the red streaks madly away from her cheeks, praying Andrei hadn't seen.

Andrei called her name, but she didn't hear. Demons snapping at her heels, Ariadne fled. Her heels staggered her gait, and she made it as far as the alley behind the restaurant before she collapsed against a dumpster, sliding down its metal side, grime streaking her beautiful new dress.

She heard Andrei calling.

She cursed herself. She had been in control! Then, all of a sudden, this. She fought for some way to right her thinking. Then she had it: If anything, her sudden helplessness would only serve to only draw Andrei in deeper.

He put his arms around her. "Something's wrong with you. Something serious. But, hey, look at me!" He laughed bitterly. "I'm hardly going to judge you. We both seem to have hit bottom, eh?"

It was a speech, an Andrei-knows-best speech, just like the old days.

"But this is perfect. I can help you. We can help each other. We're not kids anymore. We've been kicked around a bit, we've grown up. Things are different. Things ..."

He trailed off. Ariadne stared at his hand as if it were burning. Slowly, she reached out and clasped it.

"I'm sorry." The words spoke themselves through her. "For all the stupid things I did that drove you away."

Andrei's arms were around her, despite the grime and the surroundings. "Ari, you're fine. Wonderful. You were always wonderful. I was a stupid kid. I didn't know what I wanted, what I was doing. Let's take this slow. Whatever you're going through, whatever it takes, I can help."

It was the prize she had been seeking all along. Her mission had been accomplished. She would think about the costs later.

"Come with me," she said.

Back in college, he always would have asked where, always would have tried to map out the best way to go. This time, he said nothing, just took her hand and walked beside her.

Chapter Sixteen

Andrei followed tentatively, but without protest, as Ariadne led him through the dimly lit hallways of the First National Bank of Boston, where even the soft press of their footsteps on the carpet sounded incriminating. He had patiently waited outside while she worked her will upon the guards, made them deactivate the cameras and then forget she had ever been there. When she finally called him in and led him to the elevator, he had the good sense to not ask any questions until they were in private.

Only when she reached the nondescript black door in a nondescript suite of offices bearing the nameplate *Anodyne Financial Services* did he speak.

"Is this where you work?"

"No," said Ariadne. She grasped the door and, shielding it with her body, did her best to disguise her ripping it open as some kind of lockpicking.

Andrei coughed uneasily. "Ari ..."

"You said you wanted to help." She stared back accusingly, and it was enough to silence him.

He followed her lead into the dark space, and the thunk of his impact into a desk a moment later reminded her that he didn't share her night vision.

She flicked on the smallest, dimmest-looking lamp she could find. The pale light revealed an apparently ordinary office with cubicles, computers, and water coolers.

Andrei noticed the wrongness immediately.

"This place is awfully bare," he whispered. "No comics pinned above desks, no knick-knacks. This is exactly the kind of Spartan bullshit we tried to avoid at VisionTech. Every time I consulted for one of the big uglies for some money on the side, it always made me grateful to come back home."

Ariadne pulled out her cellphone, checked the text message from Liliane, showed the screen to Andrei. "You see these? They're Mister Rose's login IDs and passwords."

"Hrm."

Liliane had had her way with the Councilor, worked him as only she could to obtain this information. Thoughts of those ministrations made Ariadne suddenly look guiltily at Andrei, as if he could read her thoughts and see what she had seen.

“You’re still in?” she asked.

Andrei chuckled with a bitterness that seemed to come from some deep, terrible place. “Why not? The one advantage of my current circumstances is that I’m practically judgment-proof. No address to serve a court order to, right? And, hey, in jail at least you get three square meals a day.”

Ariadne scanned his eyes in the dim light, trying to locate the line between bravado and stupidity. Maybe her night vision wasn’t as good as she thought. Either way, though, it looked like she was going to get what she wanted.

Ariadne turned on the computer and waited the small eternity until it booted. Andrei, who had been glancing over his shoulder every few moments, apparently found his curiosity overwhelming his anxiety. He bent in close, logged in, and looked at the screen carefully.

“Who on earth *is* this?”

“No questions, remember?” Ariadne kept trying to position herself between Andrei and anyone who might see him, changing her angle every time she thought she saw the light from under the door interrupted by a shadow. Not that they had seen anyone in the halls at this hour, but some lights had indeed been on here and there, jagged teeth across the face of the skyscraper as they had first approached.

“Wow. Whoever this company is, they’ve got holdings in all the major banks, private and public.”

“Can you just do what I asked?” Ariadne snapped, prickled and alert.

“Of course.”

Andrei sat down in the chair as if he owned it, the computer’s wireless mouse becoming an extension of his hand. He explained at length all of the artistry involved in what he was doing, the accounts he was shifting around, the backdated trails he was designing. Paeans to the myriad different ways he could frame Rose for all kinds of embezzlement and malfeasance.

She turned to him, keeping one eye always on the door. “Well?”

“I can do this.” He pushed back from the desk, put his hands behind his head, tapped his fingers rapidly against the back of his skull in a habit Ariadne knew well.

“So? What are you waiting for?”

“I wanted to make sure I could. I was pretty sure, but now I know it. Which means that this would really be serious stuff. Maybe if you told me a little more about who this Mister Rose is, and why we’re doing this to him.”

“He hurts people,” she said at length. “He’s powerful and uses his power to hurt others. To hurt me. Do you really need to know more than that?”

“If he’s that bad, then surely he’s left a trail. We don’t have to make anything up; we can use what he’s done to hoist him on—”

“Andrei, we don’t have time! Isn’t what I told you enough?”

Ariadne ran her hand back over her forehead, through her hair. This was just like Andrei. Just the fact that she wanted or needed something was never enough. There had to be some greater good, some reason he deemed rational.

Andrei’s fingers tapped his chair’s arms with increasing force. He was caught in some internal loop, trying to sort out which ends justified which means. Ariadne glanced yet

again at the door and was not reassured by the fact that she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Their luck wouldn't hold forever.

Ariadne leaned in, dangling over Andrei, her hair ensconcing them both in a private curtain. "Andrei," she said, "I need this. You said you wanted to help. If you do this, you are quite literally saving my life." She stared into his eyes with yearning that was by no means false.

Andrei spoke into the darkness she had created. "Okay."

"Okay?" Ariadne couldn't help but sound surprised.

"Okay," he said, and she pulled away, let him draw his chair up close to the computer again. "You know—" Andrei began typing again "—this guy I work with at Ronnie Cab, he once stole twenty bucks from the till. He's an illegal, and he's got four children at home. But Ronnie fired him, then called the cops and told them about his status. Four children! No mercy.

"Now here's this Rose. He's actually hurt people, but he's got a ten-million-dollar portfolio. Is any cop coming after him? Is he getting any pink slips from his bosses? Is Homeland Security knocking on *his* door?"

"No," Ariadne said, shaking her head, knowing her role. "It's not right."

"Hell, no."

Ariadne watched as icons flew across the screen, hourglasses twirled, flitting and dancing beneath the all-seeing eyes of Andrei reflected in the glass, some manic God laying down righteous retribution.

"There we go." He clapped his hands together, undaunted by the noise it made.

"That's it?"

"That's it," Andrei beamed. "This Rose guy, he'd better run. Thanks to what I did, right now he makes those guys from Enron look like Mother Teresa."

"What did you do?"

"Made it look like he swiped two million from his company and then cashed out."

Two million? Would that be enough to distract the Invictus Council?

"Order him plane tickets," Ariadne said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Someplace far."

"Sure, I can do that, but don't you want his bosses to come looking for him here?"

"No!"

Andrei stared at her, a realization dawning.

"You ... you *don't* want them to come looking for him."

She shook her head.

"Ah. You, um ... you didn't—"

"You promised no questions." Ariadne lowered her voice. "You saw what he did to me two nights ago."

"My God," Andrei whispered. "That was him? Personally?"

The lie came easily enough. "Yes."

He reached out, gripped her hand. “Ari, whatever you did, I’m sure you had no other choice.” She nodded.

“I’m sorry I hesitated. I didn’t realize what this was about. It sounds as if whatever we do, it’s not going to matter to him. That he’s, ah, beyond caring.”

“Please. Let’s stop talking about it.”

Andrei executed the final commands.

“Is it done?”

“It’s done.”

Ariadne stared at him, saw the concern in his eyes. “Thank you.”

“How can you even think I’d have done otherwise? I mean, once I knew the whole thing.”

“Of course.” She took his hand. “Let’s go. Now.”

As they left the building, Ariadne allowed relief to seep slowly through her. The political battle had been won. Just like that. With keystrokes. Without Bourne.

She pumped a fist in the air.

Then she stared at it as it hung there, as if the limb belonged to someone else. In all her battles, in all her victories, she hadn’t ever made a joyful gesture like that.

Andrei looked at her, smiled broadly. “I’d forgotten that we used to make a pretty good team.”

Ariadne bit her lip and nodded.

“So, ah—” Andrei shifted, hands in his pockets “—is that it? Mission accomplished, so long? Or do we get to see each other again? Because I’d like that,” he said before she could even fully open her mouth to answer. “I mean, if it’s okay for you. If it’s safe. If you need to leave town or something, I’ll understand.”

Ariadne stared at him. He was giving her an out, right here. Her business consultation was over, and now she had the perfect excuse never to see him again. She didn’t even have to say a word. She could just turn and walk away.

It was more than just an out. It was a chance to avenge herself for his killing blow a decade ago. Back in the motel, the night of the golem fight, she had been weak and confused. She’d been unable to find the strength to repay him, with sword or claws, for what he had done to her. This time, the Silent Knife needed no other weapon than a word. One syllable; two letters: *No*.

She could say it, savor the expression on his face. But would it be one of heartbreak, like hers had been ten years past, or merely mild disappointment? What kind of prize would that be?

And then, to walk away. To lose this pounding feeling inside her, as if blood were still rushing around inside. Tonight she had felt nervous. She had felt triumphant. God, there had even been tears rolling down her cheeks at one point.

Andrei was different now. And he could still prove useful. The war wasn’t over yet.

Ariadne smirked. “I wouldn’t be so sure you won’t see me again.”

Andrei’s face began to blossom with anticipation, and Ariadne turned her back on him, to stop herself from leaping into his arms. She shouted commands to her limbs to keep walking, all the way back to Eagle Hill, the half-remembered tune in her mind now transformed into a rollicking symphony.

Chapter Seventeen

“So get this: The guy eats the freakin’ eyeballs. In tartar sauce! Freakin’ *tartar* sauce.”

Ariadne tried to tune Po-Mo out, his jeers and the hip hop blaring on the old boombox he had stolen from somewhere. She glanced at her watch for the fifth time.

“He’s got his mouth full of, like, this white foam. Hey, you think they put some kinda extra stuff in to make it look, you know, grosser for the cameras?”

Ariadne shrugged impassively as they walked down Broadway in East Cambridge. Like most streets in the winter, in this city devoid of late-night dining, it was deserted at 2:00 A.M.

“I bet they do. So all this loser has to do is get it down his throat without barfing, and he wins like, I don’t know, like a million freakin’ dollars. And his eyes are bulging and his mouth’s puffin’ out.”

Ariadne ignored Po-Mo’s pantomimed reenactment.

“And then, like, as the clock’s *just* about to hit zero, he spews. All over the studio audience. It was the freakin’ *bomb!*”

There was no sign of any trouble. From Roarke. From the Council. There had been no sign for days. The tide of the war seemed to have turned at last.

As Ariadne had hoped, the Invictus Council had been silent on the matter of Rose’s disappearance. Ariadne knew she and Andrei were not the only ones deserving of congratulations for political skill. Liliane was meeting with the local wizards every night, it seemed. They came in threes and fours, dressed to the nines.

One time, Marie was among them. The blue streak in the hair, the too-chic glasses, the mischievous twinkle in the eye ... it was definitely the girl who had saved her from Silas’s hound by the riverside. Ariadne dimly remembered her words, her curiosity, her comments about Ariadne—what was it: hiding her aura? If Marie recognized her, though, she made no show of it. Maybe all Kindred looked alike to her.

Ariadne caught snatches of the wizards’ conversations. They talked an awful lot about arrows and veils, it seemed. And fixing the roof with a silver ladder, or something like that. They always arrived looking angry and concerned. They always left looking satisfied, even Marie, carrying armfuls of books or statuettes.

Scrying spells, Archibald's Ravens, Ariadne's gambit with Andrei. New Jerusalem had many brave defenders, keeping the eyes of the mortals away from the war as it wound down. Leaving Ariadne free to do what she did best.

"One second, man. One more second, and he woulda been gold, but, naw, he loses it. Doughboy, he always says those shows are scripted, but me, I say you can't *write* that shit. Some people, man, they're just determined to self-destruct, y'know?"

It took Ariadne a moment to realize Po-Mo had paused in his logorrhea.

"We need to push our patrols beyond the city proper," she said. "Roarke's home base is gone. He obviously learned he can't stab into East Boston anymore, or we'll cut him down. He's not stupid enough to disobey the wizards' warnings about downtown and those troops of his we found in Roxbury were staked to fenceposts by the time we got there, so some wizard or other obviously won't let him operate out of there. The only consistent places we've engaged with him have been in the Kendall area, so he's got to either have another base there somewhere, or he's building one."

"Hey, you're the boss," said Po-Mo. They began their trek across the Longfellow Bridge.

What little remained of Roarke's forces were ghouled humans and a handful of neonates, freshly embraced Kindred so confident in their own newfound strength as vampires that they did not stop to think tactically. Their fighting styles were slow, ponderous, sloppy, and Ariadne never gave them a chance to learn better. The war was swiftly becoming a series of search-and-destroy missions that did not require her constant hand.

So she had begun meeting with Andrei at the Fresh Pond Motel, at restaurants, at any location Ariadne could think of that seemed far from the war zone that Andrei didn't even know existed. As long as she was conscious to always "happen" to drape something over the mirrors in Andrei's room, the whole thing was easy. Whenever they were out in public, Ariadne half-expected the pedestrians of Boston's busy streets to stop in their tracks and point, stare, run away, or call for help. But their eyes, when they truly saw her at all, told them only what they wanted to see: She was just a college-age girl out with her boyfriend. If anything, Andrei drew more attention, the critical or jealous stares of his agemates assessing how this disheveled-looking guy was robbing the cradle.

Their best conversations came when she would ask him, in veiled terms, for political advice. How to get people to part with information by means other than physical intimidation.

"You've got to make your bosses feel as if your ideas came from them," he told her one night, pushing aside his pile of papers to make room for her to sit atop his desk. "Remind them of the times they did things for you, however small. They'll want to keep doing things for you. It's about their sense of self."

As much as it had galled her to begin expressing gratitude to Silas at war council sessions, the confusion in the elder's eyes was almost worth it. Soon enough, he was agreeing to "his" war plans that Ariadne had drafted. Maybe her pride suffered a bit, but it certainly was nice to not hear Silas's biting critiques at every briefing.

"Build coalitions," Andrei told her, and she actually took notes on a small steno pad, as if she were back in college. "Find like-minded individuals and get them on your side until you achieve critical mass."

Of course, the Prince's Hand needed no more than to ask and the Kindred in her court should obey. But many were the elders, still jealous and bitter over Ariadne's role, who

would find ways to lose track of a request Ariadne made, or delegate it and blame its failure on incompetent minions. But Ariadne found that winning over just one or two elders to her agenda—by means, of course, of making them think the idea was theirs—was often all she needed to make her ideas start to seem like inevitabilities.

These tactics were new toys that thrilled her as she tried them out ... or, at least, that thrilled her by the time she got to Andrei's room to talk about it. That the reaction was delayed didn't diminish its value. Did it?

Po-Mo's voice cut through her thoughts again. "So, what d'you think?"

"About what?"

"About what I said. About some people."

"I've never watched *Fear Challenge*."

"It's *Fear Brigade*," he said. Then he absent-mindedly brought his hand up to his chest, as if remembering the wound she had made him self-inflict at their first meeting. "Ah, sorry, boss. I forget sometimes that you old Licks, you don't know the new shows and all that."

Ariadne snorted. *Old*.

Po-Mo relaxed visibly. The Silent Knife had been in an increasingly good mood these nights, which opened up so many delicious possibilities.

They walked down streets with only letters for names, past signs for the Galleria Mall and the Kendall Square Cinema, approaching the warehouse district.

"You gotta wonder 'bout the people who go on those shows," Po-Mo said again. "They get, like, blinded, you know? They try an' keep their eyes on the prize, but they lose sight of what really matters."

"Stop philosophizing. We're out here to fight."

Mercifully, their route led them into an ambush.

The next few minutes passed in a flurry of blades and bludgeons. This squad of Roarke's minions was composed of mere ghouls, strong enough to bandy blows with Kindred but inescapably mortal. One of them carried a heavy silver canister on his back, from which a tube snaked all the way out to a nozzle in his hand. He raised it with a gleam in his eye, fingers twitching in anticipation.

To Ariadne's senses, he moved like a figure underwater. She paused just long enough to let hope build a home in his eyes, to let him think he had the drop on her. She allowed time for the germination of whatever dreams might have taken root in his mind, whatever ambitions he might have imagined himself fulfilling by killing her.

Then she swung her sword, cut the vital tie between nozzle and backpack. He pressed the trigger, only to see it spark uselessly, deprived of fuel. She allowed another moment for his surprise and frustration to turn to panic. Only then did she gut him.

Ariadne did not smile. The battle, the slaughter, was old poetry to her.

Po-Mo, beside her, reveled in the newness of each stanza. He danced in and out of the mortals' slow-moving limbs, wasted precious time with taunts and jeers. He twisted arms, jabbed out eyes, and broke teeth, cackling all the while. There was art in what he did, Ariadne had to admit, but it was the art of a child splattering paint.

For a moment she envisioned what Andrei would think if he saw this scene. For the first time in years, she shuddered on the battlefield.

Gunfire beckoned from several blocks away.

Ariadne cursed. “That’ll bring the police. Time to end this, now.”

She finished off the rest of their opponents in a flurry of sword strokes, much to Po-Mo’s annoyance, and beckoned him to follow her. They clambered over fences and around alleyways to find a battle already joined.

Doughboy and another of Liliane’s soldiers were chasing what appeared to be a twelve-year-old girl. Their quarry ran right into Ariadne’s path, and Ariadne paused for a moment, hand on her sword. She blinked. The girl’s face had taken on the visage of Cassie, Andrei’s daughter. By the time she recognized the Beast on her, Ariadne was staring right into the barrel of the gun gripped in the small Kindred’s hand.

Po-Mo threw himself in front of her, taking a bullet in the process. He and the child-vampire went down in a tangle. After a brief flailing of limbs, Po-Mo emerged on top, his hands clasped around her neck.

Police sirens shouted in the night and grew closer. As one, Ariadne’s forces scattered into the darkness. All but Po-Mo. He was still grappling with the girl.

Ariadne shook the cobwebs out of her brain and, with a swift sword swipe, decapitated Po-Mo’s foe. The child-vampire’s nails scraped uselessly across Po-Mo’s neck. Her hands spasmed before falling down to the ground.

“Damn, boss—” Po-Mo dusted off his hands “—you don’t let me have no fun at all.”

“We need to go.”

Blue lights flashed into the alleyway. Ariadne leapt over a fence.

Po-Mo remained, scooping up large handfuls of clotted earth and gore as his victim began decomposing. He was pocketing them.

Ariadne stopped in her flight, called back over her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Just makin’ sure.”

“Making sure of what?”

The police cruiser rolled into the alleyway. Warnings were shouted. Po-Mo turned and leapt over the fence, gunshots ringing out behind him. It took him and Ariadne twenty minutes of madcap flight before they were confident they had lost their pursuers.

“What the hell were you up to back there?” Ariadne demanded as the team reassembled at the rendezvous point. “You want to give the Council a reason to send someone else after us?”

Doughboy, also bearing a small pile of remains in his hands, spoke up. “We gotta scatter these. Roarke can use magic to bring his soldiers back to unlife, even if they’ve been dusted. The only way around it is to steal a hunk of them and scatter it.”

Ariadne shook her head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it ain’t. I swear, that little kid we fought tonight was the same one I iced three nights ago. Unless Roarke’s embracing twins—”

“We found more of that black ash, too,” someone else said. “Do *you* know what it is?”

“Stop being stupid,” said Ariadne. “Whatever the ash is, whatever Roarke’s so-called magic is, it hasn’t done him much good so far, has it?”

A nervous silence followed. Ariadne watched a cluster of ants crawling over the carcass of a dead squirrel.

Po-Mo finally spoke. “Only one problem with this war: All the good shows are on at night, so I gotta miss ’em.”

Doughboy and the others laughed, a macho poise to cover the fear that all of them could recognize so easily. Only Ariadne radiated none of it, and they deferred to her, respected her for it, mistook it for iron courage.

• • • • •

“Why won’t you ever meet me in the daytime? Do you turn into a pumpkin or something?”

Ariadne, sitting on the edge of Andrei’s motel room bed, dug her fingernails into her palms.

“You’re married. Is that it?”

Ariadne refused to meet his gaze. In the past, this would be the point where he exploded into a frustrated rage. But this new Andrei just let loose a long sigh and softened.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I don’t want to push you too fast. It’s just you’ve told me so little. I don’t know if you’re only here because you need my business advice or—”

“I want to see you,” Ariadne said without hesitation. “Really, honestly, it’s all I have to look forward to these days. You have to believe me when I say this is all I care about in my life.”

“I’d like to hear more about that life.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she told the floor.

“Try me.”

Ariadne turned to him. “Dre, you had all these big ideas in college. You were going to save the world. Well, the job I have ... it’s supposed to be like that, too. I think it is, for some people. For my boss, anyway. It used to be for me. I was really, really good. I still am. Knowing that used to be enough. But now, I just ... I just don’t feel it anymore. Not that I haven’t tried.”

“As it turned out, my job wasn’t all it was cracked up to be either,” said Andrei. “No, that’s not true. We helped a lot of people who really needed it. There was some rot in the middle of it all, but that didn’t change the fact...”

He seemed to run out of steam midsentence. Almost by accident he had taken Ariadne’s hand, but his grip on her fingers began to loosen. She tightened her grip to make up for it.

“Dre, please. Let’s stop asking questions for a while. Go with the flow.”

God bless the flow. It swept her along, through meals she couldn’t eat, songs on the radio she didn’t recognize, arms that held her whose warmth she was almost, almost sure she felt.

Andrei’s motel room centered her, the way seeing Silas’s paintings in the safehouse foyer used to before he had taken them away to replace the ones Roarke’s men had burned. She always knew there would be toilet paper on the roll, a stack of tissues in the box, a filled pitcher of filtered icewater. Even though her body required none of it, her mind, it seemed, required knowledge that it was there. The bareness of her cell in Liliane’s sanctum now seemed unbearable.

If only he didn’t have those damned pictures of Cassie. The ringlets of hair, the playful smile, the dopey panda eyes that seemed to mock Ariadne from all corners of the room.

From within those photo frames came glimpses of Andrei's world, complete with people who loved him—a world in which Ariadne could never take part.

Ariadne began pacing around the room, opening up the plastic storage bins that contained Andrei's papers and rifling through them with impunity. Her chest seized when she came upon a rolled-up canvas.

"You ... you saved it."

Andrei craned over her to look, and she could suddenly smell the salt and sand of a remembered ocean:

It has been an age since she's painted anything, what with exams to study for and final projects requiring hollow essays that miss the point of what college is supposed to be about. So Ariadne jumped at the chance to paint his portrait as a birthday present, with their favorite beach as the backdrop.

She tries to capture the jutting chin, the pride in his bearing, the pent-up energy struggling to burst free around every line and tendon and muscle in his neck. He fidgets something fierce the whole time, muttering about all the studying he has to do, all of the hours they're wasting out there on the sand.

"Christ." Ariadne finally hurls her paintbrush across the towel, where it leaves a stain the color of dried blood. "Can't you just sit and enjoy anything? Look around you—it's beautiful out!"

"Ari, not another one of those 'stop and sniff the flowers' speeches, please. I'll just be quiet, okay?"

"No. Then you'll just be thinking the same negative things. I want you to have fun."

"I had fun. An hour ago. Now you're just milking it."

"Milking what?"

"You'll do anything to delay me going to this conference, won't you?" He says it with a smile that she has learned not to believe.

"Can't you forget about work for two lousy hours?"

"We've been out here for three."

"I'm not watching the clock! Look, do you want this painting or not?"

"I never asked for a portrait."

"Then what?" Ariadne spreads her arms. Overhead, a seagull screeches. "What makes you happy? Just tell me, Andrei, and I'll do it. But don't make me guess, just so you can yell at me because I'm not psychic."

"This isn't just any conference. It's my chance to meet Matt Legatt. Matt Legatt! He's a legend in social technology entrepreneurship. He's the guy who outfitted half of Nigeria's schools with computers—"

"Can't saving the world wait until one portrait's finished?"

"Some of us aren't born with connections. We have to make our own."

"Thank you for the fiftieth reminder."

She turns from him, pounds the sand with her fist. What will it take to get him to see that she's on his side?

At that moment a small child running by drops her ice cream cone and the cloud of seagulls hovering overhead descends in a storm, screaming and biting and clawing for the

meal. Their frenzy kicks up sand and sticks, sends the child running and crying, and makes Ariadne and Andrei dive to protect the paint supplies and their spare clothing.

Ariadne feels like something of a refugee as they scurry to the car, fleeing the scene with the bags slung over her shoulder. As they near the parking lot, they exchange no words, but Andrei seems to have calmed down. She can tell by the glassy look in his eyes that means he has already converted the energy into something useful, some plan for tomorrow. He doesn't even allow himself the luxury of wallowing in his anger. Ariadne doesn't know whether to feel jealousy or pity.

An elderly couple passes by, arm in arm, and Andrei raises the fence post at the edge of the beach and beckons for them to pass through first.

Ariadne can't tell if the old man is crying or if his eyes simply have that watery look. He reaches up a bony arm, removes his checkered hat, and tips it to Andrei. The old woman smiles through thick brown sunglasses at Ariadne.

"My, it's nice to be young," she says sweetly. "It only comes around once, so you two enjoy it, you hear?"

Andrei's voice pulled Ariadne back to the motel room. "Yeah, I saved it," he said. "Sarah wouldn't let me put it up in the house. She was a bit of the jealous type. So it stayed in the basement, and, well, I guess it got swept up when I moved out. I couldn't really bring myself to hang it up—seemed a little arrogant. But I liked what it reminded me of."

The reel of memories running through Ariadne's brain snapped to a halt. The rising tide of her anger froze. "Me?"

"Yeah, I guess," Andrei said. "You. Better times."

"Better times than with Sarah?" Ariadne hadn't wanted to sound juvenile. Who was this person who spoke in her voice whenever she was around Andrei?

Andrei spread his hands in a gesture of equanimity. "Sarah was—is—a good person. She just could never sympathize or understand when I failed. Even when it wasn't my fault. She had these impossible standards for me, and I think going through that made me realize I'd done the same thing to you, way back when. I must have been a right bastard."

"Yeah." Ariadne laughed bitterly. "You kind of were."

Then she reached out, touched his cheek. "But you could also be kind. I haven't seen a lot of that in my life lately."

Andrei shuddered slightly under her touch. He remained still.

"I really like helping you, Ari. It gives me something to look forward to every day. Otherwise, it's just the grind. The two jobs, trying to get my life back on track, two long weeks at a stretch between seeing Cassie. Helping her, helping you ... it's the kind of work I really want to do. Driving a taxi just doesn't compare."

"Gee, high praise." But Ariadne was smiling.

The digital clock on Andrei's desk beeped the hour. Ariadne couldn't bring herself to look at it, refused to see the sky beginning to lighten beyond the shades.

Her hand was still on his cheek. She put the other one there to match it.

"Ariadne?"

She turned and spread out her arms, grasping Andrei in a hug around the waist. Automatically, he folded his own arms around her. He breathed softly into her hair.

“Do you want me?” she whispered into his ear, lips touching his flesh. Then, before he could answer, she added, “Say yes.”

She felt his grip around her tighten, felt his fingers start to cling, as if he were slipping down a mountainside and she were the last outcropping of rock that would prevent his fall. She could feel his breath and heartbeat pick up, could feel the tremors in his muscles.

“Ari, are you sure—?”

She cut off his words with her lips.

The minute their lips touched, he kissed her back with desperate ferocity. She could taste wine on his breath, taste the pungent fish from tonight’s dinner.

He gripped her even tighter, called her name, led them staggering to the bed.

He was furious, forceful, as if all of that bottled up, controlled energy of his had found an outlet. Occasionally, it had been like this back in college, and she had taken pleasure in the helplessness, the sense of being overwhelmed. A safe thrill, for the days when she had no concept of what danger really was.

He moved above her now on the motel bed, which creaked and groaned beneath them. She responded to him in a dream, her hands caressing his back, full of the knowledge that she was the one who could now overwhelm him. She could push in, right at this moment, and crush his rib cage. But of course she couldn’t, any more than she could sprout wings and fly. Or walk out in the daylight.

The sun would be rising at any moment. Andrei lay atop her, shivering.

She slid out from underneath him, threw on her clothes. He stammered questions that she answered only with a swift kiss and then a flight out the door.

Her skin was prickling with small fires as she raced inside Liliane’s sanctum with the sunrise, but the burning felt good. It almost made her feel alive.



Perched atop the Alewife Station parking garage, Bourne stared down through binoculars as Ariadne ran off into the night.

“My mother, rest her soul, always used to say that the good Lord, *and someone else*, is always watching you,” he mumbled to himself.

Then he climbed down the ladder, cursing the ungainly bulk that almost made him lose his footing and plummet to the pavement, and ducked into Silas’s sun-proofed limousine. The ride home was smooth and uneventful.

Chapter Eighteen

Unthinkable!

Ariadne thoughts raged. She had walked in on Po-Mo and his boys gathered in the younger vampire's quarters, arms linked, performing Liliane's unity ritual. Without Liliane. Or anyone else, for that matter. Their blood flowed into a large cast-iron pot.

"What are you doing?"

Ariadne rushed forward, forcing their hands apart one after the other.

"No biggie, boss." Po-Mo laughed, but the expressions on his fellows' faces were anything but mirthful. "Just buildin' a little backup reserve, y'know, in case we need an extra zing in the next battle."

"The whole point of the unity ritual is to benefit and bind the community." Ariadne folded her arms. "We're all united—"

"By God's love and New Jerusalem, yeah yeah," said Doughboy, following it with a snigger.

She turned on him. "You dare to mock the Prince's vision in front of her Hand?"

The others fell silent, even Po-Mo. But Doughboy, still high from the blood, puffed out his chest. "Hey, come on, Ariadne. It's not like you've exactly got your eyes on the prize there, either. How many battles have you actually led us in lately, anyway? Seems like we're the ones workin' our asses off on this New Jerusalem thing."

A millisecond of silence passed.

With a flash of her sword, Ariadne severed first his right hand and, an eyeblink later, his left.

Doughboy's eyes widened. Then his face scrunched as he battled back a scream. Finally, the sound erupted from his mouth and he fell howling to his knees.

Po-Mo laughed and kicked him in the back.

"Ey, what did I tell you about messing with that chickie? No, you had to learn the hard way. Next time, she'll cut off your balls and make you crawl through the sunlight to get 'em back."

Po-Mo was now walking with a veteran's swagger, and his burgeoning flock followed his every move. When he bayed, bloody-mouthed like a lupine at the night skies, they joined him. And the next night, when Doughboy tried to jump Ariadne as she did her regular inventory in the armory, she wondered if it were mere revenge for humiliation or part of some darker ambitions of Po-Mo's.

If so, it was a pretty weak plan. Doughboy's heavy gait betrayed his attempt at stealth, and Ariadne had drawn her sword and thrust it behind her, impaling him even as he charged at her back. She spun and danced with the blade in hand, drawing it in an arc that almost bisected Doughboy's body at the waist.

Then she withdrew the blade, brought it up at ready position by her shoulders.

"Okay," Doughboy coughed, staggering. "Okay, I give up."

"Yes," said Ariadne. She made a swift swipe, and Doughboy's head was gone. His body crumbled to stinking earth moments later.

Doughboy had been an idiot. But Po-Mo wasn't. The war was almost over. Ariadne knew Po-Mo well enough to be certain he wouldn't try anything that directly stupid until Roarke was taken care of once and for all. But once that happened, would the next ambush be his?

She made a note to ask Andrei his advice on the whole situation. Then she paused.

She was asking his advice a lot lately, and giving him so much in return. If she had spent a little more time on the front lines, would Doughboy's challenge have ever occurred?

Ariadne walked down the long red-carpeted hall inside the house on Eagle Hill, approached the large wooden door, had her hand on the knob and a mind full of uneasy thoughts when Liliane's voice rang through the empty hall.

"Daughter."

Ariadne flinched. The Prince had not emerged from her private study in almost a week. She had communicated through agents only, even to Ariadne. To suddenly hear her, with no warning, was startling enough even without a secret to protect.

Some Kindred took unsuspecting mortal lovers, of course. There was no crime in that. Ariadne hadn't come close to breaching the Masquerade with Andrei. And the war was all but over. Still, the Prince's cold eyes seemed to stare accusations at her even as her blood-red lips formed a smile. Liliane seemed to glide down the hall toward Ariadne, the motion of her feet completely obscured beneath her flowing white gown.

"My lady," Ariadne bowed.

"Does the war go so well that we can afford to diminish our own ranks?"

Ariadne began to shiver in dread, remembering the pile of goo that had once been Doughboy, but Liliane waved her delicate hand dismissively, white handkerchief gripped daintily inside.

"Have no fear. We are not truly angry at that whelp's destruction. He raised a hand to you in a time of war, and you did only what we have taught you to do. Finding you weak, solitary, sire-less those few years ago, what else could we do but ensure you developed the skills with which to protect yourself?"

Ariadne remained bowed, ostensibly in respect and deference, secretly in shame. However painful the Prince's lessons were, she had taught Ariadne how to survive this waking nightmare. She yearned to open up to Liliane about Andrei, to rest in the lap of the all-consuming love of her Prince and have her erase the pain.

Ariadne took a step forward, actually opened her mouth, before her mind seized control again. No. She would not ask for help. Even Po-Mo knew enough to let his disciples try, and fail, on their own. The surest way to reward the Prince's trust was to handle Andrei herself.

She only wished she knew how.

If Liliane was aware of this struggle inside her Hand's mind, she gave no sign of it. Instead, she beckoned for Ariadne to follow her back through the corridors, until they found a secluded alcove.

"Daughter," Liliane whispered. "We would not speak of this to the others, but you deserve to know. If the war continues much longer, we will not make the same mistake one foolish mortal prioress once made in ignoring the warning signs."

"My lady," said Ariadne, confused, "the war is almost won."

"But the peace is almost lost." Liliane's smile grew thinner. "Archibald is destroyed." Ariadne blinked. "When? How?"

"His fellow Ravens found his sanctuary ravaged, and only a pile of black ash to attest to his presence. Roarke has hit us in the worst possible place."

"That's impossible!" Ariadne had posted extra security around Archibald the moment the war began. Roarke had to be nearly helpless at this point. Ariadne stopped herself before she said all of this out loud. The Prince detested excuses.

Instead, she asked tactical questions: How many attackers? With what weapons? The Prince's answers reassured Ariadne that at least the entire attacking party had been destroyed. It had been a suicide mission.

Ariadne ran the numbers in her head. "Then that's it. The end of Roarke's army. Other than Roarke himself, the rebellion is over." Archibald was destroyed, and that was a tragedy, but Roarke was now alone.

Then Ariadne felt a chill.

"Wait," she whispered, the realization finally sinking in. Roarke's goal had never been to destroy Liliane, had it? It was to cause chaos, break the Masquerade. Then others would move in to do the job of destroying the Prince for him.

"No ..."

"Yes," the Prince said heavily. "None of the local Ravens have Archibald's skill. All Roarke need do now is draw us into breaking the Masquerade, which sooner or later he will force us to do. We will have no cover. Whether it be the kine, the Invictus Council, or the wizards, they all have their dreams to protect as well. Sooner or later, no shadow will be long enough to hide us. We must regroup and build again."

Ariadne couldn't believe her ears. Even with their ranks thinned by the war, Liliane's demesne hosted a population of seventeen Kindred and twice that many ghoulded servants. What other Prince in his right mind would freely welcome such an influx into his domain? What unclaimed city existed that could support so many vampires?

When she voiced her concerns, Liliane replied, "Your questions are wise ones. You yourself should have gained enough wisdom to know the answers."

Ariadne swallowed hard. All two-dozen of them wouldn't be making the trip. Liliane would pick a select handful, flee, and leave the others to die at the hands of Roarke, or the mages, or the Council.

"Be thou not afraid." Liliane stroked Ariadne's hair. "We do not blame you for this. You have fought the war admirably and remain high in our esteem. At any new home we build, you shall be present to guard its gates."

Ariadne turned from the Prince, buried her face in her hands. This was all her fault. Andrei had been a distraction at the worst possible time. She had thought she was on top

of the war, hadn't realized that even as she congratulated herself on winning each skirmish, she was fighting on the wrong front.

But Ariadne decided then and there that she would never make such a mistake a second time. If Liliane indeed moved her court, if she indeed took Ariadne with her, then Ariadne would never see Andrei again.

Chapter Nineteen

Ariadne watched Andrei's naked body through the frosted glass of the motel shower. The pinkish hues were beautiful, like the impressionist paintings Silas kept.

Her foot connected with a small stuffed rabbit. Cassie's toy. Sighing, Ariadne pulled her pants back on. By the time Andrei emerged, she was fully dressed.

"Going already?" He sighed. "Is it too much to ask that once, just once, you stay?"

Ariadne nodded silently.

"Can I at least know a little bit about who he is? I mean, I've told you everything about Sarah. About Cassie. This weekend I'll be seeing her again. Maybe you'd like to meet her? You could come out. I could introduce you as one of Daddy's friends—"

Ariadne buried her face in her hands. Andrei drew near. He wrapped her in his arms, and for a few moments, everything was bounded, contained.

"I've screwed up, Dre." She spoke into his shoulder. "Horribly."

"What do you mean?"

"My job. The person I owe everything to. I failed her."

"What do you mean?"

Ariadne tried, as best she could while obscuring the details of the Kindred's world, to explain her misguided triumphs, her unexpected failure, the dangers that lurked around the corner. It came spilling out, not in the organized, professional manner of a business consultation, but the fevered, whimpering panic of a college girl. The Silent Knife was gone again, had perhaps been fading more and more with every visit to the Fresh Pond Motel. Ariadne was simply Ariadne, in need, and Andrei was Andrei, holding her hand, stroking her hair.

Andrei started making suggestions, drawing charts and diagrams. The words barely registered, drowned out by the comforting tone in which he spoke them. Confidence. Reassurance. Ariadne wrapped herself in it, sat back on the bed and listened. Everything was going to be all right.

Ariadne remained rapt until Andrei reached his conclusion.

"You need to leave."

"W-What?" A burst of cold water had fallen on her.

“Leave this woman. Your boss. She’s got you all out of sorts. This relationship you two have, it doesn’t sound healthy. She’s moving her operations? Good. Don’t go with her.”

“I can’t abandon her!”

“Why the hell not?”

Ariadne now held her arms tightly around herself. “She’s ... she’s a great woman, Dre. A leader. A visionary. I owe everything to her.”

Something in Ariadne’s fervor made Andrei bite down his first reply. Remarkably, he stood quiet, listening.

“She was kind to me, at a time when no one else was. I would have died without her guidance.” Ariadne swallowed. “She’s hurt me at times. Terribly. But it was for my own good, I think. She has this mission. This dream.”

“I thought you said you had been losing faith in that dream.”

“Oh, I don’t even know anymore! Whenever I’m here with you, thinking about the rest of my life is like trying to reconstruct a sandcastle after the tide’s come in.”

“Ariadne—” Andrei moved back in “—this sounds like a cult. It really does. You’re way too smart to be taken in by something like this.”

“She needs me—now, of all times. I failed her, when I owe her so much!”

“What? What precisely do you owe her?”

Ariadne opened her mouth. At this point, it was not even the Masquerade keeping her silent. It was the challenge of explaining the pride in what she had become, in her skills, her title, her reputation, now, when it all had melted away in Andrei’s presence, when it hid and refused to be found.

Instead Ariadne growled, feeling the reins of the Beast slip a bit. Andrei recoiled. He backed into the bathroom door, hitting his head. Ariadne moved to comfort him before stopping herself.

Rubbing his head, he repeated his command. “You need to leave this woman. Regardless of what you think you owe her.”

He stared into her eyes with the zeal of the newly baptized. “Look, I know it must seem impossible, to break out of a routine, to transcend the rules you’ve made for yourself. But I had rules like you wouldn’t believe. Thousands of them. You remember. And life fell apart anyway. There are good rules and there are bad rules, and the bad rules are just paper. We can rip them up any time we want to.”

Ariadne tore at the cobwebs that kept clouding her mind. “You have no idea.”

“I’m sure it must seem impossible, but—”

“You have no *idea* what I went through after you broke us up. No idea what kind ... of how I ... of how everything ... she was there for me! She was the only one there for me! Where the hell were you? Where in God’s name were you, Dre?”

“Look, I’m sorry!” Andrei spread his arms, voice rising to match hers. “I am. I really am. I was a stupid kid. I think I’ve paid for my mistakes, don’t you agree?” He gestured to the motel room all around him.

“But seeing you again, being with you again ... it’s like that missing piece is back. I’ve bent the rules. I’ve moved around taxi shifts, given my freelance jobs half the effort I should, and what do you know, the world didn’t fall apart. In fact, it got better. I’ve been

so happy when you come to visit, Ari. However horrible your life seems to be right now, you look happier, too. Tell me I'm wrong."

Ariadne couldn't speak a word.

"We have to put the past behind us, Ari. Both of us. Or it's going to kill us. It's going to drive us right into the ground. We have to move forward. We're strong enough now. Both of us have seen terrible things and felt terrible pain and we're still here."

Ariadne stared in disbelief. There was little she could do but watch Andrei place his hands, like a preacher about to perform a baptism, on her shoulders.

"I've got enough for first, last, and security on an apartment. It's far from the city, out in the middle of nowhere, but what does that mean when you're telecommuting? It's close enough that I could still bring Cassie out. Okay, so I'll lose the Ronnie Cab job, but I figure I can set up a small tech repair business out there. It'll give people an alternative to the big box stores. Personal support, from someone who cares. We can do it together! You're an artist. You can create logos, maybe do web design. I can teach you how. We can live a quiet little life that still makes a difference to the people around us.

"Come with me. Tomorrow night. Don't look back."

Ariadne shook her head, trying to recall what life this was, whether she was alive or dead or undead, whether this was Andrei in the present or the past or some twisted future. She had imagined a life with him once, but now when she tried to pull that picture from her mind's memory box, she found something had smeared the colors and the shapes.

Trade New Jerusalem for an apartment and a family business in a small town? How could she explain her inability to walk in daylight? Her need for blood? How could she protect him, or herself, from any retribution Liliane might dream up?

"I need time to think."

"Don't take too long. It needs to be like ripping off a bandage."

He moved away, began clicking on his laptop. "I'll buy nonrefundable train tickets. That's a sign of my faith in you. Meet me here tomorrow and we'll go to South Station together."

Ariadne tried to even imagine that scenario. All that came to her mind was music.

"Um, Dre?"

"Yeah?"

"This is going to sound silly, but, um ... for weeks, I've been trying to remember this song, and where it came from." She hummed a few bars, did her best to stay on key. "What *is* it?"

Andrei's face darkened in concentration. He was putting his whole self into the task, as he always did. "I can't put my finger on it," he said at last, almost apologetically, "but I'm sure it'll come to me. I'll have it on my iPod for you when you come to meet me on the train, okay?"

They kissed, passionately, briefly. Then Ariadne collected her things and all but ran out the door.



When Ariadne returned to Eagle Hill, she imagined all eyes upon her in the sanctum, but all conversation was, of course, about what had happened to Archibald. Gone were the bacchanalian loungings and conversations about *haute couture* that had once filled

this room. They had been replaced with a circle of acolytes gathered at Po-Mo's feet as he reenacted scenes from the previous night's carnage. Ariadne imagined a raging fire at the center, with Po-Mo dancing, holding a spear high. Then she withdrew into the shadows.

Ariadne walked through the interrogation room where Mister Rose's body had long since turned to earth and stared up at the bronze frieze. She let her eyes roam over Lucifer, a bearded snake with eyes of coal, as he proffered a fruit to Eve's tiny, waiting hand. What did Eve know of temptation? It was only a novelty to her, a break from the routine, from endless, static boredom. Only too late did she realize what was at stake, what she was giving up. She didn't make a real choice, she just flowed with gravity, like a river over the edge of a cliff.

Ariadne walked past the closed door to Liliane's study. She wanted to enter, ask the Prince to retell the story of her own baptism, her rise from the ashes of the first New Jerusalem. But the shame of having let Archibald fall was too great. The Prince still seemed to trust her, but Ariadne knew the extent of her own betrayal.

She returned to her cell, where she sat on her slab for a long, long time. Then she closed the door, opened the floorboard compartment, and stared at the old photo album again. She saw smiling pictures of a girl wearing her face, sitting on benches or dancing across the campus green, in broad daylight. Holding hands with a young, blond man with determination in his eyes.

Liliane was wrong. Ariadne was selfish. The Prince had placed such trust in her, and she had betrayed it, not for some beautiful divine goal, but for Andrei. For someone who had betrayed her and broken her heart.

Was Andrei, was what she felt with him, worth it? He had taken her back, but only now that he had almost nothing else in his life. No one *settled* for the Silent Knife. Ariadne's anger raged, but contained, as always, behind a wall. If it was to have a release, it would be on the nights when she unsheathed her blades in battle. She wouldn't have survived this past decade if she had been given to senseless rage or to self-pity. But lately she had been finding herself perched atop roofs, staring out into the starry black of night, asking silent questions and receiving no answers. What she yearned for most now was a friend.

In ten years, she had never found a trusted ear among Kindred or kine. Comrades such as Hera, mentors such as Liliane, antagonists without end ... but no one to whom she could go for advice, no one to truly listen, without any aims of one day using what she said against her. The closest thing to a friend she had, she realized sickly, had been Bourne, but ever since that night at the bathhouse he had refused to speak to her. At first, she had welcomed the silence, had mocked his sullen, pouty brooding. But now?

In rage, Ariadne hurled the photo album against the wall with such force that the binding broke. Pictures scattered in all directions.

Ariadne buried her face in her hands. Part of her yearned to march back to Liliane's study and lay bare her soul, to beg to be placed on the ant table and slowly devoured. Part of her wanted to storm out into the streets, find and drag Roarke back personally.

Her visions of atonement shattered as quickly as they formed. Even if she somehow found and destroyed Roarke, the damage had been done, hadn't it? Liliane seemed convinced that without Archibald, New Jerusalem's days in East Boston were numbered. The Prince was already making her secret plans to relocate.

Ariadne sighed deeply. Why *not* just leave with Andrei? She didn't deserve Liliane. She didn't deserve a place in New Jerusalem, wherever it ended up being built.

Ariadne gathered up the pictures, stuffed them and the broken-spined album back under the floorboards, and took up her sword. She hesitated again outside Liliane's door, thought of some veiled way of making her goodbyes. But the Prince would know, the moment she saw Ariadne. She couldn't face that.

She returned to her room and carefully placed her sword in the hidden compartment beneath her slab, staring at the blade for long moments before hiding it away from the world.

Finally she left the house and walked out into the night, stalking the streets pregnant with the knowledge that this might be the last time she ever plied these particular paths. A memory bubbled up from the abyss: Her, at age seventeen, being driven through her hometown by her father, off to college and leaving home for the first time. She was watching the same brown and white colonial houses flash past the window in the same order they'd always had, steadfast as the sun in the sky and the giant tree in her backyard. She had been trying to wrap her mind around the idea that she would not see them again for months, terrified and thrilled at the idea that somehow, by the time she returned, she would never see them the same way.

This turned out to be true. Come December she had walked the streets of her hometown like a ghost. Or perhaps only she was real and the rest of her hometown had turned spectral. Storefronts, streetcorners, farms, and people whom she had spent a lifetime seeing every day suddenly seemed less real, less familiar, than the dormitories and classrooms that had surrounded her for three short months. Some changes just un-stuck you permanently from the universe you knew.

Even the prospect of an eternal unlife, it seemed, did nothing to stay this process. Once again, Ariadne was terrified that she would never be able to return, even if she returned in body. Hell or home or both, she knew what she was leaving at Eagle Hill. She tried to think of what she was running toward as she put distance between herself and the sanctum, tried to form visions of a life with Andrei. She could get no further than the image of the two of them seated side by side on the 11:00 P.M. Amtrak train from South Station. It was hardly a beacon, but she followed it along the banks of the river rolling indifferently by, cradling its upside-down city, then up the cracking pavement ramp to the Fresh Pond Motel, itself swiftly becoming one more familiar sight that would soon be abandoned.

That song had returned to plague her thoughts, oppressive in its repetition. *Da da da daaa* ... Whatever doubts she had, Ariadne hoped that just being around Andrei would dispel them. She would feel better, more human, in his arms. At the very least, his embrace would free her from the weighty burden of control over her own decisions.

She knocked on the flimsy teakwood door of the motel room. There was no response, but the television was on. She called his name, but her voice was suddenly so soft that she herself could barely hear it. She tried the knob. It turned. The door opened.

A few more steps. She could feel it happening already, the tearing of the husk of her now-self, the opening of the petals of her old life. She would be clay, which could be shaped and moved without pain.

"Dre, I'm ready." She strode over to the bed where he sat in the dim glow of the television.

She blinked. Something was wrong. Andrei had put on weight, but he was not this bulky. And he never wore a baseball cap. Her eyes and other senses cleared, the mist of her confusion lifting just as the figure turned around.

"Heya, sweetheart," Bourne sneered, an unlit cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth. "Glad to hear you're finally ready, 'cause I've been waiting all night."

Chapter Twenty

Ariadne leapt at Bourne, fangs bared, claws extended.

He was ready. With speed belying his bulk, he seized her arms in mid-charge and redirected her momentum, slamming her into the wall with such force that the plaster dented and flaked.

“You’re losing your edge, kiddo.”

Ariadne shook her head, white paint chips spraying from her hair. Instinctively, she reached to the guitar case that should have been on her back, only to feel her splayed fingers grasp air. Of course, she had left her sword back at the sanctuary. It had seemed so easy at the time, like discarding clothes that no longer fit. Now, she felt as if she were missing a limb.

Bourne moved to the far edge of the room, drew a pistol.

Ariadne crouched on the bed, teeth glistening in the dim light. “You know I could kill you seven different ways before you could pull the trigger.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Bourne’s tone was maddeningly jovial. “The Silent Knife may have gone a little soft and bendy since she decided to spend her time Cleaving, thinking she can play nice little family games with mortals, but I’m sure she’s still too much for fat old Bourne to handle. Still, you do that, and you never find out where I’ve stashed your favorite toy.”

Ariadne tried to keep her face expressionless, and suspected she was failing. So violence wouldn’t solve this situation. Fine. Andrei had been teaching her all sorts of other tactics. She had to think of one, and quickly.

“Fat old Bourne,” she said, “is now threatening Liliane’s Hand. During a time of war. Clear treason, punishable by destruction. Even Silas won’t be able to countermand me.”

“Treason’s kind of like a tree in the forest,” said Bourne. “If no one’s around to see it, is it really there? I may or may not be holding a gun on you. Without a witness, who’s to say?”

“Liliane will believe my word over yours.”

“Probably. Your voice is a lot sexier than mine. But, it happens that I have at my disposal some cold, hard evidence of *your* treason, love. Our commander in chief, during wartime, spending half her nights banging some mortal Lick-stick. And look what happens! We lose Archibald. Now, I’m a pretty slow guy, but I figure that rates a little higher on the treason scale than aiming a gun at the person who failed to do her job.

“As for Liliane, well, we both know she’s shown herself quite capable of turning on treasonous Seneschals. Two for two turn traitor? You ask me, she should just eliminate the position altogether.”

Ariadne stared at him with directionless hatred.

“For Christ’s sake, Ariadne, just sit in the goddamn chair, okay? We’re going to be here a while. You’re tall enough as is, and I don’t feel like straining my neck.”

Ariadne backed her way to the chair, never taking her eyes off Bourne, and sat. In silence, she sliced Bourne into a million pieces with mental swords.

“Whew. Glad to get those preliminaries over. Right. Now, it’s time to play a little game. It’s called twenty questions. I ask, you answer.”

Ariadne kept staring. There was plaster in her hair and an icy rage in her stomach. What would Andrei have her do in this situation?

“Question number one: How long have you been seeing him?”

“Let him go, Bourne. He’s not involved in this.”

“Well, that answers question number five,” Bourne checked off a phantom box with an imaginary pen. “Just how close are you two? I guess the answer is: close.”

He shook his head and clicked his tongue. “What a waste.”

“Excuse me?” Ariadne’s voice was a low hiss, barely audible.

“What a waste.” By now Bourne’s own voice seemed to have lost a little of its jovial quality. “I mean, look at you. The Silent Knife. Sheriff. *Seneschal*. At ten years’ dead. Do you have any idea what you’ve achieved? And you’re going to throw it away for this slob? Who the hell is *he*?”

She remained silent.

“I mean seriously, I just don’t get it. After thirty years living and, I dunno, maybe sixty years dead, I still don’t get it. You’re really, really good at what you do. You actually say what you mean and don’t play stupid games—a habit it looks like you’re actually starting to grow out of, which is a shame, because innocence has a certain charm. And with all your strengths, you decide to waste yourself on someone like him.”

“You don’t know anything about him.”

“Oh, don’t I? I know his name is Andrei Montague, that he’s a stuffed shirt busybody who used to push papers in some office doing something with computers and stock markets. Some kind of crap that helps rich sods get richer without having to work. Now it’s all fallen apart and he’s boo-hoo-hooing, and here you are to stroke his head. Is that the appeal, Ariadne? Playing mommy?”

“Shut up,” she growled. Inside, she was panicking. How long had Bourne been spying on her? How much else did he know? Did he really have Andrei prisoner, or was Andrei heading for the train station right now and this was all some elaborate bluff? The image of Andrei waiting vied with visions of him, bloody and bruised at Bourne’s hands.

“If you’ve hurt him, I’ll destroy you.”

“If you kill me, you’ll never find him. We’ve been over this. Now behave.”

Ariadne clenched her fists uselessly. Bourne had always had the edge on her in these kinds of games. She had to focus, look for an opening.

“You seem awfully determined to bring me down, Bourne. Let’s say you do. The war’s not quite over. Aren’t you worried how you’ll beat Roarke without me? Of course, you could be secretly working for him.”

Bourne opened his mouth to say something, but at her last comment, he stopped and gaped. She imagined he looked like a donkey frozen in mid-bray, and indeed, a moment later he started producing hee-haw noises that rolled the flesh along his belly in great heaving waves. Bourne laughed for half a minute straight before composing himself.

“Oh God. Oh Christ, Ariadne.” He wiped away imaginary tears. “Please, don’t ever change.”

Ariadne felt like knives were raking her flesh. Somehow, his mockery cut worse than his threats. But she had to keep probing.

“Why *do* you care about Andrei and me, then? What do you want from all this?”

“Maybe I get a kick out of playing mommy, too. It’s time someone kicked some sense into you—the hard way, if necessary.”

“Bullshit,” said Ariadne, pressing. “You don’t want to help me. Your own mommy, Silas, just wants a lever to unseat me as Seneschal. Is that it? Just give Andrei back and Silas can have the damned position. Is that what this is all about?”

“Hey, I’m asking the questions here. But yes. And no, as generous as your offer is, Silas isn’t going to rest easy until you’re done away with permanently.”

“Oh. So just let me get this straight: You’re loyal to your sire. Just not your Seneschal. Or your Prince, for that matter. You know, I still haven’t told her how you cut out on the Fresh Pond battle weeks ago, putting all of us at risk, to go on an errand for Silas. Who’s to say that’s not the reason Roarke’s still around today? Maybe if we’d had one more soldier on the ground that night, we could have ended this war then.”

Bourne ground his teeth for a moment, then broke out into a smile.

“Not bad,” he said. “Not bad. As far as threats go, that might actually have worked. But as much as Liliane loves you, she needs Silas. The other elders are all powerless, penniless windbags who fled other courts. Silas actually brings a small fortune with him.”

“He’s not the only source of money out there,” Ariadne countered. “My ‘lick-stick boyfriend,’ as you put it, makes a living out of making rich people richer. I don’t know about you, but when it comes to cash flow, I’m thinking Liliane might prefer a malleable, seduced mortal to a pompous old codger who constantly needs to be appeased. Come to think of it, Andrei and I just might stick around.”

Bourne pursed his lips. “Hmph. You *are* getting better at this.” He shifted. “I suppose it’s something of a gamble. But then, that’s Silas’s call. Mine is but to serve, eh?”

“You have no will of your own?”

“Has it ever crossed your mind, Ariadne, that I might actually *like* the man who sired me?”

Ariadne raised an eyebrow.

“Oh no, of course not. To you, Silas is just a—what, now?—‘pompous old codger.’ He doesn’t dress nearly as nicely as Andie-poo, doesn’t jet-set with the rich and famous, doesn’t have soft blond hair and a dashing, put-it-on-my-credit-card smile. Stick around long enough, kid, and you’ll see that looks fade. Mortals age and lose ’em, and us vamps? Well, soon you start to see that beauty doesn’t count for spit after a while.”

There was feeling in what he said. Ariadne sensed it, could almost smell it. Somehow, she had hit a nerve. She had to push.

“Andrei’s generous,” she said. “You don’t know him at all. He’s always planning to make life better, not just for him but for others.”

"What others? His own darling little broken family, behind the white picket fence?"

"More. Even if it were just his own family that still means he cares about something beyond himself. Which makes him a better man than you."

Bourne's fists clenched.

"You're a cowardly, spineless, fat little man who's been kept alive far longer than he should have," she sneered. "You just do lapdog work for a wizened elder who protects you from all the schoolyard bullies."

"Right. You just keep thinking that."

"Everything's a joke to you," she pressed. "You miss no chance to knock someone down, because then maybe they'll fall a little closer to the ground, where you crawl around, nipping at Silas's feet."

"You don't know a goddamn thing about me!" Bourne cried.

Inside herself, Ariadne cheered.

"You have no *idea* what kind of man I am," Bourne said, trembling, "what kind of life I lived."

"Life? Really? Were you an errand boy during your living days, Bourne? A stoolie? A pimp? A petty thief? Come on now, I'm curious."

Bourne's already puffy face reddened in a paroxysm of rage.

This was more than Andrei's teaching at work. Liliane's tutelage had taught Ariadne all too well about torture, how it wasn't even about the physical pain. It was about *breaking* the other person, and right now Bourne looked close to the breaking point.

"Sounds like you have all the evidence you need against me," she said. "Why ask the questions? Why not just bring the evidence to Liliane now?"

"Maybe I just like playing with my prey before I eat it."

"You're bluffing, Bourne. You're a spineless coward with no hand to play."

"Oh really?" he said. "I might not have a hand, but I have a *finger*."

With that, he plunged his hand into his pocket and returned with a severed digit, red and cakey brown at the stump.

Ariadne had seen plenty of severed limbs. But the thought that this might be Andrei's sent a ripple of fear and disgust through her.

"That could be anyone's finger." She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. "Prove you have him. Take me to him."

"Oh, I'll take you to him. I'll take you to him so you can watch me gut him before your eyes!"

Bourne had lost control. Bourne, who was always removed, detached, above feeling. The pieces started to fall into place. Ariadne finally realized why she was succeeding.

"Gutting a helpless mortal?" Ariadne laughed, laying her cards on the table. "Is that supposed to prove your manhood?"

"What ... what is that supposed to mean?"

"Yes, Bourne, what does all this mean?" Ariadne rose from her seat, walked up to Bourne. "You're not just in this for Silas, are you?"

She leaned in close. “This isn’t just business. This is personal. You ... you’re ...”

She couldn’t even form the words, for the laughs escaping her mouth. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

The more she laughed, the more Bourne seemed to gnash his teeth.

“You are such a bitch, Ariadne,” he whispered. “Such an ungrateful bitch. After all I’ve been trying to do for you.”

“Such as kidnapping the people I care about?”

“It’s for your own good! You can’t even see what’s going on around you.”

“A few moments ago you were praising my abilities. Now I’m an idiot?”

“You’re naïve,” he said. “You don’t understand that you’re being used.”

“Used?”

Before he could even open his mouth, she cut him off. “No. Save it. I don’t want to hear it. I’ve seen the man behind the curtain. Either show me Andrei or start running. I’ll give you a head start before I chase you down, rip off your limbs, and bring your torso back for Liliane to drink from.”

Bourne hissed, his eyes narrowing to snakelike slits.

“You’re playing the wrong game, Ariadne,” he said softly. “But for what it’s worth, I’ll concede you the win. Follow me.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The creeping clouds of mildew in the Fresh Pond Motel's hallways were but shrines in the face of the mecca of decay that was the motel cellar. Bourne led Ariadne through cobwebs and clouds of flaky asbestos that floated down from the pipes above. Their boots slid through the thin layer of grimy water that coated the concrete floor.

She watched Bourne warily, alert for traps or tricks, but he led her straight to a storage room. Several crates were piled against the door.

"Um, a little help hauling these aside?"

Ariadne stood, arms folded.

"Fine, be that way, Princess. Let it never be said that Bourne isn't good for some hard, honest work."

As Bourne freed up the door, Ariadne fought the urge to push past him and tear it down herself. But if this was a trap, Bourne was going in first.

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey," Bourne called out as the door opened with a creak. The small shaft of light it let through revealed Andrei's form bent over a folding chair, slouched in broken-doll posture.

It was him. Ariadne charged past Bourne, pushed him aside, scrambled up to Andrei. His face was bloody and his eyes moved in and out of focus. He murmured something through the dirty towel gag in his mouth. She tore it away, slashed his bonds with her claws.

"I'm here, Andrei. I'm here, darling. It's all right—"

He flinched from her, pushed back, fell off the chair. She reached for him and he skidded backward, eyes wide in terror. He threw an arm up to cover his face, an arm ending in a hand dripping blood ... missing a finger.

Ariadne whipped back around to Bourne, teeth bared.

"I'll kill you, you fat piece of—"

"Maybe." Bourne backed away a step. "Maybe not. See that video tripod in the corner? I wasn't just making snuff films with the retro tech. Andrei said a lot on tape about him and you and what you've been up to. That tape will reach Liliane and all the elders unless I give the word to stop it."

She rushed to the camera, tore it open.

Bourne sighed. “Of course the tape isn’t still in there. And no, it’s not on me, either.”

Ariadne looked to Andrei, then looked to Bourne. Too much was happening at once. This wasn’t neat and clean, like a battle. Until she knew the rules, she couldn’t act. But her blood was screaming for her to leap at someone.

“You said you were doing this to teach me a lesson.”

“Yes.” Bourne drew nearer but kept well out of what he figured to be Ariadne’s striking range. His voice seemed to be shaking; his words fell over one another in a cascade. “You can’t waste yourself on men like him. What’s done is done, of course. No use crying over spilt milk, which’s what I always say.”

“Bourne, spit it out! I’m seconds from killing you no matter what.”

“You need to focus on your priorities!” Bourne shouted, and she felt his spittle land on her face. “If Silas presents Liliane with that tape, he’ll have all the warrant he needs to have you destroyed. You have to come to her yourself, admit it, but shape the story *your* way. You have to do it before Silas gives her his version.”

Ariadne charged him, battered easily past his defensive posture, slammed him up against the wall. She pressed her forehead to his as one hand pinned his gut and the other grabbed his throat. She held him there, squeezing his neck. He gave a token struggle, and Ariadne felt her fangs push out of her jaws and inch, of their own volition, toward his jugular.

She managed a growl, barely able to form words. “Why are you saying this? Whose side are you on?”

“Now,” Bourne coughed, his voice barely a whisper, “you’re finally asking the right questions.”

She eased up the pressure, only a little.

“I’ve been trying to protect you, Ariadne. I’ve been busy, real busy, in the time you’ve been all distracted. I’ve spent a lot of time away from Eagle Hill. Amazing what you can see from a distance. Something’s wrong. Ever asked yourself why you’re winning the battles, but losing the war?”

“We’ve won the war,” she lied. “Roarke’s finished.”

“But so is Liliane. Archie’s gone, right? A pretty Pyrrhic victory if you ask me.”

“Fine. That’s my fault. Happy enough? Want to say ‘I told you so?’”

“Sure. Put a ten-years-dead neonate in charge of a political bramble, and what does *anyone* expect? That’s been my problem all along. Either Liliane’s gone insane in her old age or she’s setting you up for a fall.”

“You’ve always been jealous, Bourne. Liliane’s idea of New Jerusalem, her meritocracy, that allowed me to rise to—”

“Oh, get real! You asked what I was back in my living days? Let’s just say I had all sorts of experience with dreams of a better world, justice and equality and all that jazz. I mulled them over in my head for hours while hauling and packing and toting, read books full of them. I read them at night, holed up in my rack where the bosses wouldn’t see. I marched for them, I got my head bashed in for them, got gas in my lungs for them, and sooner rather than later, gave my life for them, just like I’d always dreamed. And then the good Lord saw fit to give me a postscript after death, just so I could see how wrong me and Uncle Karl had always been.”

“Uncle who?”

“Marx. Karl, not Groucho. Although I think Groucho was the smarter one. Point is, if you want anything like a better world, Silas is the only way that’s ever going to happen. People like Liliane? At best they get cut down. At worst, they’re just selling you a line of shit.”

“Why should I believe a word you’re saying?” She hurled Bourne to the ground. “You’ve never cared about anything but yourself.”

Bourne coughed, staring back up at her from the grimy cement floor. “You think because you’re pretty and can screw pretty mortals, that makes you better than me? You’re fooling yourself. That old life’s gone. The Danse is all that matters, and you’ve got to learn the damned steps before—”

Andrei groaned, and Ariadne turned to see him struggling to rise.

“Get out of my sight, Bourne.”

“The tape—”

“Screw you and your tape. I’ll deal with it later.”

“You’re going to help him?”

“I love him, you fat piece of shit! Do you even understand what that word means?”

Bourne rose, shivering, the flesh of his face trembling as his eyes narrowed.

“Yes. Yes, I know very well what that word means.”

She blinked. A growing shadow of dread rose inside her. Quashing it, she ran to Andrei, cradled him, wiped the blood from his wounds.

“Oh, I barely roughed him up.” Bourne seemed now as if he were standing a galaxy away. “Nothing broken, nothing cut off—’cept one finger. I could have done much worse, you know.”

Andrei murmured some incoherent questions. Ariadne shushed him, kissed him, smoothed his hair. She helped him to his feet, where he joined her in a daze.

She looked up to see Bourne standing there, almost at a loss for what to do. The momentum, the haughtiness, seemed to have fled his body.

“Do you have a car?”

He nodded.

“We’re taking him to a hospital.”

“Why on earth would I help you take him to a—”

“Because I’ll kill you if you don’t and just *take* the damned car, understand me? No matter what Silas will do.”

“You love this guy that much?”

“I hate you that much.”

“It’s one and the same,” he said heavily.

“Either help me or get out of my way.”

Andrei looked from Bourne to her and back, as if he was a child, for whom everything in the world was new, confusing, and equally deserving of attention. His mind had shut down. Ariadne envied him. Hers was racing.

Wordlessly, Bourne led her to the parking lot, held the door open as she laid Andrei’s unresisting body across the back seat. Then she motioned for Bourne to give her the keys. He complied and sat down beside her.

They drove down Fresh Pond Parkway, past the towering housing projects where teens in heavy sweaters and coats played late-night basketball in the gloaming cast by a half-dead floodlight. They drove down Storrow Drive where stubborn ice-fishers had set up shop along the riverbank. The Kindred's empires rose and fell, but the city persevered. Why not? No amount of lion attacks, it seemed, ever convinced gazelles to abandon the savannah. What choice did they have?

"Where are you going?"

"Longwood. The hospitals there are the best."

"You really should take him to Liliane."

She blinked. "Are you out of your mind? Why would I ever consider bringing Andrei there?"

"Because once Silas sees that tape, he'll know everything about Andrei and where to find him. Ironical though it may be, the safest place for that boy of yours now is right by your side."

"I thought you wanted me to give him up," said Ariadne. "Now you want me to keep him safe?"

"Look, I botched this up." Bourne was wringing his hands. "I thought this was going to turn out differently. I thought ..."

"You're such a liar, Bourne, you even confuse yourself. Is that it?"

They were passing Simmons College. The tree-lined canopy of the Riverway darkened their drive.

"Silas sent me on a mission, all right? To find dirt on you, to expose you, to give him an excuse to have you destroyed. I have a hard time refusing his orders. He's my sire. It's a respect thing. Can't you understand that?"

"No, I can't." Acid dripped off Ariadne's words.

"Well, in this case, you're damned lucky your sire took off for the hills after Embracing you. In any case, I have to bring Silas proof of your affair. One way or another, he's going to make me. But I don't ... I don't ..."

He swallowed. "I don't want to see you dusted, okay? So for your sake, play things the way I tell you to."

"She'll kill Andrei the moment he steps inside the sanctuary. Kill him or ghoul him."

"Maybe. Maybe not. This could play out in any number of ways. I can help you."

"You're asking me to trust you?" Ariadne gave a short laugh. "Right. Sure. Look, we're going to the hospital, and that's—"

Something landed hard upon the hood, smacking up against the windshield with a deafening crack. Ariadne lost control of the car, which barreled off the road and between two trees along the Riverway drive. Before she could get her bearings, she heard the screech of metal tearing and felt the cold wind from outside sting her skin.

She just had time to think *someone's torn the door off*, before rough hands hauled her out. She heard Bourne shouting protests, and then blows began raining down on her face and body.

Reacting on instinct she lashed out, trying to unbalance her attacker. They fell into a tangle, one in which Ariadne quickly gained the upper hand. All she could see was the denim of a jacket obscuring her vision, but she could judge that the attacker was male

by feel and by weight, Kindred by strength, inexperienced by his form of attack. Had he known how to truly press his advantage, she would have been done for.

Ariadne threw him off, rose to a crouch, senses searching the area.

Impact. First from one side, then the other. Ariadne twisted and pulled, trained habit guiding her limbs. She kneed one attacker in the groin, slamming the base of her palm into the other's neck. Before either could recover, she had spun, pulled away, kicked one in the base of the spine and sent him flying, face first, to the ground.

Her original attacker approached her from behind, knife in hand. She swiveled, grabbed his weapon, flung him around to use as a shield against her new attacker's thrust. Then she wrenched the knife away, drove it deep into the closest man's skull. Pushing hard, she sent him into the other, knocking both to the ground.

Ariadne had just enough time to wonder whether Bourne had set this trap for her, to wonder from what crevice he had summoned these novitiate thugs, when a new attacker sprang out of the shadows, a blade flashing in his grip.

Ariadne knew swords, and there were two swords in particular she could spot from half a mile away. This was one of them. One of hers. How?

That moment's shock almost cost Ariadne her life as her opponent swung the blade in a clumsy arc, trying to lop off her head. Only his lack of skill with the weapon saved her, and she pressed her advantage, charging into her now off-balance enemy. She freed her blade in one instant and turned it on him the next. His head fell to the floor, and his body slumped in the other direction.

At least, Ariadne thought with the kind of nonchalance that only came in insane moments such as this, *someone's been keeping my katana sharp*.

Her katana. The one she had lost in the subterranean caverns while fighting the golem several weeks ago. Which had to mean—

Properly armed, Ariadne surveyed the scene. Her attackers didn't seem to have reinforcements. She swiveled to watch the car. There was Bourne, struggling with someone.

"Bourne," she cried out, "we need to get out of here!"

"Um, I'm a little busy," Bourne wrenched the baseball bat from the hand of his foe, slamming the butt end of it into the attacker's stomach. He rolled away, hissing. Bourne helped him along his way, flipping him over the car hood.

"Bourne, now! Before—"

It was too late. Ariadne could feel it already. Could feel him. A wind must have kicked up, or there was a crackle of static electricity in the air. Bourne snapped the neck of his dance partner just as the tree limbs parted to admit a towering figure whose eyes blazed red in the night.

"Hello, little Sheriff," said Roarke. "I knew we'd meet again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ariadne felt as if she had jumped off a skyscraper. These were the moments of freefall, wherein she had time to contemplate the inevitable finish with grim detachment. Roarke was alone. He had no posse, no visible soldiers save the ones she and Bourne had already dispatched. But the tree canopy, while browned and yellowed and missing half its leaves, remained thick. It hid them from the world beyond; who knew how many soldiers it could be hiding now?

Ariadne kept trying to look anywhere but at the wreck of the car. If Andrei was still alive in the back seat, she didn't want Roarke getting ideas.

Roarke walked at a leisurely pace out to Ariadne, his feet crunching on the frosty ground. The power that radiated from him hit her like a wavefront announcing his physical presence, casting an invisible shadow over her.

"If'n I remember rightly—" he took off his hat, reshaping it slowly, menacingly against his waist—"last time we met, you were busy tellin' me I was a traitor and I needed to die. Seems like you've grown up a bit since then. Maybe done some foolin' around of your own. The world still seem as black and white to you now?"

Did he know about Andrei? Did anyone *not* know about Andrei?

Roarke's hand reached out tentatively. Ariadne brought her blade to bear behind her, took up the ready posture. "Stay back."

Roarke's deep brown eyes studied her face intently. That was not where his eyes should have been. Ariadne knew she should seize the opportunity, make an attack or a feint so she could flee, or ... something! The rational part of her mind insisted that if Roarke made any threatening move, she could respond in kind. But the rogue Seneschal just kept staring unnervingly at her face.

His voice rumbled gently, "It's a sad thing, Ariadne, when a man's business keeps him from payin' attention to what he should be payin' attention to. I reckon I haven't looked closely at you nearly enough."

"You're getting cocky, Roarke." Ariadne heard Bourne's voice from near the car, where Andrei lay vulnerable. Damn Bourne, drawing attention to the car! Couldn't he do *anything* that didn't hurt her?

Bourne kept talking. "Just 'cause you've scored that hit on Archie, you think Liliane doesn't have your number? You think you're safe coming out here like this?"

Roarke kept his eyes on Ariadne. “Did I hear me the gruntin’ of Silas’s pet pig?”

“Oink oink oink,” Bourne sneered. “Sticks and stones, boyo. Just keep letting those seconds tick by. Any moment now, this place is going to be crawling with our people.”

“A bluff?” Roarke raised an eyebrow. “Land sakes, Bourne, I expected better from you.” A pause. “Actually, I reckon I expected worse. My first guess was you’d beg and offer to spill your guts to keep me from spilling them for you, if you know what I mean.”

Hearing him say it made Ariadne realize that she had thought the same thing.

“You never did give me enough credit,” said Bourne. “But then, I was never a part of your little frat party. Must have failed some test. You know—to ride, you have to be taller than this bar?”

Roarke turned, crossed the grass between him and the car with an easy, mellow strut, as if he were enjoying a lazy spring day on a ranch. Ariadne stayed rooted, watching him. Then, with a move so fast even Ariadne’s eyes couldn’t follow it, Roarke punched Bourne in the gut.

Coughing, Bourne spilled over into Roarke’s arms. As if the portly man weighed nothing, Roarke picked him up and savagely slammed him, spine first, into the car hood. The impact drove Bourne right through the metal into the engine inside. Fluids sprayed everywhere—oil, coolant, blood. If Bourne screamed, the screech of metal hid it.

“Pardon that.” Roarke turned back to Ariadne. “Seems some folk just need to be taught some manners.”

The shattering of metal, the sight of Bourne savagely attacked, snapped Ariadne out of whatever trance she had been in. The battle had to move away from the car, as far away from Andrei as possible.

She jogged forward but to the right, blade flashing, trying to draw Roarke off.

“Oh, darlin’, this again?” Roarke’s voice was easy and light.

Ariadne remembered their last fight, remembered Roarke’s preternatural speed. She approached with caution, keeping as much distance as she could. She had beaten him twice before. She could certainly do it again.

Come on, move in. Take the bait. Follow me.

He remained still. “You ready yet to listen to my side of the story?”

“Roarke,” Ariadne said honestly, “I don’t care what your side of the story is. This war has to end.”

“The war’s over. And in another way, it ain’t even begun yet. I’m tryin’ to prevent it.”

Ariadne heard his words, but the din in her mind kept them from entering. *Move ... away ... from the car.*

“All right.” She backed up, still trying to draw him. “Let’s say I hear you out. Show me a gesture of good faith, too. Send your men away.”

“What men? You done gone and killed my very last ones.”

“I’m supposed to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

Ariadne paused and took in her surroundings, stretching her senses, reading the landscape with her warrior’s skill. The night air was cold and stale, full of car exhaust. There seemed to be no one else lurking, no other minions waiting to support Roarke. Car noises sped by, muffled by

the trees. She hadn't been driving fast enough to leave tire marks to indicate the crash. Unless someone looked very carefully, they could be alone for a very long time.

"Well?"

"No one I can sense."

"No one there at all. Like I said, it's just down to me."

"Good." Ariadne charged forward, blade swinging, dead set on Roarke's neck. The driving arc was perfect, the speed lightning-fast. Even he could not dodge or duck away.

"Stop."

Her sword-arm faltered. She stumbled, off balance, wondering why she had been so hell-bent on striking him a moment ago.

Roarke moved his hand up to the blade, took it in hand, and squeezed. When he removed his hand, the tip was bent in on itself, fused and melted into the beginnings of a small ball.

Ariadne blinked, trying to make sense of it all.

Hand still on Ariadne's sword, Roarke swung a wide backhand. Ariadne finally managed to jar her mind back to the fight just in time to duck. Releasing her grip on her now-useless sword, Ariadne lashed out with a hand to chop Roarke's stomach. He doubled over. Still, her hand felt as if it had smacked iron. A shaking, rattling pain radiated up her arm to her elbow.

She followed up with a kick to his chin that snapped his neck back in a way that would have instantly killed a living man. Roarke staggered, grunting, and Ariadne followed up with another kick to his chest.

The former Seneschal, unshaken, grabbed Ariadne's sore arm and lifted her up by it. She felt the world pull away beneath her, watched a swirl of images pass her eyes. She was flying. Then a terrible impact, explosions in her back and at the base of her skull.

A tree. Had he slammed her into a tree? She managed to stagger forward and collapse to the ground. Her senses failed her. She had no idea how much time passed between that moment and when Roarke was kneeling over her.

"Enough, little Sheriff."

Half-insensate, Ariadne thrust her arms upward, claws extended. Roarke was faster, seizing her wrists, squeezing so hard she lost all feeling in her fingers. She pushed with all her might, kept waiting for the inevitable "give" that never came. She was met only with irresistible force.

"Stop moving."

Just like that, Ariadne's body became a prone statue on the grass. Roarke leaned in over her, knees on top of her thighs, a mountainous weight.

As Ariadne's mind faded away, something else took over. She growled, fangs extended and gnashing. She twisted her waist and stomach muscles uselessly, the Beast in her desperate to rise. Everything bled away—Liliane, Andrei, even who Roarke was—save that he was a predator, and she was a predator, and this was the jungle.

He locked eyes with her: "*Listen* to me, girl."

The word invaded her mind like a rainstorm through a screen door, pouring in past her defenses and cooling her inside.

"I could kill you real easy now. You know that. You've always known that."

The Beast didn't understand the words, but the intentions were clear. Roarke was in control.

"I need you to think again, Ariadne. *Calm.*"

Again, the word was spoken, and so it came into being. Ariadne calmed. The Beast growled in irritation, tucking its tail, licking its wounds and biding its time until it could once again break its leash. Ariadne slowly remembered herself, as if waking from a dream.

"You got guts and a whole lot of fire in your belly, I'll give you that." Roarke's tone relaxed, but his grip on her limbs remained tight, painful, unbreakable. "I wouldn't expect any different. Fact is, I'm proud of you. Times were when I didn't reckon you'd ever survive Liliane's initiation. Yet here you are, a Sheriff."

"Seneschal," Ariadne mumbled defiantly, lips and tongue sluggish, as if trying to speak from deep within a dream.

"Ah, don't be too keen on that title." Roarke's eyes turned downward. "State o' things bein' what they are, you see things as Seneschal that you ain't never wanted to see. That's why I left. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Ariadne gave a tentative test of Roarke's grip. Her arms responded at a tenth their normal speed. It was an effort to remember why she was angry with Roarke in the first place. She listened to see if Bourne was up and about yet, but she couldn't hear anything—sense anything—that would tell her one way or the other.

Fine. She would listen.

"What you've got, girl, it's more than just a mean right hook or a flashy swing of the sword. You've got fire. That's rare in these parts, among folks like us. You wouldn't know it from my dashin' good looks, darlin', but I'm getting nigh on nine score and ten years old. Stick around as long as I have and you see folk just kind of ... sink. Fall in on themselves. Do and say the same thing over and over again, getting more and more 'fraid of anything changing. 'Fraid, no matter how much power they get, to step outside those comfortable little shoes they done built for themselves.

"But you, Ariadne. You still *care*. 'Bout New Jerusalem, 'bout this mortal you've been courtin'. You still try and do things *right*, even if maybe you're startin' to forget *why*. So I'm here to help."

"I don't do things right." Ariadne surprised herself as she spoke. "I just kill people. That's the whole reason I exist." Maybe she had been stupid to think otherwise.

"No. Killin' is all Liliane taught you you were good for. But you can be more. Deep inside, there's a part of you that knows it, that's fightin' tooth and claw to show itself."

I was never brave, Ariadne wanted to say. *I just didn't care if I lived or died*. Except, now, that didn't seem true.

A month ago, before she'd met Andrei again, she wouldn't have cared if Roarke ended her life right here. She wouldn't have sought destruction out, of course, and she would have fought to her last, just like she had been prepared to do the night Roarke first broke away. Hers was but to serve New Jerusalem, with her very existence if necessary. Other than that, her unlife, her final death, simply wouldn't have mattered to her.

But that had changed.

"You're searching," said Roarke. "You're confused an' you're searching. I remember what those days were like. They fade, eventually, once you find a little rut to spin it. Less'n you get really lucky, or unlucky, like I did not too long ago."

"When you turned traitor?"

“Come on, Ariadne. You know now that when some things call out to you, you can’t turn away.”

“So you and Nadine were like me and Andrei? I don’t buy it. I tried to balance it all—Andrei and New Jerusalem. I screwed up, but at least I tried. You and Nadine, you ... you messed around with things you shouldn’t have. You were warned, and when Nadine was destroyed, you took arms against your Prince. We’re nothing alike.”

Ariadne remembered Marie’s words, the night she and the young wizard had met at the banks of the Charles. Marie had said Kindred couldn’t learn magic from any books.

Ariadne’s eyes narrowed. “Just how *did* you learn to do magic, Roarke? Did Nadine and her book really teach you?”

Roarke sighed. For the first time, his gaze wandered away from her.

“How I learned what I learned ain’t important,” he said, his voice suddenly brittle. Recovering, he began again. “Now, Nadine. Can’t say I didn’t care for her. But no, she wouldn’t have been worth doin’ what I did. Much as I miss her, she wasn’t what called me.”

“What called you? Was it the thing that gave you your powers?”

“Stop askin’ how, girl, and focus on the why.”

“Why’s simple. If it wasn’t for love of Nadine, then it was for love of power.”

“Really?” asked Roarke. “If a fellow’s gonna betray his Prince for power, you think he’d end up in a better spot than me. It warn’t love, it warn’t power, and I’d never been noble enough to do anything out of some higher principle. Know what that leaves?”

Ariadne stared daggers at him.

“Fear,” he said softly. “I done what I done because I got scared. I realized if I didn’t nip somethin’ in the bud, I wouldn’t ever be able to stop it.”

Was Ariadne’s brain still rattled by Roarke imposing his will on her? His words weren’t making any sense. And where the hell was Bourne in all of this? Had the coward run off? Had he killed Andrei while she was distracted over here? Ariadne needed to break free. But she still couldn’t move.

Roarke kept speaking. “On some days ... bad days ... I c’n still remember the War between the States. I remember all the fine folk who turned their pretty little necks and kept on pretendin’ all that fiery talk warn’t gonna lead to a whole lotta people dyin’. Maybe if more of Dixie’d really believed it was coming and made some better preparations, things mighta turned out differently.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Forgive an old man’s ramblin’.” Roarke shrugged, and with a hideous *crack* his neck finally snapped back into its proper place from where Ariadne had broken it. “There’re times when I lose track of things. Past ’n’ present, they kind of bleed. Sometimes that’s not so bad a thing. But so long as you can remember your mistakes, you gotta learn from them. Speak up a lot sooner when you see somethin’ that ’frights you. Might cost more in the short run, but save more in the long term.”

“You’re saying this is like the Civil War all over again?”

“In a way. But Liliane’s got something much scarier up her sleeve than Old Dishonest Abe ever dreamed of.”

“It doesn’t matter what Liliane’s plans are. New Jerusalem is worth it.”

“Used t’think that myself,” said Roarke. “Maybe you will, too, even after you see what I saw. But I at least want to give you that choice.”

With that, he finally relaxed his grip, rising slowly off her. Ariadne rolled out from under him, her body sluggish, a pounding ache in her legs and arms. She struggled to rise, to spring up, but her mind was still too addled.

“Here.”

Roarke, after rummaging inside the pockets of his trousers, produced an old brass key with an ornate head, the kind Ariadne had only seen in movies. He tossed it to her. She let it *thunk* to the ground at her feet. She refused to take her eyes off him.

“You go to Liliane’s sanctum. Pull aside the small bookcase. There’s a door behind it. You go there, use this key to get in. An’, yes, you have to use the key—door’s bewitched. Thing won’t break, and all the heavin’ and strainin’ in the world won’t do no good otherwise.”

“You want me to betray my Prince. Outright. Just like you did.”

“Not yet. Just snoop around without her knowin’.”

“I’ve already done enough to harm her, thank you very much.”

“Not nearly. You’ll need to do more. Once you see what’s there, once you look inside yourself and figure out what to do, I’ll know you’re ready.”

“Ready?” Ariadne felt her control returning and pulled herself up to a crouch. “You had me. You could have just destroyed me. Why didn’t you? You can’t possibly expect me to join you.”

“Wouldn’tve thunk it—” Roarke retrieved his hat from where he’d left it on the ground “—but somehow even all these decades o’ bein’ a deader haven’t beaten all the fool’s hope out of me. That’s all I got left, little Sheriff. Fool’s hope. A hope that you’ll open your eyes and make your own decisions.”

“Fool’s hope, and sorcery. Which you still never told me how you manage. You’re asking a lot of me without giving me anything in return.”

“Aside from your pretty head on your shoulders?” Roarke shrugged. “Fine. There’s this, and you can go smoke on it. A long time ago, somethin’ called out to me, offered me a deal. Sounded wonderful at first, but in the end, it didn’t work out like I planned.”

“Devil took your soul, Roarke?” Ariadne said with mock sympathy.

He stared at her, then laughed a thunderous, belly-shaking laugh. “Not quite. More like he would have, ’cept I couldn’t quite keep up my end of the bargain. No fault of my own. And I got some lovely consolation prizes. But they ain’t enough. I need you.”

“Me?”

Roarke nodded. “Without you, I’m gonna lose this one. An’ if I lose, we all lose. You. Me. Every soul, both quick and dead, in these here parts, and who knows where else.”

“You mean when the wizards finally step in? Or the Council? Now that you’ve killed Archibald and forced the matter?”

Roarke replaced his hat on his head. “You’re not gettin’ it, girl, but I don’t fault you. You’re young. Use the key. Use what’s inside you. I can’t say any more or it won’t be no good. I got faith in ya.”

With that, he turned his back on her. Almost any other vampire in the city, even Silas, would have been thought mad to turn his back on the Silent Knife. But Roarke just strode off into the shadows, whistling a sad country melody. The night wind shook the tree branches as he stepped between them. Then his sad whistling faded away.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ariadne stood, dizzy and in pain, staring at the key by her feet. Wordlessly, she picked it up, turned it over briefly in her hands, then put it in her jacket pocket. Retrieving her mangled sword, she walked to the car.

A Bourne-shaped sinkhole dominated the hood, but the man who made it seemed to have completely vanished. Ariadne sniffed the air, but couldn't pick up a trace of Bourne. Which of the many stories he had told her had been the truth? Was he really trying to protect her from Silas out of some bizarre affection for her, or was he at this moment on his way back to his sire with video recording in hand?

One thing at a time. Ariadne looked in on the back seat, found it empty, the door ajar.

She followed the trail of blood and found Andrei huddled in the cold at the base of a tree, still half-insensate.

"Dre." The dread in Ariadne's heart fought to break through the cloud cover of fatigue. "It's all right now. We're going to get you help."

She helped him pull himself up, supported him on her shoulder. She stared at the sword in her other hand. It was beyond repair. She had already declared it lost once, after the golem fight, but to lose it a second time pained her all over again.

And lose it she would have to. Even bent and broken, it would raise too many questions at the hospital. Sighing, she set it inside the car, noting the swiftly decaying bodies of Roarke's last three soldiers. An abandoned, wrecked car with a bent sword inside would raise questions. Ariadne had no idea how well Bourne or Silas had obscured the car's ownership. Archibald knew how to take care of these things, but Archibald was gone.

Ariadne found a book of matches inside the glove box. As she hobbled away with Andrei, she lit one and tossed it onto the upholstery, waiting until she saw the flames begin to spread, then moving well away before the gasoline caught. She had no idea if a forensic specialist could still find identifying marks on a burned-out car, but it was the best she could think of.

The events of the next few hours blurred. Somehow, she brought Andrei to the emergency room at Brigham and Women's. As she paced the blue-and-white waiting area, bright lights stinging her eyes, she watched the faces of the hopeless, the terrified, and the bored. They wrung their hands, shook in drug withdrawal, cradled screaming tod-

dlers, withdrew into their iPods with glazed-over expressions. All the many flavors of the Damned who never even had to taste blood.

Flashes of another, very different hospital overlaid Ariadne's vision:

The waiting room walls lined with designed-to-be-inoffensive photos of various white middle-aged couples standing in front of their gardens, hoes in hand and goony smiles on their faces, some flanked by the occasional child or golden retriever. Ariadne isn't watching; she is sitting with fingers interlaced, rocking back and forth, waiting for the doctor to report on her mother's condition.

Andrei has taken a cab all the way out into the suburbs to be here with her, even though she told him not to. He cradles her in his arms, never judging. She feels more embarrassment than concern when the doctor reports that her mother is okay, that the cuts on her wrists weren't nearly as deep as last time. Andrei doesn't judge, doesn't say a word, just strokes her hair and holds her...

Here, no one paid Ariadne much heed. Hair tousled and matted, clothing stained and torn, pacing a hole in the grimy linoleum floor, Ariadne was just one more lost soul among many.

Her attention snapped to when a gurney slid to a halt alongside her, its steward suddenly called over to deal with another matter. The body beneath the sheet was a young man, *rigor mortis* preserving the tautness of his skin, the set of his jaw. But his skin was scorched with black, festering sores, crumbling to a charcoal-like ash.

Ariadne had seen this before. Hera's body. The urns that Liliane's house-steward had spilled. Archibald.

Looking left and right, Ariadne swooped in to examine the body. The man wasn't Kindred. He was just a normal, run-of-the-mill dead human being. Yet here his body was starting to decompose into the same charcoal dust that she had been seeing throughout the war.

Quickly, Ariadne seized the handles and wheeled the gurney down a hall, dragged the body off and into a stairwell, stuffed it in the nearest trash receptacle. With luck, it would decompose entirely before someone noticed.

It was fortunate that she had been around to dispose of it, but how many other human corpses were out there, turning to black ash, waiting for some idiot mortal to discover them? And why were they turning to black ash to begin with? Was this Roarke's doing? Some wizard's experiment? Without Archibald around, how long before the Masquerade shattered entirely? Maybe Liliane knew about this. Maybe that was why she was so eager to pack up and leave; she wanted out before the storm hit.

But if that were the case, why wouldn't Liliane tell her? Bourne and Roarke had both impugned the Prince's honor, had both accused her of some sort of deception. Ariadne absent-mindedly fingered the key Roarke had given her, took it out to study it.

"Excuse me, miss?"

Ariadne swiveled around, hands raised in a fighting stance. The portly, middle-aged nurse's aide flinched.

"Um, sorry." Ariadne dropped her arms. "Long night."

"For all of us," said the nurse's aide. She smiled, but Ariadne noticed how she kept her distance. "I've been looking everywhere for you. The man you brought just came out of surgery. You can visit him."

Before the nurse could notice the empty gurney inexplicably placed by the stairwell, Ariadne had vanished.

She found Andrei, his right hand in a cast, his eyes surrounded by rings of red and purple but fixed on her as she entered. Ariadne smiled half-heartedly, then checked his chart. It made little sense to her, but one item stood out loud and clear.

“I’m sorry they couldn’t re-attach your finger.”

Andrei stared at her. Stared in fear, in accusation. The dried remnants of a trickle of blood could be seen leading from the bandage on his forehead down to his puffy right eye.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“Ari.” It sounded like a frog croak. “What the hell is going on? Who are these people? The mob? Drug lords?”

“I told you that you didn’t want to know.”

Ariadne was unable to meet his gaze. When she’d brought Andrei in, she’d claimed to be a good Samaritan who’d found him on the street. She wondered what Andrei had told the doctors, if anything. She didn’t want to know.

“I’m sorry,” she said one more time. “For everything. I’ll be going now. You won’t have to see me again.”

Like the drop in one’s stomach when an elevator rises, Ariadne had expected this, but had still not fully prepared herself. She could see his fear written across his features. She thought for a moment she could even smell it, rising above the stench of antiseptis. No, she had to leave. From now on there would only be Liliane, New Jerusalem, the Silent Knife. It had been enough for her before. It would have to be enough again.

“Ari, wait!”

She turned her head, not her body.

Andrei struggled to rise up out of bed, sat dizzily on the edge. “I can’t just leave you on your own like this.”

“Why not?” she said before she could stop herself. “You did before.”

Andrei opened his mouth, then closed it. Ariadne decided to spare him the tedium of creating false apologies.

“Andrei, I understand. It’s dangerous to be around me. You can see that now, obviously. I’ve screwed up yet again.” She drew closer, lowered her voice. The curtains that partitioned off Andrei’s bed weren’t nearly thick enough to block out sound.

“You can’t stay in Boston,” she said in a low voice. “You’d better go to that apartment you mentioned, or even farther. If you stay, someone may try to hurt you to get to me ... and ...”

“Ari.” She could feel his voice sinking into “lecture” mode, even here, amidst what to him *had* to seem like pure insanity. “I’m not going to abandon you. I’ve walked out on too many of my responsibilities.”

“I’m not your responsibility. I ceased being that the day you decided you were done with me.”

Andrei grimaced. It was not the grimace of a child who had swallowed medicine. It was the grimace of an adult, ailing and full of the knowledge that no medicine could help.

“So now we get to it. Okay, fine. Have it out.”

“Have it—what?”

Didn't he realize he had been mauled? That he was missing a finger—a finger that, unlike hers, wouldn't grow back?

"This isn't the best place for this conversation."

"Well, this is where we are." He shrugged, pulling the IV taut as he did so. "I said I'd made a mistake when I left you back in college. I don't know what else you're expecting."

"The mistake was in ever being near me to begin with, Dre. Back in school, you told me I was just an obstacle to your plans. Well, I'm no different now, except this time I'm a deadly obstacle."

"Will you stop it?" he cried out. Ariadne looked around guiltily, but the staff seemed far too busy to notice.

"Look," said Andrei, "is there anything I can say that will make that breakup make sense? I mean, seriously? Are you looking for some kind of closure? Well, you're not going to find it. I learned that a long time ago with Sarah. Shit happens, and you just accept it, and get back on the horse, and ... and ..."

Andrei's breath began to fail him. Blood was seeping out from the bandage again, running into his puffy eye. "At this point, you *are* my plans. You and Cassie. If you're still willing, I'll take you to meet her. We can still do everything like we said. We'll go far, just the three of us, out of the country if we have to, where no one can find us."

"Out of the country?" Ariadne couldn't fight back a bitter, gallows laugh. "With what money? And I lost my passport eons ago. Listen to yourself. You're half-crazy from shock—"

"No," he said, with all of the confidence and firmness that she had swooned over back in college. "No, I'm saner now, at this moment, than I've ever been in my life."

Ariadne opened her mouth to speak, but he interrupted her.

"I spent my whole life working so hard, building something, and the wind knocked it down. Okay. Lesson learned. But I also proved to myself I could do it. I can do it again, I know I can."

"Andrei, I—"

"We're going to be together, Ariadne. Whatever I've got left, I'm going to spend it helping you with this mess you've fallen into. I've already lost everything. Tonight was the final step, the final test. Nothing can hurt me now. We're going to be together."

His eyes started to soften. "If ... if that's what you want, that is."

There it was again. Andrei placing himself in her hands.

He was still trying to save her, but he needed her to agree to the arrangement. It was finally starting to make sense to Ariadne. Liliane's training, becoming the Silent Knife—it had been all Ariadne could cling to in order to stay sane in the world into which she had awakened. She defended New Jerusalem because any other *raison d'être* wouldn't have been sustainable for her. For Andrei, taking care of her was the only center he could find.

The damndest thing was, she wanted it, too.

She felt as if Roarke were back on top of her again, his weight bearing hard upon her limbs, his power gripping her like an invisible squeezing hand.

Ariadne is in college, walking along the grass, hand held in Andrei's, and in that small warm press of flesh resides the anchor that keeps her from floating in all directions at once, from breaking up into a thousand miniature component Ariadnes that all want to drink in life in different ways. She feels the warm rush of the night air invade her lungs, hears the chorus call of the stars, and feels she will shatter from the rush of possibility, from the

beautiful, terrible promise of her burgeoning adulthood ... except for that hand. She cannot imagine how she will find her way without it to steer her.

Is this love, she wonders? Is it weakness? What would it mean to be strong? What terrible responsibilities would it bring?

Ariadne looked down at the hospital floor, centered herself in the present. What would saying “yes” to him mean? She wasn’t the one in need of caretaking. She needed to protect him from those who would use him to hurt her or even Liliane. Tonight, Ariadne hadn’t even been able to protect herself from Roarke. She had never been this helpless before Andrei came around. Even now, when she was so much and he was so little. Or was it the other way around?

Ariadne put her fingers to her temples, walked out from behind the curtains and into the bathroom beside the nurse’s station. Everything was happening so fast, and she couldn’t think when Andrei was nearby.

Dawn was coming soon. Ariadne could feel it in her blood without even looking at the clock. She needed a safe haven, and Eagle Hill was her only real option. When she’d walked out of Liliane’s sanctum earlier this evening, the Prince hadn’t known about her plan to leave with Andrei. But Silas and Bourne clearly knew about Andrei’s existence. They would reveal her to Liliane soon enough. If Ariadne ever wanted to be able to set foot in Eagle Hill again, she would need to show up and defend herself.

Of course, Liliane was planning on evacuating from East Boston.

But even if Liliane was leaving for parts unknown, even if Ariadne was leaving with Andrei, it just made good sense not to burn bridges if she didn’t have to.

Her nails, caressing her scalp, began digging in. Leave with Andrei? She had deceived herself earlier into believing it would be possible, that she could somehow keep her unlife hidden from him. But tonight had shattered that myth. Andrei, for all his bravado, had no idea what he was getting into.

Ariadne opened the door a crack, peeked out at the pain and suffering of the people on their cots. She listened to their groans, smelled their waste and their wounds. It was a strange time to wish she were human again. Then she could run off with Andrei. But she couldn’t become human again. There was one other thing, though, that she could change.

“Andrei.” She pulled the curtain aside, saw his face brighten up at her return. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

She stared him in the eyes. “If you’re serious ... if you’re truly serious, then call me at this number the moment you get out of here.” She wrote it down on his admission bracelet. “Call me and we’ll meet up after nightfall. Back on campus.”

“Campus? Where on campus?”

“You know where.”

“Oh. The covered bridge.”

“The covered bridge.”

Full circle.

Andrei nodded, unhesitatingly. Would he be so confident if he knew what Ariadne was planning?

“You have to trust me from here on in,” she said. “No matter what happens. I have some loose ends to tie up, and you have some healing to do. You have to trust me. Do you understand?”

Of course he didn’t. But he said he did. That was Andrei.

Would he be the same, after the Embrace? After she turned him into the same thing she had become?

Of course not. Ariadne certainly wasn’t the same as she’d once been. But she could not go on like this, with each of them a frozen, twisted reflection of what they used to be, ten years ago, with one another.

Ariadne was going to do this the right way. She would formally petition Liliane, make Andrei a proper child, remove any leverage Bourne or Silas or anyone else would have on her. Then they would leave East Boston together. Either with Liliane, or on their own. She just hoped that Liliane was willing to be her benefactor one last time.

Then she remembered Bourne’s words, and Roarke’s. Each had told her that Liliane wasn’t to be trusted. Roarke’s key had been slowly burning questions into her thoughts all night long, and as she walked out into the night she could no longer ignore them.

She would figure this all out. She was the Silent Knife.

The rising sun began to stretch its rays, mocking her confidence as she ran back to the house on Eagle Hill.

Chapter Twenty-Four

By the following nightfall, the house on Eagle Hill stood as silent as ever—on the outside. Inside and underground, all the fancy furniture had been overturned to make room for ammunition piles. Coats and boots lay scattered everywhere. Motor oil and blood stained the carpeting. Po-Mo and his gang had removed the chandelier and had strung a corpse up instead, mutilated beyond recognition, from which blood still dripped in fits and spurts. Mouths open, they shoved and jockeyed for position, trying to catch the drops, all while the television blared that the night's football game had entered sudden death.

A few of them looked up guiltily as Ariadne left her cell and walked past, but most paid her no notice. Why would they have? Who among them knew about how, last night, she had planned to leave them all forever? Ariadne had pushed aside her slab upon waking to find her sword waiting patiently, as if it had somehow known she wouldn't have been able to leave it. Liliane and New Jerusalem had been the sum of her existence for so long. How foolish to think she could have shucked them off in a single night.

Yet to Po-Mo, standing atop a beer keg and presiding over his court, Liliane seemed now to be only a name. He had not escaped this world, but he had reshaped it to his own liking while Ariadne had been distracted. She pressed her fingers to her temples, a disturbing new habit she had acquired, willing such thoughts to go back into hiding.

She stepped over the unconscious body of one of the house-ghouls. One by one, the servants had been vanishing. She heard some of Po-Mo's thugs boasting about the beating he had given one of them the other day.

The words of a poem came to her, unbidden: "*Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold ... the blood-dimmed tide is loosed ...*"

Ariadne moved toward the center. She knocked on the door to Liliane's study. Hearing no answer, she did what no other Kindred in Eagle Hill would dare to do: open the door and enter.

Liliane's study didn't seem like it belonged in the same house. With the door closed again behind her, Ariadne could not hear the ravings outside. Her eyes could not detect even the slightest smudge in the carpeting or the barest veneer of dust on the books or the artfully placed antiques.

The room with its small library looked innocent enough, fully recovered from the fight with Mr. Rose so many nights ago. Ariadne was tense, combat ready, as she edged over to the tiny bookcase, pulling it aside to find the secret door she half-hoped wouldn't exist. She turned the key she half-hoped wouldn't fit the lock.

A voice inside her warned her of her mistake. Silas was trying to turn Liliane against her, and by snooping around she would only help his plans. But surely the Prince's Hand had free reign of the sanctuary...

The gaslights in the room made even the dull brass of the key sparkle when turned just right. The door, with some resistance, pulled aside to reveal a passage just tall enough for a stooped-over person to move through. Ariadne pocketed the key and tiptoed down a cold stone path through the darkness, her heightened senses only producing a heightened state of paranoia. Liliane was not a forgiving woman. If Ariadne were overstepping her bounds, there would be hell to pay.

Ariadne wondered just how far down this tunnel extended. She walked for long, long minutes the ceiling growing higher, the walls turning from cement to packed earth to carved stone. Every step she took pulled her down, down, deeper into the blackness.

The corridor started to feel cold and musty, a skin-prickling kind of physical cold that Ariadne shouldn't have been able to feel. Then the path dropped away, and Ariadne, so sure-footed, nearly tripped.

Her hands skidded across the wall before she secured herself. Her fingers brushed a light switch. For some reason, Ariadne's senses weren't helping her much. Something about this darkness seemed peculiarly impenetrable. Her hand hovered over the switch, hesitant.

She could sense no heat sources in the room. Still, the switch might send a signal that she was down here. Fortunately, she had prepared for this possibility. Ariadne reached into her pocket and pulled out a small flashlight. Under its beam, parts of the room sprang into sharp relief. Piles of cardboard boxes lay stacked everywhere, caked in cobwebs and reeking of mildew.

Ariadne drew near and reached her free hand out, pausing above the top box. She could still turn around, go back, erase the signs of her presence. She could still just ask Liliane for permission to Embrace Andrei with a relatively clear conscience.

"Be wary of Roarke," Liliane had told her. "He is a great deceiver, and the power of his blood is matched only by the power of his lies. If he cannot break your bones, he will try to break your mind."

What if Roarke had set a trap here for her?

Enough. There was only one way to find out. Ariadne ripped the top off the box in one swift gesture. Tossing it aside, Ariadne gazed down to see ledgers.

Rotting, smelly, yellowed and browned paper. Gingerly picking up a few sheets, she saw they were old financial records, receipts for furniture ordered, construction bills for renovations to the house. Ariadne dug and found more of the same.

Nothing incriminating. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing more than the mundane minutiae of maintaining the house on Eagle Hill.

Satisfied? Ariadne asked the doubting voice in her mind. The answer, clearly, was *no*.

Liliane wasn't stupid. She certainly wouldn't leave any terrifying secrets lying in the open. Ariadne hefted the box up and opened the one beneath it.

Decades-old tax returns. Liliane paid *taxes*? Apparently so. At least, several front organizations she had created paid taxes. But since becoming the Prince's Hand Ariadne had become dimly aware of the existence of these holdings, of the financial deals the Prince staged in order to secure and maintain capital. Andrei had, in fact, helped her to make use of them during the war. While Ariadne was hardly an expert in finance, these looked utterly ordinary and consistent with what she knew of Liliane's plans.

Damn Roarke! Would it have killed him to be a little more specific? Or perhaps that was his plan: to plant seeds of paranoia. To make Ariadne think the surest proof of ill-doings was the fact that she couldn't easily find proof at all.

Ariadne opened another box: Technical manuals for the television, the security system, the dishwasher. All covered in dead spiders.

Another box: rusted-out silverware.

With a cry of frustration, Ariadne tore through the room, upending boxes, throwing their contents out onto the dusty floor. Bills, records, maps, worn-out appliances. A century's accumulation of the most ordinary detritus, compulsively categorized and maintained and then just left to rot, utterly absent any file folder marked *deep dark secrets*.

With all the boxes emptied, Ariadne scoured the floor for cracks, the walls for hidden levers. She kicked the surface at random points, stomped on the floor in every pattern she could think of, waved her hands through the air.

Nothing.

With a resigned shrug, she flipped the light switch. It was all she had left. A lightbulb dangling from a cord above her flickered and went dark.

Ariadne no longer felt physical fatigue except during daylight hours, but her mind felt sluggish as she spent long minutes reassembling the storeroom into something approaching its previous state of order. She cursed the loss of valuable time, time that Bourne and Silas were probably using to try to smear her good name with Liliane. She crept cautiously back into Liliane's study, thanking God that it was still empty, and replaced the bookcase over the door.

Damn them. Damn Roarke. Maybe damn Liliane, too, but who knew? At this point, Ariadne just needed to get the Prince's permission to sire. Then she could leave this whole world of schemes and secrets to fend for itself.

She climbed up onto the roof of the house on Eagle Hill, gripped the key, and with a savage motion, reeled back her arm and hurled it out into the city, where it landed silently in the waiting clutches of oblivion.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bourne barely had enough strength to drag himself away from the car chassis. Crawling across the pavement on his belly, his head pounding and his vision blurred by blood, his mind lost track of the year and the place. It was 1934 again on the Embarcadero, and he was crawling to evade the hooves of the police horses, the fall of the truncheons. He crawled over blood-soaked copies of the *The Waterfront Worker*, the pamphlet's cheap paper scraped into wet chunks by his knees. Above the shouts and screams of strikers and the whistles of the riot cops, above the strains of "The Internationale," which someone was still singing, Bourne could hear the seagulls crying up in the San Francisco skies. They soared high enough to avoid the tear gas wafting through the air.

Those were the days when he had walked in daylight, when he hadn't felt the hunger. Or rather, he had, but for an entirely different sustenance: justice, equality, brotherhood. Commodities apparently no less forbidden and unnatural than Vitae, as he learned when the truncheons fell upon him again and again. Somehow, with rocks and empty canisters landing all around him, Bourne managed to drag himself beneath the chassis of a flatbed truck. He knew he was dying. The entire world, with its punishing sense of irony, finally decided to turn red. Then it began to fade away entirely.

A silver Mercedes M550 bore down on Bourne, and he stared uncomprehendingly. That car didn't belong in 1934. Then he realized it was more than seventy years later and the car was about to hit him.

Bourne had crawled to a rather unsavory neighborhood. The street was devoid of people at 2:00 A.M., exactly the kind of situation in which the kind of person who drove a Mercedes would least want to find himself. The driver had probably taken a wrong turn somewhere and was rolling slowly up and down Boston's notorious one-way side streets looking for a way out of the maze.

Staying low, Bourne tossed himself to the side as the car drove past. He flung out an arm, raking his claws across the left rear tire. The car lurched, and the driver pulled over by a fire hydrant. The door opened. Bourne scampered close behind, racing forward at knee level. He reached the well-dressed man just as he looked down.

Leaping up from all fours, Bourne tackled him. To his credit, the man fought. Had he any training or strength beyond the panicked urge to survive, he might even have fought off the weakened vampire. But Bourne had been tenacious in life, and was doubly so in death. In

his neonate days, he had wondered if the blood of the wealthy would be thin and watery compared with the hardy pulse of the working man, but blood, in the end, was blood. Sweet, sensuous, it truly did unite the human race, gave it equality. Equality as chattel for the Kindred.

And here he had thought he had outgrown all those tired political metaphors long ago.

Bourne rolled over on his back, too exhausted even to wipe up dribbles of red from his beard. After a few minutes, he had regained enough strength to climb up, seal the puncture wounds on the man's neck, check his pulse. The suit-and-tied bastard would live. Bourne laid him across a stoop and left him for the good people of the neighborhood to find in the morning. Maybe they would be kinder to Mr. Suit-and-Tie than he would have been to them if situations were reversed and they had shown up at the lawn of his gated house out in the suburbs. Bourne hoped not.

He changed the tire and drove back to Eagle Hill. He knew exactly which roads to keep to. What he didn't know was what he was going to tell his sire.

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Silas always looked nervous and haggard, but Bourne could tell the difference between his sire's habitual anxiety and genuine worry. Lately Silas had mostly displayed the latter; after the destruction of his townhouse, he had been in a constant state of near-apoplexy. At the moment he was pacing up and down the halls in Liliane's safehouse. Bourne arrived and walked desultorily in his wake.

"Well?" Silas turned, hands wringing, eyes narrowed and molelike. That was the only greeting he offered Bourne. No words of concern over his child's battered appearance, no expression of relief over his return after a covert operation.

Bourne sighed. That might make what he was about to do easier. Then, upon reflection, he thought: Yeah, right. The same way screwing the stewardess makes it easier to survive a plane crash.

"I did what you asked, sire."

"Of course."

Silas nodded, then turned his back, stared intently for a few moments at the wall, at this painting or that one. "Liliane has no taste whatsoever. Her age is no excuse for a fascination with this Baroque rubbish. I have met plenty of Kindred who personally remember the Council of Trent and yet still recognized Bernini for the pervert and charlatan he was. Bah!"

Silas spun away, seemed to fold in on himself. "I miss my own paintings."

Bourne kept his distance and kept his silence.

Eventually Silas looked up, like an ostrich removing its head from a dune. "Well? Where are your inane little witticisms?"

Witticisms. It was 1934 again, and Bourne was blood-curdlingly furious. After his first few nights among the undead in Silas's studio, the elder had finally revealed the reason for snatching the young union agitator from death's embrace.

"I wanted to forever preserve a piece of idealism," the strange old man cackled. "As a tonic for when my moods become dark."

The weeks flew by, and Bourne came to see that Silas hadn't preserved him, the idealistic labor activist, because the elder had wanted to rekindle some long-lost noble fire that

would illuminate the darkness in himself. No, he wanted that idealist around so that, when he was feeling blue, he would always have someone to laugh at.

Bourne had fought against that role. Yet the more he raged and hewed at his sire, the more humorous Silas seemed to find it. Silas laughed all through those years when Bourne, kept on a very long leash, rejoined the old movements, rejoined them again when they became new movements. He bashed heads at the Ford Motors Strike, strangled rednecks with their own lynching ropes in Selma, set fires in Watts. But the system endured.

Silas helped him peek behind the system's mortal curtain, showed him the Kindred of the Invictus Council. Bourne joined the Carthian revolt, sang its rallying cries about the basic rights of Kindred freedom. Bourne joined every cause, mortal and immortal, then stormed away when they were crushed or sold out or simply failed. Then he would begin again, and again, and again ...

Finally, Bourne got the joke. *The* joke. There was no better world coming, no matter how hard anyone worked. There was only a steady supply of idiots who kept breaking their backs, and the backs of others, believing in it. It was the biggest joke of all.

By the time he realized it, Bourne had developed a big enough repository of cynical humor, of both the gutter and the gallows varieties, that he could still make Silas laugh.

But tonight, right now, he didn't want to.

"My humor seems to have leaked out tonight, boss. Along with about six pints of blood." Bourne coughed, wondering when his shattered ribs would get around to healing themselves. "It's been a bad one."

"You have no idea." Silas's voice dripped off his rotten gums. "You also have no idea how much worse it's going to get unless we can unseat Ariadne from our Prince's side. I presume you have the needed evidence."

So this was the moment.

Bourne felt something bubbling in the pit of his stomach. He preferred to think it was the lining of his intestines slowly re-knitting after being punctured by the carburetor into which Roarke had slammed him.

"Um, yeah. About that."

Only moments earlier, Bourne had held the tape of Andrei in his hands. He had stared at it, felt the cheap plastic of the case, tossed it in the air once or twice.

"Boss, is this the best possible time? I mean, Archibald's death still has everyone pretty frazzled—"

"That is what makes it the best possible time." The elephantine skin of Silas's forehead wrinkled in annoyance. "Out with it already. My patience is thin."

Silas held out a bony hand. If the old man still produced saliva, Bourne imagined it would be churning across his gums and tongue as he anticipated the incriminating, lurid scenes the tape would reveal.

Bourne looked at his sire, so desperate, so fragile, despite all his age and power. He had hated that bony, hunched visage for so many years. But even hatred, though longer lived than idealism, had a finite lifetime. Silas had given Bourne so little yet depended on him so much. The man had lived so long, amassed so much art and influence, and yet fell into pits of hopelessness and misery at the slightest provocation. On his good nights, Silas had enough venom of bitterness to at least give himself some lift.

Bourne, like everyone else, feared Silas in his moments of rage. Unlike everyone else, Bourne realized just how vulnerable the elder was. Bourne had made a legion of enemies; he knew that, if not for Silas's protection, he would have been destroyed long ago. But Bourne knew just as well that, if not for Bourne's companionship, Silas would have long ago dissolved into some solitary madness.

Bourne didn't know which he feared more in response to his revelation: the punishment that was surely to come or the sight of Silas's own grieving disappointment.

Well, we all gotta face the music sooner or later. Least I stole some clean underwear from that yuppie I drank.

"Recording's no good, boss." Bourne forced the words out. "Destroyed when our car got ambushed by some of Roarke's goons."

It was true enough. Silas had ordered Bourne to make the recording, to bring it to him when it was ready. The elder had imposed his will. The strength of the Vinculum, especially from his sire, commanded Bourne's obedience. But commands came in words, and words were funny things. Silas hadn't specified anything about taking great lengths to protect the recording—for example, about not choosing to use it as a passably adequate shield against Roarke's goon's knife. Bringing the recording to Silas was required. The recording, however, was hardly in working condition.

Silas paused, still processing the words he had expected to hear, not the ones he actually had.

"It ... you ... *what?*"

Trying to push all images of the tape shattering between his hands from his mind, willing his thoughts to erase the feeling of the delicate magnetic ribbon as his claws slashed it to pieces, Bourne continued. "Gets worse, boss. The actual guy Ariadne was seeing? Roarke's thugs took care of him, too. Not enough of his body left to even prop up as a puppet, let alone bring in to testify."

Every lie seared Bourne's tongue. Ariadne's cruel words bubbled up in his mind: *Lapdog. Stoolie. Fat piece of shit.*

She should have added "complete idiot," he thought. Look at what he was doing, for her sake no less!

Silas's anger seemed to travel slowly, neuron by neuron, rippling up each individual skin cell and muscle until, one by one, they clenched and began shivering.

"This," he hissed, "is unacceptable."

"Accept it." Bourne tried to pull himself up to his full height, but the spine just wouldn't stretch right. He chose to blame it on his injuries. "Shit happened. Roarke's stronger than we thought. He—"

"I don't care about Roarke!" Silas roared. "Roarke will die in a few days, just like everyone else in this damned city."

Bourne started. "Ah, how's that now?"

"Can I trust you with nothing? Not even self-preservation? I thought I had at least trained you for that."

"What do you—?"

"A flood is coming." Silas jabbed a finger up toward the ceiling and presumably the outside world that lay above Liliane's subterranean refuge. "A terrible flood, all consum-

ing. Liliane is building an ark, but space is certain to be limited. We shall not walk out of this place two by two. Surely she will take with her her Hand. If we sever that Hand, she shall pick a new one. Me! As she should have before. And, unlike our dear Prince, *I* would not forget those who had been loyal to me. *Had* been loyal.”

“What? She’s not leaving. What are you talking about? Is this because of Archibald? I’m sure the Prince has contingency plans.”

“Liliane has done all she could.” Silas’s voice shook. “But I have been watching the kine’s blather on the television news. They are noticing too many hints of our actions. The Prince is convinced the Council and the wizards are ready to descend upon us to preserve the Masquerade. We must act quickly, re-assess our plans. You may have doomed us both, you useless waste of flesh!”

Bourne clenched his fists and bit his lip. So the end was coming. Ariadne was going to be saved. Bourne had sacrificed his own chance at being saved in order to protect her.

He felt like smashing every breakable object in sight. Silas had been right. Bourne was extremely laughable. Hysterically so. A shame Silas didn’t know enough of the story to fully appreciate the humor.

“We will have to make plans.” Silas voice was now very soft. “But first, you need to pay for your incompetence.”

Blown by an unseen wind, the door to the room slammed. Silas’s eyes narrowed. There was no trace of depression in them. He strode forward toward his childe, claws extended, and Bourne at least found the dignity to stay rooted. As for Bourne’s inability to keep back his own screams a moment later—well, none could fault him for that failure.

Those screams went on for a very, very long time.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Ah, Daughter. You await us.”

Ariadne had tried her best to make herself look busily occupied at Liliane’s writing desk, reviewing Po-Mo’s field reports composed in childlike scrawl on bloodstained paper. Over an hour had passed since she had left the secret passageway, had buried her tracks and thrown away Roarke’s key. Liliane’s study looked as undisturbed as ever. Still, Ariadne tensed when the Prince entered the room, certain some statuette jostled a half an inch to the left would somehow give her away.

Indeed, Liliane’s brow was furrowed.

“We sense your heart is heavy and wrought, Silent Knife. Come, unburden yourself. New Jerusalem is your home, your oasis, your sanctuary, as it is to all who wander and are lost.”

Liliane spread herself out on the divan, looking more radiant than ever. Her translucent white dress gave her body an ethereal glow in the room’s dim light. She smiled, her ice-blue eyes fixed on Ariadne.

Ariadne knelt before Liliane, and the Prince stroked her Seneschal’s long hair with strong, defined sweeps of her hand. Ariadne knew at any moment those lovely fingers could apply pressure and crush her skull like a fruit.

“Rise and drink with us.”

Liliane reached to the small night table beside her, where two crystal goblets and a decanter lay. She poured a rich, thick soup of red into each and offered one to Ariadne. The blood smelled sweet. It soothed the restless energy inside Ariadne as she pulled it close to her lips, but for a moment she hesitated.

Two glasses. Does she always keep two glasses or did she know I would be here? I’ve been here plenty of times, but she’s never asked me to drink with her before...

Ariadne slowly pulled her lips up from the rim of the glass, feeling as if she were fighting against the draw of a strong magnet. “You have shown me so much kindness, my lady. I am unworthy of all you have already done, yet I have to ask you for one more thing.”

“Our Hand,” Liliane said pleasantly. “We always reward those whose faith has been strong.”

Ariadne's thoughts rang with voices, Roarke's most insistently: "*Liliane's got something much scarier up her sleeve than Old Dishonest Abe ever dreamed of.*"

She willed the voices to silence, but they were replaced in her mind by Liliane's eyes. Cool blue lakes.

Ariadne took a sip of the blood. It seemed to take every ounce of her strength now simply to swallow. The Vitae, rich and thick, churned in her throat and stomach.

"Speak, and we shall hear," Liliane said.

Ariadne fought to get each syllable out. "I wish to petition for permission to Embrace. I have found a mortal upon whom I wish to bestow eternal life."

Liliane's smile remained, but now it thinned ever so slightly. Her eyes narrowed. Such tiny gestures, and yet Ariadne felt the Prince's mood change in her own bones like temblors heralding an earthquake.

"You are but a childe yourself."

Ariadne wanted more than anything to throw herself on the ground before the Prince, to beg forgiveness and be on her way. But visions of Andrei's battered body, of Bourne holding his bloody finger, pushed her forward.

"My lady, I know I am unworthy, but I desire—"

"You desire what?"

Now Liliane's voice grew genuinely frosty, and Ariadne knew she had made a mistake. "Do you desire love? Is that it? Yes, I see it in your eyes. And he is kine? Mortal?"

Ariadne nodded meekly.

"You. The Silent Knife. You desire the love of a mortal, made eternal by the sharing of your own Vitae? Pshaw."

The Prince put her glass down gently, but even the small *clink* sounded ominous. "Has our love for you not been enough?"

"I would never suggest that, my lady," Ariadne felt as if the fresh blood she had just drunk was starting to coagulate.

Liliane fixed her with a gaze that felt like sunlight itself. Just as Ariadne thought she would cry out for the Prince to stop, the pressure eased.

Liliane's voice softened. "Do not think we do not value and appreciate all you have done for us. Neither should you think us so cold that we do not recognize your passion, your burning need to create."

The Prince turned and stared at some distant point. "The ability to create may be all that keeps us from becoming monsters through and through. Even when He damned us, God in His infinite mercy left us with that small shard of His grace."

There! Ariadne found and seized upon her opening.

The words started to come now, unbidden, and Ariadne was surprised at how much honesty lay in them. She wove a tale of Andrei, praising his skill as one who could forge new structure out of rubble. Just the kind of soldier-architect to help build New Jerusalem. What started out as a flattering exaggeration became true as it left her lips, all of it.

As Ariadne's story wound down, Liliane slowly drew the knuckles of one hand across the palm of the other in thought. Ariadne kept her mouth closed, desperate not to spoil whatever germ it was that she had planted.

“From the mouths of babes,” Liliane said at last. “Daughter, you ask much of us. These are dark times, trying times. Remember what we told you earlier. We must flee soon, and if your new childe is to come with us, someone else must not. Know that if you Embrace this man, you condemn more than one soul this night.”

Ariadne nodded. This hardly seemed the time, though, to raise the next idea: that neither she nor Andrei would join Liliane at all.

The Prince was speaking: “Little time remains. If it is to be done, it must be done quickly. Tonight if possible.”

Tonight, then. Ariadne would worry about the future tomorrow. Maybe Roarke’s accusations were true, maybe they weren’t, but what mattered was that Liliane had come through for Ariadne yet again. She rose to leave.

“Daughter.”

Ariadne snapped to attention. She had thought the interview concluded.

Liliane sounded almost tired as she spoke her next words. “This is a bittersweet night. It seemed like only yesterday that we had taken you under our tutelage. But then, why does one create, if not to have something last beyond you?”

Ariadne nodded, uncertain what to say.

“Still, we have a vested interest in this new creation, as well. He was yours to find, but he will not be yours alone in undeath. You are not yet ready for that.”

Ariadne stiffened.

“You will bring this man to me before you Embrace him.” Liliane’s voice was crisp and deadly in its superficial nonchalance. This was no mere request.

Forgetting her place, Ariadne blurted out, “Why?”

“A sire need not explain herself to her childe,” said Liliane. “This man, this Andrei, will be of your blood, but he will also be of ours. We take very special, exceptional care of what is ours. We shall teach him, just as we taught you.”

At once, Ariadne felt herself collapsing. The room seemed to tilt. What Bourne did to Andrei would be tender lovemaking compared to Liliane’s tutelage. Those thoughts so consumed her that it took Ariadne a few more moments to realize the totality of what Liliane had revealed to her.

“A ... sire? Your ... blood?”

The words tumbled out of Ariadne’s mouth, as suddenly the full import of the Prince’s words seeped into her brain. “My lady, do you mean—?”

“Yes.” Liliane beamed her warmest, most terrible, most deadly affectionate smile. “You are ready now to know. We are your mother in fact as well as name, sire and liege in one. Rejoice and know your place at our side to be rightful in the eyes of God.”

Ariadne had to steady herself on a bookshelf, nearly toppling it in the process.

The revelation rushed like a river through a broken levee, there to flood and fill and fulfill. The taunts, the jeers, the cold shoulders, all of it came screaming up to her in a giant cacophony. Orphan. Wanderling. Caitiff. Outcast even among a community of outcasts, all of whom could at least name the sire who had rejected them. A thousand scornful, pitying leers, and all along ...

“Look not so crestfallen, my Hand. Any childe of a great sire can claim greatness, which was all the more reason why we made you earn it. This Silent Knife has been forged from true steel, not bastard iron.”

The next thing Ariadne knew, Liliane was standing, holding her in her arms. Terrible warmth suffused Ariadne, generosity so boundless and consuming that it frightened her. Caught up in those arms, Ariadne was an infant, helpless to do anything but be rocked and soothed.

Liliane released her a small eternity later. “Now go forth, free for the first time of the cloak of anonymity. Wear your royal lineage proudly. You will be the helmsman at the prow of our ark, the princess presiding over the walls of New Jerusalem, wherever we may construct it. This night has brought great joy to our heart.”

At once, Liliane raised her hand and waved Ariadne away. “Such moments are far too rare. We must be alone now, to meditate upon it, before darker matters demand our renewed attention.”

Ariadne did not so much walk from as flee the room. She kept on running, through the filthy and torn-up hallways, pushing past Po-Mo’s reveling warriors.

Up, up to the surface, tearing out the front door, Ariadne felt the city falling down behind her. She climbed to the roof of the house, the highest spot on the highest hill in East Boston. Cold wind tossed her hair and battered her form.

“You ... monster,” Ariadne finally said, struggling through a haze of guilt to speak. Even now, it was so hard to hate Liliane. Was this some power the Prince had over her as her sire? Ariadne had so little knowledge of what actually went on between sires and their childer. What if all Liliane needed to do was speak a word and Ariadne would be forced to stay? If Ariadne Embraced Andrei, would his blood also be Liliane’s to command?

If so, then Andrei would be Liliane’s. As Ariadne would be, for all time.

All her unlfe, Ariadne had envied the status a sire would have brought her. Why had she never thought about the freedom it would have robbed from her until now?

Sheriff. Seneschal. None of it was worth anything. The loyalty Ariadne had fought so hard to prove had been meaningless. What use was loyalty when your Prince’s words held the power of blood-command?

Liliane had never let her out of the torture chamber after all. She never would.

Ariadne balled her fists, beat them against her own eyes. She reeled back, her mouth opening to gruesome, inhuman proportions, a mouth wide enough to melt her face into her neck. Her scream set off car alarms throughout the street. Let the police come to investigate.

Exhausted, she hugged herself tight, kneeling on the roof. She never asked for the night, but she had thought, until now, that she had at least carved a place for herself in it. First that place had been defending New Jerusalem. Then it was to have been an eternity with Andrei. But all along, and forevermore, that place was subject to the whims of Prince Liliane.



Ariadne was half-hoping Andrei wouldn’t call her, but she knew that sooner or later he would. Until then, what?

Ariadne should have felt an electric thrill of freedom. She wouldn’t have to sneak out now. She could go meet with Andrei whenever she wanted, with the Prince’s full sanction. She didn’t even have to wait for his call; she could sweep into the hospital, or that horrid motel, or wherever he was hiding, and simply claim him.

But all of the many imaginings and reimaginings of the scenario of the Embrace crumbled to ash in Ariadne’s mind, ash swept and blown by the cruel winds of Liliane.

She couldn't Embrace Andrei now. And now that Liliane knew about him, could she even run away with him as he was?

Battles with blades had been so easy. But without Andrei's help, it seemed Ariadne met only with defeat at every step of the Danse.

"Well."

There, as she passed the silent spires of East Boston High School, sat Bourne, his bulk pressed up against one of the stone lions at the gate. She turned to face him, trying her best to pull triumph from the jaws of all that gripped her. She attempted to sound haughty. "Not on the hunt tonight?"

"Better things to do."

"Well, blackmail won't do you any good now."

"Boo hoo hoo." Bourne spoke to the cement walkway. Shadows hid his face. "Looks like you outsmarted me."

"Did you show Liliane the tape? Are you going to try anyway?"

"No and no."

"Oh."

The two stood there in silence, alone while the rest of the neighborhood huddled for warmth in the cruel winter winds. Even the cars seemed to pass quickly, seeking shelter.

"Why?"

"You have to ask? Jesus. Go the hell away, Ariadne. I don't know why I bothered."

In a flicker of moonlight between the clouds, Ariadne saw his face, the flesh crisscrossed with talon-shaped canals almost deep enough to see bone through. Then the darkness set in again, and he was obscured.

"How did you—?" She fumbled for words. "Aren't you afraid someone's going to see you like that and—?"

"What part of 'go the hell away' didn't you understand? I can say it in Gaelic and Russian too, if you'd like."

Ariadne stepped back. She wasn't afraid, but she felt awkward, like accidentally walking into a wake being held for someone you didn't know.

"Whatever you and Silas are planning, it's pointless anyway. There won't even be a court to jockey for position in much longer. The Prince told me she's planning to leave the city now that Archibald's gone. I don't know who she's even going to take with her. I ... I thought you should know."

A long pause. Then, finally, he replied: "So Silas wasn't just being paranoid. How long have you known?"

"Only tonight. She told me herself."

Bourne stared up at her, his eyes blazing red in the night. "So when you Embrace that mortal sod, you'll bring him with you?"

Ariadne started. "How did you—?"

"A guess. Nice to know I'm right."

Ariadne cursed herself. She was better than that. Of course, now that Liliane had declared her lineage, what could Bourne really do to hurt her?

"Let me make another guess. You asked Liliane for permission, and she attached conditions."

Ariadne said nothing.

"I'm guessing she did because that's what she does to every Lick here. You're really going to fold boy-toy into the warm little family of New Jerusalem? We accept everyone, right? That's Liliane's credo? How convenient for you. You get to have your cake and drink him, too."

Bourne went on: "You call me Silas's lapdog. Well, you're Liliane's. Thing is, if you wanted to, you could be running this place."

"Liliane is my Prince," Ariadne said with more bitterness than she intended. Tonight's revelations—and lack of revelations, in the subterranean chamber—still burned inside her. "She commands my loyalty. And yours, too."

"Even if she orders us to march off a cliff. How sweet."

"She's not asking that of me," said Ariadne. Thoughts of the Prince with her ivory talons around Andrei immediately gave lie to the words. "I'm no pawn," she added, trying to convince herself as much as Bourne. "I've done things. I've disobeyed. You of all people know that. I'm Liliane's Hand, not her slave."

"Then prove it."

Bourne's stubby fingers shook with faint palsy as he held aloft a small object, barely discernable in the dim light.

Ariadne, though, immediately recognized it.

"You bastard," she breathed. "How did you get that key?"

"Look at me, Ariadne," said Bourne. "I'm fat and fight like a girl. A real girl, not whatever the hell you are. If I didn't have a few tricks up my sleeve, do you think I'd have lasted this long?"

"What were you going to do?" Ariadne stepped forward, tried to gauge how she could wrest Roarke's key from Bourne's grasp. "Use it as more evidence against me? Prove that I have been trafficking with the enemy?"

"I've *protected* you!" Bourne spat. "First when I destroyed the tape, and now with this."

"Oh really? So why didn't you destroy the key?"

"Knowledge is the only power that matters around here," said Bourne. "I wanted to know what it was first."

"It leads to an ordinary storeroom. Absolutely nothing in there worth anything."

"So there's no harm in coming with me to look at it again, right?"

Ariadne tensed. "Is this some sort of—?"

"Trap? If it is, am I going to tell you?" Bourne shifted. "If you're that worried, go tell the Prince. Have the soldiers seize me. That'll show how much your own woman you are."

Ariadne clenched her fists. She wanted nothing more than to turn around and go to Andrei, run off, and erase the Kindred part of her existence. But what if all Liliane had to do, from however far away she lurked, was whisper "Come back," and Ariadne would have no choice? Better to exercise her free will now, while she still could.

"Damn her," Ariadne whispered. "And damn you. Fine. Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The storeroom was as disheveled as Ariadne had left it. Stray styrofoam packing bubbles now littered the floor like freshly fallen snowflakes, but otherwise the room showed few signs of Ariadne's rummaging.

"See?" Ariadne spread her arms. "There's Roarke's big revelation: Liliane's a packrat."

Bourne paced slowly up and down the circumference. "Doesn't make sense. Why keep all these records, but then let them go to rot?"

Ariadne shrugged.

"Come on, girl. What else did Roarke tell you about this place?"

"Surprisingly little. Maybe because there's nothing to tell."

"Roarke sounds like a redneck, but he's crafty. He would have planted some seed in your ear. Think back."

Ariadne strained to remember what Roarke had told her when he had her at his mercy.

"Once you see what's there, once you look inside yourself and figure out what to do, I'll know you're ready."

"Look inside myself?" she muttered. Ariadne looked up and down, tried to somehow open her senses beyond their usual keyed-up state. She stared at her hands, her feet, the boxes in front of her.

It happened so quickly she almost missed it. One of the boxes seemed to flicker with an afterglow, like the images that used to get burned on her retinas after watching fireworks.

"Bourne, did you see that?"

"See what?"

Now that she was focusing, she saw it again, from all the boxes.

"For pity's sake, Bourne, if you and Silas are stringing me along here, just have him come out and draw a sword. I'm sick and tired of these games."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." For once, Bourne sounded serious. She described what she saw, and he squinted, trying to see it as well.

"Hrm," he finally said. "I've got a vibe."

“A what?”

“Hang around a city of wizards long enough, Ariadne, and you’ll learn a few things. Something’s not right. And I don’t just mean Liliame cheated on her taxes.”

He circled the room. “Step out of the room for a moment.”

“Oh, really?” Ariadne crossed her arms, raised an eyebrow. “Is this where Silas has six demon dogs jump me?”

“Just do it!”

Ariadne, with an exaggerated flourish, stepped backward across the door’s threshold.

“There! Now what?”

“Step back in. Yeah, the room feels different when you’re in it versus when you’re out.”

“How sweet.”

“I’m being serious,” Bourne growled. “Whatever it is you’re doing, keep doing it.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Stop using your eyes and ears and nose and just feel.”

“Just feel.” Ariadne rolled her eyes and tried to relax. She tried to remember all those yoga poses she had worked so hard to memorize back in her old life, tried to recall the scent of candles or the sound of poetry in her ears.

Feel.

A coldness settled upon her skin, a skin-prickling kind of physical chill.

“I’m cold,” she said. “Are you?”

“No. I haven’t felt cold in almost a century.”

Ariadne was definitely feeling the chill now, and could feel it wasn’t pervasive. There were spots in the room where it was more or less present, a map drawn out in patterns of temperature. She paced along invisible paths, one eye always on Bourne, until her full attention was drawn to the ceiling.

That burned-out light fixture. It was the center of the cold feeling. She reached out her hand, her fingertips wavering a foot beneath it. If she just let her muscles relax, her fingers still remained erect, as if her nails were metal drawn by a magnet in the light socket.

She felt the force pulling at her. So she pulled back.

The ceiling began to melt. The stone smeared into gray-black globs formed above the two of them. Then small hailstones of chunky black ash and soot rained down.

Ariadne shivered, shaking them off her.

“That’s a good trick,” Bourne whistled. “You made it snow indoors.”

Ariadne ignored him. The world looked different to her now. The more she walked around the room, the more she found spots where her fingers, her toes, her eyes felt that magnetism. There were a host of invisible levers and switches that begged to be tugged. All she had to do was just find the right patterns in this web of cold drafts—and twist.

Another exertion, and the ceiling peeled away to reveal funnels. Hundreds and hundreds of funnels, stained brown from the passage of gallons of blood.

Ariadne barely had time to register the change before the cement floor irised open beneath them, revealing a wide, steep tunnel below. She leapt back as the boxes of papers

and kitchenware slipped with a deadly, incriminating noise down, down, a long slope into the tunnel. Ariadne kept her balance as she slid her way down. Bourne, neither as prepared nor as nimble, tumbled into the room below in an embarrassing heap.

She did not help him to his feet, barely noticed him at all. They were now in a cavern, expansive, carved from stone. Crude candelabras were carved into the stalactites around them. They cast a pale glow along the ripples of a small, circular lake of crimson at whose artificial shores the two of them now stood.

Ariadne, sword drawn, cautiously dipped a finger in the pool and took a taste. Familiar memories and sensations crackled through her.

"This is the community cauldron," she whispered. "This is a sacred place, Bourne. Whatever you think of Liliane, we can't just defile—"

"Sssh," he said, painfully hauling himself to his feet. "Look in the middle."

A small dais, barely visible above the high level of the blood, jutted out in the center of the pool. Upon the dais sat a statue.

At first the statue had seemed like just an extension of the shadows, a clot of darkness that spread out into several large fronds, some elaborate trick of the candlelight. But the central core was slick and oily with sheen that no shadow possessed. As Ariadne focused she could see bumps and pustules carved onto its face, knobs of stone that seemed to shift and change position with every new angle.

Ariadne couldn't entirely conceive of just what the statue was supposed to be. It had fronds, crenulated textures, like some kind of fish, but it had no discernable eyes or fins and the knobby mounds were scattered with no regard to symmetry. It most closely resembled some sort hideously wounded octopus. A slow, rhythmic hiss, like the exhalation of air from a punctured tire, sounded in time to the rippling of the thing's form.

"Bourne, what the hell is that?"

"I have no idea," Bourne said, and for once Ariadne actually believed him. His mouth gaped, candlelight shining off his yellowed, uneven teeth and fangs. "I was expecting something more like a hidden safe with jewels. Or maybe pornography." The crack in his voice undermined his flippancy.

Ariadne blinked. She'd had plenty of opportunities in the past to doubt her own sanity, but this was the first time she seriously entertained the prospect of madness. She could swear that, inside each knob on the statue's surface, an image was forming. Ghostly faces, and few were recognizable beyond that. She squinted, using her eyesight to the fullest, in the way that she never could when mortal. The faces resolved as if under magnification. *There*, that one, a woman's face. Ariadne knew it.

Hera!

Ariadne flinched. This had to be some trick Bourne was pulling, drawing on Ariadne's guilt. Hera, who had died when no foe was evident. And there, another face—Mister Rose! And there, the dead mortal she had seen turning to black ash in the hospital where she brought Andrei.

"Do you see that?"

"The ugly lawn ornament in the middle of the birdbath? Yeah. I've got eyes."

"No, the faces!"

Bourne looked to Ariadne. "Um, you been getting your beauty sleep? I don't see any faces."

"I see faces. And I ... I opened up this place," said Ariadne. "How did I do it?"

"I don't know." Bourne started to backpedal. "But how about we theorize later. Faces or no faces, this place doesn't feel right."

His voice seemed to fade, to become nothing more than the echoes it produced. The thrum of the statue sounded louder. The pulsing sound had been there the whole time. In fact, it had even been audible above, in the sanctuary. It was like the hum of an airplane; you could fail to notice it for a while just because it was everywhere.

Ariadne rubbed her temples, tried to close her eyes, but couldn't move her gaze from the statue. The more she stared, the more well-defined its features became, almost as if it were shaping itself to fit her gaze. She could see striations in its stone skin, see the ripples of muscle carved beneath its stone coils. Even the faces in the knob-bubbles became clearer. She could see more faces: some of Roarke's rebels, even some of the court's elders thought dead or fled during the war. Ariadne could see Hera's eyes wide, her skin taut; she could almost hear her scream. She could see Mister Rose's lips parting, his mouth shouting unheard bellows.

Somehow Ariadne found herself hip deep in the blood lake, wading toward the statue. She didn't remember stepping in the pool, but she was here, and the faces in the statue were so captivating. Her hand raised of its own accord, her fingers stretched to touch its shimmering surface. A mosquito whine that sounded like Bourne buzzed at her ear. She ignored it.

Her long nail hovered for a second on one of the knobs. Then the pad of her finger descended, pressed and flattened against the rough stone that somehow felt smooth and soft as a baby's skin.

An electric jolt buzzed up and down her limbs. Blood splashed all around her, and Ariadne felt herself rise in the air, turn on her back, fly of her own accord. The room spun and swirled and blackened.

Then everything snapped rudely back into focus. She was on her back, against the stone of the cave. Bourne's corpulent form hunched over her. She swiped him away.

"Hey, relax! I just saved you. Least I could expect is a peck on the cheek for thanks."

Ariadne struggled to her feet. Blood dripped down from her soaking body. Her skin felt suddenly raw, as if it had been combed with iron tines.

"What happened?"

"Dunno. You got all zoned out, waded out into the lake, then touched the thing and started flailing. I had to pull you away."

Ariadne stared into the crimson pool. The blood, placid before, was now churning as if from unseen jets below. Vague shadows moved beneath the surface.

Try as she might to watch them, Ariadne's eyes kept being drawn straight to the statue in the center. "You didn't hear it calling?"

"Um, no."

She described the faces she had seen, the shadows beneath the blood pool, and the voices she had heard.

"I still don't see or hear anything," said Bourne. "But Hera and those others? They're the ones whose ashes got turned black and crunchy."

Ariadne tapped her forehead with her fingers, as if that could center her thoughts, drive out the pulsing beat in her mind.

“We have to get out of here,” she said.

“You and I finally agree, huh?”

The blood in the pool rippled and bubbled. The shadows inside grew more defined, coalescing into bodies and limbs.

“Now!” Ariadne spun on her heel and ran to the wall, seizing handholds and climbing up the incline that led to the storeroom above.

She could hear Bourne’s clumsy grasping behind her, but beyond his struggles she could hear the shuffling of limbs, the scrape of wet flesh on stone. She refused to look back.

The moment she gained level footing in the hidden storeroom, she cast a hand out to the light fixture and pulled with her mind. The floor began to obediently re-seal behind her, almost catching Bourne as he hauled his bulk up through the swiftly diminishing aperture.

“Easy, girl!” he gasped. “What has you so spooked?”

She pointed wordlessly to the floor behind him, where the passageway had sealed around a fleshless hand, its finger bones sharpened to talons. The hand was caught with the rest of its arm behind the re-sealed ground.

The fingers spasmed briefly, then lay still.

“Oh,” Bourne said simply. Just this once, he had no snide comment to add.

• • • • •

The showers in the house on Eagle Hill, usually kept up meticulously by the house ghouls, were now caked with several nights’ worth of dried blood from Po-Mo and his soldiers. Shreds of towels were scattered everywhere and the sink had been ripped from its fixture. For once, Ariadne was grateful for the recent decline of the house’s environs: no one noticed a few more bloodstains on the carpets and the tile as she and Bourne made their way to wash off.

Ariadne emerged from behind the frosted glass. Although she had had her doubts, Bourne appeared to be keeping true to his word; he still had his back turned to her. She wrapped the most intact of the remaining towels around her and moved to let him past her and into the stall.

“How did that thing get into our communal blood pool?”

Bourne produced a garbled laugh as he slid under the spray. “How do you think? It’s beneath the Prince’s personal study. You do the math.”

“Roarke knows magic. He could have created it, to use against Liliane. We could be setting off some kind of doomsday device for him. Half of those faces are Kindred we lost in battles to him.”

“Not Mister Rose, though.”

The shower steam fogged up the whole washroom, plunging Ariadne into another universe. She felt as if the room were tilting, as if she would topple over and fall into the statue’s pull again at any moment.

Forcing herself back into the present, she called out to Bourne: “I know Liliane is capable of horrible, horrible things. Especially deception. I know that better than you do. But New Jerusalem is everything to her. She’s building a place where all are welcomed and all live in harmony. If she’s the one responsible for keeping this ... *thing* down there, then it must have its place in that plan.”

Bourne laughed as he turned the water off. “How many times have I heard *that* before? How many big agendas, how many five year plans? Here’s the best lesson I ever learned, Ariadne, free of charge: Never watch laws or sausage being made. You’ll just see something that’ll ruin your enjoyment.”

Ariadne turned to him, unsettled by more than just the sight of his naked form. “You sound like a Carthian, Bourne, the Kindred who want to bring down the Council.”

“I was one. For a while.”

“You? I didn’t think you believed in anything.”

“You don’t think much of me at all.” Bourne reached behind a loose panel and pulled out the fluffy, immaculate white towel hidden within. He handed it to her. “Your mistake.”

She looked at the towel suspiciously, then took it. With a deft motion she exchanged the one she was wearing for this one and handed it to Bourne, keeping her body shielded the whole time.

“You haven’t exactly shown me your best self.”

“You haven’t bothered to look any deeper,” he said, wrapping the dirty towel around his body. “But this isn’t about you or me. This is about Liliane. Don’t change the subject.”

“Liliane’s planning an exodus,” said Ariadne. “What if it’s not about Archibald at all? What if it has something to do with what we saw?”

“Roarke knew about this a long time ago.”

“What are you suggesting—that this was why Roarke rebelled? You want us to side with him? Is that what you’ve already done?”

“Hell, no!” said Bourne. “I’ve sided with *myself*. But that’s kind of a small army.”

“You’re asking me to join you? To betray my Prince?”

As soon as she said the last, Ariadne realized how foolish her outrage sounded. She had been having an affair, neglecting her wartime duties, following instructions from Roarke. She had been planning to leave the court entirely. Still, what Bourne was asking of her seemed much worse.

“Whatever wrong I’ve done so far,” she said, “I’ve tried to put it right.”

“How well has it worked for you?”

Ariadne remained silent.

“There is no ‘put it right!’” Bourne drew near. “You can’t live your life to please the man upstairs! He—or she—is always going to abuse you. Always!”

Ariadne’s anger at Liliane welled up in her, but she wasn’t about to give Bourne the satisfaction of seeing it. “Oh really?” Ariadne said instead. “What about Silas? If all leaders are corrupt liars, then why then should I follow you two?”

“I’m not Silas.” Bourne’s voice cracked. “He doesn’t have to be involved. It would be a partnership. You deserve that.”

Ariadne stared at him, letting the words sink in, reading his body language. What it told her made her insides knot.

She shoved him back. “What do you want from me?” she cried. As he teetered, she pressed forward and pushed him again. “What the hell have you wanted from me since the moment you began tormenting me?”

“I want you to be *you*!” Bourne slammed an open hand against the shower door, sending cracks racing throughout the glass. “In ten years you worked your way up the ladder

faster than any other Kindred I've ever seen, and not by squirreling around and playing favors, either. But in this past month, you've started to play the game, to put on false fronts. I've watched you tossing yourself crazy over which Elder to placate next, and then I see it's all because of some mortal stooge. Now, despite the evidence, you're defending Liliane. It's killing me."

She stared at him, wide-eyed.

"After ninety years, I thought there was nothing more to believe in. I thought that I'd cured myself of causes at last. But you—" Bourne shook his head. "You crazy bitch, you made me believe in something again. You made me believe in *you*. And I don't think I can survive you giving me one more lost cause to cry in my beer over. So either find your stomach or else make good on what you always threaten and chop my head off already, all right? I'm a little sick of the suspense."

Ariadne opened her mouth, but a laugh or a scream, whatever it was that was going to come out, got stuck in her throat. Was he mocking her, even now?

She tried to imagine Bourne as some bomb-throwing anarchist. She recalled what her father had always said about "those people," but she couldn't take it seriously. She had been told so many lies by so many people she couldn't even believe her father's words any longer.

"You want a partnership, Bourne? To do what? We don't even know what this statue really is. We don't know what to do about it. We need more information."

"Hey, you're saying 'we.' That's a start."

"No," said Ariadne. "It was a mistake. You stay here. I'm going to do a little research."

"Research? Where? Ariadne!"

He called after her, but she sped away, out toward her cell. At least he knew better than to follow her as she got changed and grabbed the guitar case that held her sword. For a moment she stared at the towel Bourne had given her. She folded it carefully and placed it on her slab. Then she stormed out into the night.

No sooner did Ariadne step outside than she skidded to a stop. Po-Mo and his men were standing expectantly outside the house on Eagle Hill. In the lamplight, she could see the totems dangling from their necks. The objects looked like pieces of jewelry to the casual eye, but her vision pierced through the dim of the night to see their true nature: ears, tongues, knucklebones.

"Hey, Miss Silent Knife, we missed you last night. You gonna come back tonight and lead us again?"

She stared at them, their guns and knives and brass knuckles forming menacing bulges beneath their jackets. With their muscles and their weapons and their burning blood, they were hers to command. She had earned that authority, by dint of effort and now lineage as well. All she had to do is reach out, beckon, and they would move for her, kill for her, die for her.

She remained motionless. Po-Mo and his gang shifted impatiently.

Ariadne's head felt as if it had turned to stone. Slowly, so numb she could barely feel the muscles of her neck move, she shook her head.

Po-Mo looked her up and down. There was no challenge in his eyes, no smugness, not even any lechery. Instead, Ariadne saw something far more disturbing: *confirmation*.

“All right, you little bitches—” Po-Mo raised his shotgun high, turning to the troops. “—stop standing around holding your jewels. Let’s go hunt up Roarke once and for all!”

They cheered, fangs bared, weapons and fists shaking in the air. Ariadne watched them race off into the dark, into what remained of the war. They grew distant, a receding nausea. She steeled herself and headed in the opposite direction.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You found me. I’m impressed.”

A thin finger pushing her oversized glasses up her tiny nose, Marie leaned back on the bench by the Charles River as if it were a calm summer day, not a frigid Boston night. Knobby knees pulled up to her chin, she had been throwing breadcrumbs to apparently nonexistent ducks. The small chunks disappeared beneath the swiftly flowing waters.

“Don’t assume you wizards have all the tricks.”

Ariadne stood on the bike path, sword drawn but shielded from easy view by the guitar case. Marie could see it; that was what mattered.

“So how did you do it?”

Ariadne shook her head. “Asking how I found you isn’t a very good question. What you should be asking is what I want.”

Marie shrugged noncommittally, reached into her bag of bread again, and found it empty. As if Ariadne were the next best choice for her attentions, she turned to face her visitor at last.

“I always like the *how* and *why* questions better than the *what* questions,” said the girl. “But since you’ve got the sword and fangs and claws, I guess I’ll let you write the script for now.”

Marie’s wry smile indicated anything but anxiety. Still, heartbeats didn’t lie, and Ariadne could sense the girl’s pulse quickening.

“I need information. About an artifact.”

“Uh huh,” said Marie. “And in return?”

“Besides letting you live?”

“I kind of figured that was complimentary. Like peanuts used to be, on airplanes.”

Ariadne did not smile.

Marie wrinkled her nose. “Lighten up. Don’t be so ready to pick a fight. Didn’t anyone ever warn you that wizards are subtle and quick to anger?”

“I’ve seen you around,” said Ariadne. “I know you’re a part of the Merlins’ power structure here. You have a vested interest in what’s going on. What you’re going to learn from the question I’m asking is worth what I’m going to gain from what you tell me.”

“Hrm.” Marie pursed her lips, then folded her arms across her chest—an instinctive protective gesture of prey. “Maybe. Depends what you have to offer. Give me a preview.”

Ariadne didn’t feel like taking the time for careful excerpting, so she told the whole story. She described the hidden room, the statue and how it made her feel, the vampires turned to black ash whose visages then reappeared somehow in the knobs of stone. For good measure, she mentioned Roarke’s magics as well—the golem, his ability to transform his limbs into weapons. Liliame’s voice in her head screamed at her to be circumspect; she took great pleasure in ignoring it.

“Hrm,” said Marie when Ariadne had finished. Her fingers were steepling and unsteeping throughout Ariadne’s speech. She bit her lower lip at the corner.

“Not all of it fits,” said the young wizard slowly. “But enough of it does to bother me. Congratulations.”

“What bothers you? What is it?”

“I need to see it myself.”

“Not possible.”

“Look,” said Marie, “there are all kinds of statues. I know people who spend whole lifetimes categorizing them. What I think it might be, and what it actually is, could be wildly different. You didn’t come all this way for a vague answer, right?”

“Give me some possibilities, then.”

Marie shook her head. “I need to see it.”

“We can work out some payment here.”

“Seeing it with my own two eyes. That’s my price.”

Ariadne walked up to her, came within striking distance. She felt Marie tense, felt that same magnetic buzz from the storeroom crackling around her.

“I can bring you there,” Ariadne finally said. “But I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“I can take care of myself. Besides, I’ve been to Eagle Hill before. I’ve met with your, what do you call her, Prince? I even saw you there once.”

Ariadne frowned. So she had noticed.

“Your aura was still hidden, then,” said Marie. “But now I see light peeking out, like through holes in a cloth. I might even be able to take a look ...”

Marie reached out a hand toward Ariadne’s face, only to find, between eyeblinks, the flat of Ariadne’s blade blocking her.

“Relax,” said Marie. “You asked me about why you felt cold down in that basement, and how you managed to open that secret room, right? How can I tell you anything about yourself if you won’t let me take a peek?”

“I’m not your guinea pig,” said Ariadne hotly. “I’ve found out a few too many things about myself lately, so excuse me if I’m not eager for more revelations.”

“It’s not going to hurt.”

“Of course not. Because the moment it does, I kill you. Got it?”

Marie nodded. Ariadne slowly lowered her blade, but only just enough to admit Marie’s hand. The wizard reached out again, touched the air just above Ariadne’s forehead, moved her fingers slowly as if picking through threads of a tapestry.

“Wow,” Marie said with a heavy intake of breath. “There’s some powerful magic at work here. You’ve got quite a cloak over your aura.”

“A cloak?”

“You’re telling me you didn’t do this yourself?”

“No.”

“Then someone did it to you. A while ago, too. This spell’s pretty old.”

“Why would someone do this to me?”

“Cliché as it sounds, auras are windows to the soul. This cloaking spell here, it’s a shield against prying eyes. Remember those old disguise kits for kids—the Groucho glasses and fake mustache? Same concept, but much more effective. This is better than a wig and new fingerprints.”

Ariadne’s thoughts raced. Liliane. It had to be. She had to have been disguising Ariadne’s identity. Every time a Kindred joined the court of New Jerusalem and shared communal blood, Ariadne had asked him or her if they had recognized the taste of hers, if they could match it to a sire they knew. No one ever could. It must have been by design.

“But now the disguise is fraying,” said Marie. “I can get glimpses of the real you. Not much yet, but in a few weeks you’ll be back in the public domain.”

“Maybe the spell’s served its purpose,” Ariadne muttered. “Maybe the caster decided it’s not needed anymore.”

“Could be,” said Marie. “The funny thing is, it looks like it’s been broken down from the inside.”

“What?”

“I think you’re doing this somehow, Ariadne. The fact that you don’t seem to be aware of it is all the more interesting.”

“I’m doing this?” Ariadne took a step forward. “How? Why?”

“Eh-eh—” Marie held up a hand “—I’ve given you more than enough in return for your information. We need to keep that *quid pro quo* going. You need to bring me to the statue.”

Ariadne paused, considering. She and Bourne had already trodden where they shouldn’t have. Bringing a new person into this conspiracy would only add to her chances of discovery. But she couldn’t stop now, not when there were these many questions, not when Marie might have the answers.

If there was any chance this road led to freedom from Liliane, she had to take it.

“You’re a fool,” said Ariadne. “But if you live long enough to tell me what I want to know, I suppose you’re worth it.”

“Gee,” said Marie, “I like you, too.”

Ariadne gestured for Marie to follow her.

“Um, is that your phone?”

Ariadne reached to the buzzing object at her belt. Andrei’s number. The green text message glowed brightly on the cracked LCD screen: *READY WHEN U R. @ THE COVERED BRIDGE ALL NIGHT.*



Ariadne seldom prayed, but when her fervent wish for Liliane's study to still be unoccupied came true, she breathed silent gratitude to a God that had not totally abandoned her. She could use all the help she could get, especially since she could already feel the pulsing of the statue beating loud in her veins as Marie and she entered the secret corridor behind the bookcase.

By the time Ariadne reached the storeroom, the noise almost drowned out Marie's words.

"There's a hidden passage here all right," said Marie. She walked the circumference of the room, finger raised as if trying to find the direction of the nonexistent wind. "But the shielding spell is strong. It could take me hours to break it. But you said you just ... tugged and the door opened?"

Ariadne nodded, eyes fixed on the center of the floor where the skinless, taloned hand was now noticeably absent. Had she imagined it the whole time, or would its freakish owner be waiting for her once the portal reopened?

"I don't understand how, but I did it."

"I told you before, vamps don't have magic," Marie said. "But you clearly have something, something I don't understand. I'm not sure I can coach you, though I'll try."

"No need," said Ariadne. "I remember how."

Without giving any further warning, she raised her hand to the light fixture and pulled with her mind. The secret passage yawned open in the floor, eliciting a yelp and a leap back from Marie.

Ariadne dropped into a fighting stance, but the passage was clear. There was no sign of the things that had pursued her before.

The two women descended slowly into the cavern below. Ariadne's sword was out, her senses primed, but the pounding pulse of the statue before her rendered them almost useless.

Marie stopped in her tracks as she followed Ariadne's gaze to the center of the blood pool. "Oh," she said softly. "I was afraid of this."

"What?"

"It's an *Almavore*," she said, all humor gone from her voice. "Which, of course, shouldn't be possible."

"A what? And why?"

"A soul-eater." Marie shifted with visible discomfort. "No one at my *Consilium* has ever seen an actual one. I don't think there's been a firsthand sighting since the sixteenth century. They were carved in the first days after the sundering of our world from the Supernal realms of existence."

Ariadne stared uncomprehendingly, unsure if Marie's obscure explanation or the statue's call were to blame.

"It's a long story," Marie waved her hand dismissively. "Let's just say that long, long ago human beings got cut off from the higher realms and started looking in all sorts of places for a substitute for that wholeness. Some looked in the opposite direction, right into the Abyss, into the spaces between nothingness. Thankfully most of those who looked there went blind or insane before they could tell anyone what they saw. A few remembered enough of what they saw in there to carve images of it. This is one of those images. Stop looking at it!"

Marie seized Ariadne by the shoulders and forcibly turned her away. Ariadne shook her head, blinked, tried to refocus.

“It’s more than just a statue,” Ariadne said. “I think it’s alive somehow.”

“Not life,” said Marie, emphatically. “But not just a statue, that’s true. This isn’t just an image. It’s a reproduced piece of the Abyss. A reproduced *entity*. And like everything from the Abyss, it’s hungry.”

“How and why did it get here?”

Marie’s eyes kept nervously taking in her surroundings. Her body was tensed for some inevitable attack. Still, she kept speaking in hushed tones. “No clue. I only know the stories. Boston was a refuge for all sorts of mages—classy ones such as the Putnams, who left Europe over religious disputes, and ... others, folks who had every reason to be on the run from any sane society. Nalwood was one of those types. The man was crazy-obsessed with vampires, which, no offense to present company, wasn’t looked upon as a sign of sanity. Especially back in those days. I think he actually wanted to *be* a vampire.”

Ariadne gave a bitter chuckle. “He did? And here I thought wizards were supposed to be wise.”

“Well, he was smart enough to stay away from becoming one. But he found what he thought was the next best thing: the Almavore. He summoned it and bent it to his will. It would let him drink souls, the same way a vampire drinks blood. It gave him power.”

“How?”

“I don’t know the details exactly, but I know the general principles. You establish a sympathetic link with a target—through, say, a lock of hair—and then you can zap that target’s soul into the Almavore from near or far. Said person’s body becomes black ash and their soul becomes juice for you. The Almavore gets to eat and gives you a dividend in return. Magic, of a sort. Not nearly as cool as what I can do, naturally. But effective enough for brute purposes.”

“Souls.” Ariadne shook her head. “Liliane always told us the Damned had barely half a soul left. But obviously it works on our kind. Does that mean we really do have souls?”

“Um, this sounds more like the kind of discussion you want to have with your priest. We have bigger priorities.”

Ariadne pressed her. “What can one do with this power, once one has it?”

“Nothing good. Power from the Abyss is tainted, warped, and it warps the wielder in turn. Things like the Almavore don’t just give handouts. They want something, usually something that involves making our world more like theirs. Nalwood, he once created a rainforest where all the vines were made out of children’s intestines. A lot of good people died taking him down and, I thought, destroying the statue as well.”

“Is that why you said the Almavore being here shouldn’t be possible?”

“One of a dozen reasons at least,” said Marie, “but it’s not in the top three. Number one being that the Guardians told us the Almavore statue had been destroyed. Of course, the Guardians are all a bunch of damned liars. It’s their job. It’s also a marvelous way of hiding their screw-ups, of which this obviously is one. Which brings us to reason number two: none of us at the Consilium had any idea this was here until you told me. Our radar should have been pinging like mad the moment this thing showed up in the city, but it sounds like it’s been in your basement for quite a while and this is the first I’ve heard of it. This has ‘cover-up’ written all over it. Someone clearly doesn’t want us to know they had missed one of these.”

“And the third reason?”

“That’s the best one of all. Nalwood was a mage. If you’re right and this Roarke fellow summoned the statue ... well, I’ve never heard of a Dracula being able to use the kind of magic that would summon and command a thing like this.”

“Roarke obviously can.”

“Let me rephrase,” Marie said, by now wearing the pedant’s mantle so comfortably that Ariadne wondered if she wasn’t a teacher somewhere. Her bearing and manner reminded her of a TA she had had during her breathing days. “I’ve heard of Draculas who can pull all sorts of tricks with their blood. Call it magic if you want, but it’s not. Something must be special about this Roarke if he got the Almavore to listen to him.”

“But why could I uncover it? I didn’t make any deals with it.”

“I don’t know. I can’t even begin to explain how you could do that, how you could feel its power inside you like you say you do. Maybe you should be giving me the magic lessons.”

The pulsing noise grew so loud that Marie’s next words were lost to Ariadne entirely.

“Can’t you *hear* that?”

“Hear what?” asked Marie.

“I can barely hear anything else. There’s a sound coming from the statue.”

Marie stared at her, then at the statue, then back to Ariadne again. She snapped her fingers.

“I *knew* it!” Marie shook with what might have been either fear or excitement. “You’re burning through that cloak around your aura. Now that I look at you, I can see it clear as day here: a nimbus! Well, sort of. A magical resonance. At any rate, something I’ve never seen on a Dracula before. I think you could have been one of us, if you hadn’t, well, got bit by a bat, or however the heck you became a vampire.”

“It needs to stop.” Ariadne winced. “It needs to stop or I’m going to go insane!”

“Don’t worry,” said Marie. “I paid attention in history class. There’s a spell to banish this thing. Stand back and cover your ears.”

Marie closed her eyes, raised her hands perpendicular to one another before her, and began muttering words in a language Ariadne couldn’t understand. The young wizard’s body glowed brightly in the dark cavern; Ariadne had to shield her eyes.

The glow spread across the cavern floor and crackled across the blood pool. Yellow flames flickered up and down the statue’s mottled surface. The hum of the Almavore resonated in Ariadne’s mind still, now joined by a fast-tempoed series of pulses that almost felt like music. Wild music, for the wild energies being unleashed.

Marie pitched forward slightly, but caught herself. “Whew! Someone’s warded it well. The enchantment’s strong. But so am I.”

This time she spread her arms. Her hands glowed red, then white. Unseen winds tugged at her hair and clothing. Ariadne had to shield herself behind a rock outcropping from the sudden blaze of heat. Her sword began to burn her hand, forcing her to drop it. The pulse-music in Ariadne’s mind grew louder, more frenetic.

Red clouds evaporated off the blood pool as the Almavore glowed brightly. But within seconds, the glow faded, commensurate with a dimming of the light from Marie’s hands. With a cry, the mage fell to her knees.

“I will not be denied!” she shouted out, her voice echoing. “Do you hear me? I am Marie Silvermoon, sentinel of dusk, and you will yield to me!”

She thrust her hands forward, white lightning leaping from her palms to smash and cascade against the Almavore. Small showers of rock rained down from the ceiling, and Ariadne gave up all hope of this little visit being undetected. She imagined Marie could be heard from across East Boston.

Abruptly, the lightning ceased. Marie toppled forward. The Almavore stood placidly in the pool, mocking the two figures before it with its hideous shape.

Ariadne waited a moment, then crept close.

“I’m okay.” Marie crawled back to her feet, waving Ariadne off. “Sorry for the dramatics. They kind of help. But not in this case.”

“What happened? What went wrong?”

Marie wiped her brow, now soaked in sweat. “It’s like trying to remove a stone on a riverbed, but you have to reach through a raging current to do it. The Almavore’s being charged up, getting linked to thousands and thousands of souls, and I’m not powerful enough to disrupt that stream. The stream’s getting stronger. It feels like a whole city’s worth of souls is headed its way.” She shook her head. “I have to tell people about this. A lot of people. I assume you knew this before asking me, so you’re not going to lop my head off now to stop me, right?”

“My sword’s on the ground.” Ariadne pointed to where it had fallen.

Marie stared at her for a moment, and then burst into a smile. Ariadne did not return it.

“A shame you’re a walking corpse and I’m me. Funny thing is, I think that if things were a little different, you and I might even be friends.”

With a wink, Marie worked up a running start and jogged around one of the rock formations. She never emerged around the other side.

Ariadne walked over to her sword and retrieved it. The pulse of the Almavore, temporarily drowned out by Marie’s magic show, had returned stronger than ever. She couldn’t stay around here.

As Ariadne turned to go, a rolling moan issued through the cavern, like the lowing of a cow in childbirth. Ariadne could not stop herself from turning to see the Almavore begin to shiver and bubble. Its carved stone tentacles curled in, then stretched out again, as if it were in the throes of either agony or pleasure. Somewhere at the base of its pedestal, a thin red line spread and parted to reveal pulsing walls of juicy pink flesh.

Ariadne lost all awareness of the sword clutched in her hand, lost every perception and sensation except those that surrounded the Almavore. Thin human hands were parting the stone shape, hauling out a crimson form behind it.

A head of hair matted red with gore emerged first, and then a smooth neck and shoulders, followed by a torso with tight cords of muscle across the back. Two high, ripe breasts emerged next. The rest of the body followed in a sluice of Vitae.

Prince Liliane, naked and blood-soaked, rose to her feet before Ariadne. Her body reflected the candlelight like a beacon that lit the dim corridor. Her fangs were out, and her eyes blazed red.

Ariadne suddenly wanted to do nothing more than fall on her knees and bow, but the horrific spectacle of it all kept her frozen in place.

With as inelegant a move as Ariadne had ever seen from her Prince, Liliane wiped her long arm across her mouth, lapping up the blood on it. Then she stared out, her eyes focusing on Ariadne as if she was having trouble remembering who she was.

“Ah.” Liliane’s voice was a raspy whisper. “Daughter.” Her chest rose and fell rapidly, patches of pale white showing from beneath the coating of scarlet. “You should not have come here.”

Ariadne could find no sensation in her limbs. Her nerves had all gone cottony. In a moment of panicked doubt, she wondered if she still even had a body, if she had not just become a floating consciousness, held in place only by the Prince’s will.

The stone of the Almavore behind Liliane had resealed as if it had never parted.

“Tell me why you have come.” Liliane spoke the words softly, yet her voice pulled at Ariadne’s brain like a set of rusty iron fishhooks. Ariadne’s own words began streaming out uncontrollably. The events of the last few weeks, told against her own will, came all out of order. Every attempt Ariadne made to obscure or hide information only made her shout it louder. By the end of the tale, Liliane’s face had curled into a ladylike but deep frown.

“We gave you everything,” the Prince said slowly. “Our love, our teachings, our very name. We gave you titles, blessings, forgiveness when you erred, infinite tolerance of your transgressions. And how do you reward us?”

Liliane opened her mouth grotesquely wide, like a python, her eyes sinking into thin red slits to make way for the expansion of her cavernous maw. A furious hiss emerged, and when she spoke next, it was in a hissing voice.

“You give audience to our adversary! You pry into our affairs, despoil our holy place with your befouling feet, sell our secrets to impudent magicians!”

The Prince’s face shrunk back to its normal dimensions, reformed into her characteristic frozen masque of elegance.

“They have all told you lies. Roarke. The magician girl. This room here is a font of purity, the shining jewel in New Jerusalem’s crown. Yet you were weak enough to believe it to be a place of evil.”

Liliane’s words burned themselves into Ariadne’s mind, threatening to overwrite her memories. Her thoughts warped and dissolved. The more Liliane spoke, the more difficult Ariadne found it to think about anything other than the Prince’s words.

“Our love, we see, was wasted.” Liliane shook her head, striding up to Ariadne and running a bloodstained hand across her daughter’s cheek.

Then, with the other hand, she slapped Ariadne hard.

Ariadne felt her limbs collapse, felt herself fall to the ground, her sword clanging out of reach.

Liliane stood above her Seneschal, glaring down, and her gaze tore into Ariadne’s heart, forcing tears from her eyes and sobs from her throat.

“F-forgive me,” Ariadne heard herself say. At once, Liliane was her father, her mother, every angry teacher or priest who had ever caught Ariadne even considering the mere possibility of wrongdoing. In the Prince’s presence, Ariadne could not voice, could not even think, of the horrors of the Almavore, of the suspicion and fear with which she now regarded her sire and Prince. She was suddenly that small, helpless college student once

more, whose life had been freshly torn from her. The young Kindred for whom Liliane was both tormentor and salvation.

“These are perilous times,” Liliane said, “in which those who do not serve the light with all their heart must be culled. We thought you a servant of holiness, Daughter.”

“I am!” Ariadne cried out, her mind regressing with every passing second. *I’m a good girl! I promise I won’t do it again! Please!*

“We want to believe that.” Liliane paced around her in a circle. “Despite all your treasons, we wish to, in the service of God, emulate His infinite mercy. Yet God also deals swiftly and surely with those who will not repent. He is both Lamb and Lion, and so shall we be. As the Holy One will call for a sorting on Judgment Day, so shall we. You shall have one final test, our Silent Knife, our ungrateful daughter. One more chance to turn from your wicked ways. Should you do so, we will raise you up to take your place by our side, on the watchtowers of New Jerusalem. But should you choose the path of sin...”

The statue groaned, a shuddering, needy noise, a hatchling’s hunger yawning in anticipation.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ariadne was dimly aware of footsteps, could recognize Po-Mo and his soldiers as figures from a dream. At Liliane's command, they lifted Ariadne up, hauled her body like an unresisting sack of meat back up the corridor, through the sanctuary, into the bare room with the solitary stone table that she knew so well. Some were shaking their heads in disbelief. Others were leering.

Ariadne found the strength to loll her head, to stare a question into Po-Mo's eyes.

"Sorry, chickie," he said, "but Liliane's the big boss lady. Besides, you ain't what you used to be. I remember the Ariadne who stood up to me, kicked my ass, made me freakin' shoot myself. I remember the Ariadne who sliced and diced Roarke's men like freakin' horsemeat, *bam, bam*, down! Now look at you. It's like I don't even know you no more."

Ariadne wanted to shout back to him, but her lips were frozen.

"You ask me, this place needs some new management. Po-Mo's gonna be *numero uno* around here. Kinda like the sound of that."

Liliane ignored his words, called out a command that Ariadne had heard a thousand times before. The Seneschal felt herself being thrown onto the stone slab. She knew what was to come next, steeled herself as best she could for the sharp, piercing wrench of pain as her wrists and ankles were staked to the stone. It was not enough. She tried not to cry out, but some noise escaped nonetheless.

Time passed. She had no idea how much. When Liliane moved back into Ariadne's sight, the Prince was clean of blood, dressed immaculately once more in her flowing white gown. Liliane beckoned airily with one hand, and Ariadne heard the telltale squeak of the cart's wheels.

The cart that held the box of ants.

Liliane drew close, smoothed out the hair on Ariadne's forehead lovingly. "It saddens us to return full circle, after all this time."

The box opened. Although she could not see, Ariadne knew the ants had begun to pour forth. Ariadne couldn't feel them yet, but she knew that in moments her boots would be consumed. Then the ants would begin on the flesh of her toes.

Ariadne found her voice at last, the vice of Liliane's will loosening only slightly. "You said I had a chance to repent!"

“Of course,” said the Prince, and, as Ariadne felt a harsh tickle beginning at the soles of her feet, a soldier walked into the room accompanied by someone. She heard their entrance, the sharp footfalls of the soldier and the other’s submissive shuffling. She didn’t look up; the captive had to be Andrei, taken captive again.

Liliane held up Ariadne’s sword, dangling the grip of it lazily above Ariadne’s staked wrists.

The message seemed clear. “You ... you want me to kill Andrei?”

“Your mortal lover? Why, child, no.” Liliane’s words came soft and sweet. “We have already given you our word that you may keep him as yours, and our word is law. How can we set an example of loyalty if we renege on our own promises?”

Ariadne felt the burn in her feet begin, felt the fire of a thousand tiny mandibles ripping at flesh and bone.

“No,” the Prince said. “A much easier test. Despite ourselves, we love you too much to give you too hard a road.”

Liliane gestured again, and the soldier handed off the person Ariadne had assumed was Andrei to Po-Mo. He walked the captive into Ariadne’s line of sight.

It was Marie.

The young mage walked as if in a trance, her eyes glassy, placid in the vampire’s grip. She showed no signs of recognizing Ariadne, or anything else around her.

Ariadne wrenched, tried to crane her neck for a better view.

“She’s a cutie, boss.” Po-Mo laughed, tousling Marie’s hair. “You sure Ari has to do her in?”

Liliane ignored him. “A simple test, dear one,” said Liliane. “This interloper whom you brought, perhaps she bewitched you. Well, have no fear. The wizards may forget themselves, but we have not dealt with them for centuries without learning their tricks, learning how to stop them from flitting in and out of our holdings like birds. I have already clipped her wings. All you need to do is finish the job.”

The pain in Ariadne’s feet receded. Rough hands yanked the stakes out of her body. She was shoved to her feet, her legs scooped off the table to a shaky stand on the floor. She looked dismally at her feet to see the flesh mostly gone—the pain of standing on muscle and bone was wrenching. Her body was already starting to heal, but not quickly enough.

Ariadne realized the pain had cleared her mind. She could think for herself again, at least until Liliane decided to exert her will once more.

“We are your family,” Liliane was saying as someone shoved Ariadne’s sword into her hand and pushed her forward.

She stumbled. Po-Mo laughed.

“You are our Hand. Your duty is to us. Slay her.”

The room spun and blurred. Ariadne counted four of Po-Mo’s gang here, plus Po-Mo himself. Then Marie, frozen, her face soaked in sweat, and then Liliane, now beside Ariadne, running her hands up and down Ariadne’s shoulder. So many smiles, laughing at Ariadne, as she staggered about the room, trying to find her balance.

Po-Mo held Marie’s arms, frog-marched her to where Ariadne stood.

Ariadne tested the weight of her sword. Her wrists burned and ached where the stakes had been removed. Her arms felt heavy as she raised the blade high. Marie, still half-insensate, stared up at her.

Ariadne was not tall, but Marie was particularly petite. The wizard's small size, her flushed face, gave her a vaguely non-human appearance. If anything, it seemed that killing her might be easy. Killing had always been easy for Ariadne.

But Ariadne's blade remained poised before the wizard's face.

"Kill her, my Silent Knife."

Ariadne had killed children before. When Liliane had starved her, when she'd had no other choice, when her hunger pulled the reins of her body. This was no different. For her to survive, Marie had to die. It was simple.

So why wouldn't the goddamn blade move?

Disobeying Liliane's order would mean nothing. Marie would still be killed, just by someone else. Liliane had been very clear in the early months and years of Ariadne's tutelage: **Your only mandate is survival.**

But what good would survival be, as someone else's puppet?

"Do it. **Kill her.**"

Ariadne felt the order, almost indistinguishable from the impulses her own brain gave to her limbs.

But her blade wavered in the air and did not move.

Was this Marie's doing?

No. It was her own.

"No," said Ariadne, tossing the sword to the ground. "I am not yours. You can kill me, but I am not yours."

She had no time to see Liliane's reaction, or anyone else's. The door to the room had just flown open to reveal Silas.

The elder stood in the doorway, his waistcoat disheveled, his eyes wide with panic.

"My Prince, it has begun! The Council's forces are here! You must help us!"

Liliane's expression darkened as she stared first at Silas, then back at Ariadne. The sword lay at Ariadne's feet and Marie remained alive.

"We are involved in a very delicate—"

"There is no time!" Silas bleated. "My Prince, you must save us!"

Liliane sighed, steadying herself. She beckoned to Po-Mo. "You, come. Take the magician with you. If our ungrateful daughter will not kill her, at least we can interrogate her before we do the job ourselves."

"What about her?" Po-Mo chuckled a thumb at Ariadne.

"She will *stay*." The spoken command plowed into Ariadne's brain, freezing her in place. "We will not be long. If she should stir—" Liliane nodded to the other soldiers "—cut off her legs."

With a swirl and billow of her white dress, Liliane spun on her heel and strode out. Po-Mo marched Marie out behind her. Silas crept along by in their wake. Ariadne struggled fiercely to bend down and pick up her sword, but she might as well have been a stone statue herself.

The door remained open. After a few moments, one of Po-Mo's men took a step to close it.

A knife flew out of thin air, piercing his throat.

As he gargled helplessly, the others turned to the door. This was a perfect distraction. If only Ariadne could move! She strained with all her might against her sire's command. With a suddenness that surprised her, her limbs unlocked.

From here, the Silent Knife's training took over. Ariadne slipped her wounded foot beneath her sword, kicked the blade into her hand, and, whirling in place, chopped the head clean off the soldier behind her. As the second soldier turned toward her, she cut him in half on the backswing.

Then her unsteady ankles gave way beneath her. She used the momentum of her fall to tumble out of the way of a scuffle drawing close to her. She didn't see the fight. There was a grunt, then the sound of bodies slumping to the ground.

By the time she turned around she saw Bourne, bloody stake in hand, driving it into the heart of the last soldier.

Ariadne and Bourne were now alone in the room. Supporting herself on the wall, Ariadne dragged herself up to her feet.

"You!"

"Shut up," said Bourne, glancing nervously back at the door. "We don't have much time."

"Then the Invictus Council hasn't really ordered its troops in?"

"Of course it has," said Bourne. "But they did it because Silas was the one who squealed."

Ariadne gaped. "He did what?"

"Yeah. Who would have guessed that, right? It looks like there are a bunch of rats on this here sinking ship."

A shape appeared at the door, and Ariadne readied her blade. Silas entered, and entered alone. He closed the door behind him.

Ariadne did not lower her sword.

"Liliane will only be gone a few moments." Silas strode forward, stepping over the fallen bodies of Po-Mo's brigade.

"Come close, stripling," he hissed, drawing near to Ariadne. "Let me take a close look at the slip of a girl who has seduced my childe into betraying everything to which he has sworn, dragging me into dishonor along with him."

He held Ariadne's face in his wizened, leathery hand. His fingers felt like worms wrapped in sandpaper. It took all of Ariadne's self-control not to ram her sword through his aged body.

"Hmmm," said the elder. "You have no idea how long I've planned and plotted, how many nights I've been unable to find peace in my paintings, because of you."

Ariadne pulled his hand away forcefully. "You don't exactly put me at ease either."

"I should be Seneschal. I'm eldest. I've served our Prince the longest, the most faithfully. She chose Roarke because of his brawn, his ruthlessness, and now she has reaped the rewards of her foolishness. Yet it would appear that she needed a second lesson. Hence you, here, now."

"Oh, and you were so loyal? Betraying us to the Council?"

"I had no other choice."

Ariadne was backed against the wall. She knew she should have just pushed past him, gained herself some breathing room, but where Liliane froze her with terrifying love, Silas radiated a stench of rotted power, a toxic cloud that kept her where she was for fear that any change of position would make her breathe it deeper.

"I entrust my dim-witted childe with the simplest of tasks: bring about your destruction. He flummoxed it. Why? Because he developed some mad infatuation with you. Well, rest assured, stripling, I have no such fondness. What Liliane has begun in this room, I can easily finish."

His nails became claws, long and heavy like iron. They hovered by Ariadne's throat as his other hand grabbed a fistful of her hair, and this time, despite all her pushing, Ariadne could not budge his wrists.

"Sire—"

"Silence, Bourne!"

"Sire, please," Bourne said. Silas flailed out with his clawed hand, slashing red lines across his childe's chest. Coughing, staggering, Bourne fell back.

"We have supposedly won the war against Roarke," said Silas, "but at what cost? Flagrant breaches of the Masquerade, the murder of a member of the Invictus Council, the conversion of our home into a den of anarchy. Disastrous! Thanks in no small part to our incompetent young general. I told the Council as much, and at least *they* respected my opinions. They're taking over. Together we'll get rid of Roarke *and* Liliane's mismanagement."

Roarke? Mismanagement? Ariadne's mind raced madly. These were the grounds upon which Silas appealed to the Council? Then the Invictus might not know anything about the Almavore statue at all. Bourne had never heard Marie's explanation. All he could have told Silas, if anything, was that Liliane kept a weird statue beneath her study. There was only one way to find out, and it might be the way to save herself.

"Do you even know about that statue?"

Silas's rheumy eyes narrowed. "What gibberish are you spilling now?"

"Well played, Bourne!" Ariadne cried out. "It looks like we all keep our little secrets, eh? As you two were planning your revolution, you didn't tell your sire about what we found down there? It's Liliane's, Bourne. You were right. But you have no idea just how bad it is."

Silas kept his gaze firmly on Ariadne, but she could tell that the low growl issuing from his throat was meant for Bourne alone.

"Um, I was getting to that," Bourne coughed. "It's complicated."

"I'm sure." Silas's voice dripped. "Was this another omission designed to obscure your relations with this woman?"

"Why I didn't tell you is not important," said Bourne. "Here's what we saw." His explanation was quick and remarkably free of his usual levity, which told Ariadne how frightened he was. But Bourne didn't know the half of it.

Silas did not loosen his grip on her. "A rather bizarre tale. Why should I believe it?"

"Whether it's true or not, boss," Bourne said with a smile, "it makes an even better case against Liliane if you bring it before the Council, doesn't it? Under Council rules,

Nadine and Roarke weren't even supposed to be reading that grimoire. What do you think the repercussions would be if they saw Liliane playing with that statue?"

"You need to think beyond your stupid politics." Ariadne glared, struggling in Silas's grip. "That statue's not just a tool you can use, it's a threat to all of us. I can help you get rid of it, but only if you start treating me like an ally and not a prisoner. Now."

"You dare to make demands of me?" Silas reared back his hand, claws flashing.

"I have information. I spoke with that girl, the wizard. I know what the statue is and what it can do."

The sound of gunfire suddenly reported from the halls. Gunfire and screams.

Silas grimaced, his hand wavering, and for a moment Ariadne saw just how old he was, how many beatings the world had given him. For Liliane, the centuries seemed to have only added to her strength of will, but they had eroded Silas's. Was it merely a difference in attitude, or was it somehow the Almavore's doing? Was the statue constantly feeding Liliane power from the souls of both her enemies and those who trusted her?

Silas released her, and Ariadne wasted no time in moving to the far side of the room, her blade firmly at the ready. She then told them what Marie had revealed.

The elder stroked his pockmarked chin, his eyes widening with every detail he heard. No doubt part of him didn't believe a word she said, but Ariadne knew Silas, knew his paranoia in the end would allow him no other option but to consider the Almavore a threat.

"Troubling," Silas said at last. "I gather you propose an alliance, then?"

"An alliance of convenience," said Bourne.

Silas snorted. "As if there is any other kind."

Ariadne thought of Andrei, of the text message on her phone. He was waiting for her back on campus, promising escape. Bourne and Silas stood before her, promising her an even deeper road into the hell she had known for ten years.

"Damn it!" she cried out to no one in particular. "Liliane's my sire. When she's in the room, I can't even think about lifting a hand to fight her. And if I try to leave, she can always call me back. I've got no choices at all."

"If my suspicions are correct," said Silas, "and if you and my childe are deviating from your nature and are actually speaking some shreds of truth, then you are capable of far more than you believe—which is all the more reason why it would be wiser to kill you right now, before you realize just what you are."

"You can try," said Ariadne, raising her blade.

Silas seemed to consider for a moment, then folded his wizened hands. "Perhaps another time. If we are now deciding on the path of Lucifer, we will need all the fallen angels we can muster."

"Real poetic, boss," said Bourne. "Me, I would have just said every conspiracy needs a good-looking babe."

Gunfire again. Everyone tensed.

"Stay here, in this room," Silas ordered. "The Council's agents know where we are. They know we stand with them. As long as we remain here, we will not be harmed."

Ariadne envisioned the beautiful carpets and tapestries on fire, the communal cistern shattered, in ruins, Liliane's library torn to shreds. This had happened to the Prince once before.

“What will you do when the Council wins—if the Council wins?” Ariadne asked warily.

“Oh, they will prevail,” said Silas. “Liliane has kept this city running smoothly for a century, through careful manipulation of all the powers that be, but Roarke disrupted that dance. Order must be restored.”

“Roarke only rebelled because of the Almavore,” said Ariadne. “At least, that’s what he told me. He implied that there were certain lines even a Prince shouldn’t cross.”

“If a Prince keeps order, that is all that matters,” said Silas. “But monstrous statue or not, Liliane has failed in her mandate. Roarke caused havoc, and Liliane did not seem to care overmuch.”

“Because she had the Almavore!” said Ariadne. “Don’t you see? She wasn’t incompetent and she wasn’t overconfident. She knew she had the power to crush Roarke or even the Council if she had to.”

“Wait a minute,” said Bourne. “If that were true and she had the power, why is she so confident that the city’s going to be a lost cause? That the only way to build her New Jerusalem is to escape and start over?”

Ariadne shook her head. “The Almavore is a battery. You have to feed a battery with something—in this case, souls. Maybe she’s not leaving the city because she’s being driven out. Maybe she’s planning to leave the city because she’s about to get all she needs. Marie said the Almavore was being charged with a city’s worth of souls.”

“Maybe she was exaggerating?”

“No. We’ve seen black ash all over the place, and there were hundreds of faces in the Almavore. That means she’s harvested a lot of souls already. But that was just the preamble. She’s leaving Boston because by the time she’s through using the Almavore, there won’t be a Boston left.”

She had seldom seen Bourne and Silas silent for so long.

“Liliane loves this city,” Silas said at last. “She is a fool and a dreamer, but she loves this city. She would not destroy it.”

“No,” said Ariadne firmly. “She loves New Jerusalem. Who’s to say that Boston is where she wants New Jerusalem to be? What if Boston is just another of her many ‘necessary sacrifices,’ to give her the power to build it elsewhere?”

Silas rubbed his chin uneasily.

“A soul eater,” said Bourne. “Never much believed in souls myself—nothing convinced me religion’s the opiate of the masses more than dying and becomin’ Kindred—but I’ve seen some things in my time that make me wonder. Of course, even if there was a soul, you’d think folks like us, vamps and all, wouldn’t we have cashed those in?”

“Call it what you want,” said Ariadne. “‘Life energy,’ ‘death energy,’ ‘pixie dust.’ Marie said that all you need is a sympathetic link, some piece of the person in question, and you can convert their soul into power.”

“Okay, fine,” said Bourne. “In all the chaos of the war, she’s had plenty of chances to snatch blood from enemies and stray mortals. But how would she have blood from members of her own court, like Hera? I mean, we’re hardly a bunch of diablerizers here.”

Ariadne realized then exactly how Liliane had acquired the blood from Hera, from all of them. The answer had been in front of them every evening as they held hands.

Silas spoke her thoughts for her. “The common pool. I always knew that idiotically egalitarian ritual had to have some ulterior motive.”

“She can wipe us all out with the snap of a finger,” said Bourne. “We’ve been fighting the wrong war this whole time. It distracted us from seeing what she was up to. She must have planned it that way.”

Ariadne shrugged. Even if the war hadn’t been engineered as a distraction, it had certainly served that purpose well enough.

Bourne scratched his head under his cap. “Wow. Gotta hand it to the old lady. She’s good. I’ve joined a bunch of lost causes in my time, but this one? It takes the freakin’ cake. How do you think she’s gonna harvest the rest of the city?”

“I haven’t figured out that part yet,” said Ariadne. “But I’m willing to bet she has.”

“Let’s just get the hell out of here,” Bourne said. “This thing’s got to have a range limit.”

Ariadne shook her head. “You and Silas can leave. Maybe you can convince some extremely naïve Prince to take you in. But I can’t. Liliane owns me, body and blood. I don’t think I can ever leave.”

“I told you,” said Silas, “you underestimate yourself. You command magic.”

“No, I don’t,” said Ariadne. “Marie said I had the potential, maybe, if I hadn’t been Embraced. But vampires can’t do magic. Only Roarke can, and that’s because he’s somehow wrapped up with the Almavore.”

“Really now? Didn’t *you* reveal that secret passage?”

“Yes, but—”

“You are carrying the Prince’s death in your very veins, if only you knew how to use it. Why else do you think she has kept such close eyes upon you?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Bourne swallowed. “Ariadne, you said that Liliane told you she was your sire.”

Ariadne nodded, an uneasy feeling forming in the pit of her stomach.

“Well, when I told Silas that, he didn’t think that could be true.”

Ariadne blinked. Her mind raced. *No. Don’t take this from me. Whatever else Liliane is, whatever else she has done, she has given me a name.*

“I need confirmation,” said Silas. “I need to taste your blood.”

Ariadne leveled her sword. “Oh, no,” she said. “You’ll have to kill me before I let you do that. Besides, plenty of Kindred have tasted my blood and no one’s ever been able to make an I.D. on my sire. Marie said there was some sort of cloaking spell placed on me—”

“Which, according to your story, the magician said is gone now. We can find out.”

“No! I’m not letting either of you get your fangs anywhere near me.”

“There is no need, girl,” Silas said. “We have already established that I have all the blood of yours I need right here, from the others who have already drunk their fill as they dined on you a few minutes ago.”

Silas snapped his fingers. Bourne scurried to the center of the room, retrieved the box of ants, and brought it to his sire. Heedless of any danger, face absent of any disgust, Silas plunged his wizened hand inside, churned the assemblage of ants back and forth, then produced a squirming, swarming fistful.

He leaned back, opened his mouth wide, and shoved them in, so far down it looked as if he would gag himself. Then he stretched his neck and pitched forward again, ants crawling around his lips and jaw as he smiled.

“Yes,” he said, licking some of the stray insects off his cheek with a sickly gray tongue. “Ohhh, yes. I know the stink of this blood well. I’ve barely tolerated it long enough to spit it out during the unity ritual.”

Silas laughed a thin, wheezing, grating laugh. “Little girl, you are Roarke’s childe.”

Ariadne wanted to vomit at the very thought of it. “I know I somehow resisted the order to kill Marie, but Liliane has made me to do so many things against my will. I had to do them. Doesn’t that mean she’s my sire?”

“That means nothing,” Silas huffed. “An elder has many means at her disposal for dazzling and persuading the untrained mind, chief among them the Vinculum. There is enough taste of Liliane in your blood to confirm she’s bound you. Were she actually your sire as well, she might well control you fully. But tell me: if she could just exert her will upon you so easily, why all of the careful initiations she ministered to you over the years?”

Within Liliane’s presence, Ariadne would believe anything that came to her, soaked in the honey of her Prince’s voice. Here, in the cold wilderness beyond the reach of her Prince, the truth started biting into her skin. Ariadne started cursing, finding and calling out every obscenity she knew. Then she made up new ones, mixed and matched, twisted them, until she was screaming and growling like a beast and Silas’s bony hands were pressing on her shoulders, vainly trying to steady her.

“Stop it, you miserable waif, and listen! I have tried in secret to learn sorcery for centuries, to no avail. That Roarke succeeded may be more testament to his blood than his studies. If that is so, then his strength is yours, too. If we unlock that strength, use it to our own advantage . . .”

A wicked gleam crept into the old man’s eye. “This city will need a new Prince. By my side, you can maintain your post as Seneschal, in the new order that will come.”

Ariadne stared at the walls of the room, wherein she had been both victim and executioner, exchanging those masks dozens of times. She imagined herself taking up swords again under Silas’s command to punish Liliane for all the Prince had done to her.

Or else returning to Liliane’s silken voice and the cold, marble hands that would forgive her, grant redemption, and then place her in the vanguard of a holy host waging a war—a war not to preserve the city, but to destroy it in the service of some other dream.

An explosion rocked the house. Chunks fell from the ceiling as the candelabra swung back and forth. Eve’s head tumbled down from the frieze to shatter against the floor.

“I’m done with serving,” said Ariadne. “I have another option. Fight your own wars. Against Roarke, against Liliane, against whomever you want.”

“You . . . you’re going off with pretty boy?” Bourne gaped. “Last time I checked, he wasn’t so pretty anymore. I say we—”

“No!” she cried. “I won’t stand in your way. That’s all the help you’re going to get from me. No, wait. I’ll offer this, too.”

“You—” she turned to Silas. “Liliane was right about you. You have no head for tactics. The Council will never trust anyone from Liliane’s court to run this demesne again. Sooner or later, they’ll take you out. It’ll be sooner if you stay here waiting for them. What you need to do now is get out and go to the last place anyone would look for you. That would mean going to meet Roarke.”

“What?” Both Silas and Bourne spat out the word.

“Everyone knows how much you two hate each other, so no one will suspect you’re there before it’s too late. The fact is you need him. If I have some link with the Almavore because I have Roarke’s blood in my veins and you want my help, then why not go to the source of that blood? Join forces. I’ll even tell you a safehouse you can use: Room 12 at the Fresh Pond Motel. In fact ...”

She fished into her jumpsuit to the chain she kept close to her skin, tore something from it, and hurled it their way. “Here’s the key. We won’t be needing it anymore.”

“Where will you be in all of this?” Silas sneered.

“I’m going to rescue someone who’s in danger because I once brought her here. When she’s safe, my slate is clean. I’m gone. Hunt me at your peril. But then, I think you’ll have plenty of more important things on your mind.”

“You impudent whelp of a—”

“I’ll miss you too, Silas. By the way, steer clear of weddings.”

Silas stared in confusion. Bourne stared too, but with something else in his eyes. For the briefest of instants, Silas’s portly childe seemed to look his near-century of age. Then his face reformed into its usual mask, with his characteristic leer. He gave a low whistle.

“Shucks. You’re sexy when you take charge.”

“Shut up,” said Ariadne, taking up her blade. “And goodbye.”

Chapter Thirty

Ariadne stalked through the halls of Liliane's sanctuary, certain that this would be the last time she would feel this carpet beneath her feet, see the friezes on the walls. She had tried and failed to leave before, but that had been different. She had been different.

Liliane had trained her well. The Prince had taught her not to care whether she lived or died crossing swords in the night. She had been a tool, an instrument, a Silent Knife, carrying out the work of others. Now, for perhaps the first time, she was wielding herself.

Stumbling through the halls, Ariadne certainly felt like a newly born thing. Her limbs shot pain through her as she walked; it would take time to heal the wounds from the ants and from the stakes.

A man in a flak jacket burst through a door, automatic rifle rising in a reflexive gesture. Ariadne's grabbed the barrel just as he squeezed the trigger. The red-hot metal scalded her fingers when she turned the weapon aside. The unexpected angle of the recoil threw him off balance, and Ariadne fell upon him, ripping out his throat with her fangs. His blood sent shivers through her veins as she drank deeply, relishing the new strength the liquid gave her.

From behind him, another man—they all looked identical, with their helmets and goggles, their asexual padding—rushed forward, drawing a sword. Ariadne thought she recognized the weapon; it looked just like the one Mister Rose had used, the one that could steal souls at a single touch.

Mister Rose had said there were only two. Liliane had taken Rose's. Was this the other? Ariadne couldn't take the chance. As he came swinging in Ariadne's direction, she felt the tightness of the space, especially with his fellow's corpse right below them. Ariadne rushed in low and knocked into his knees. They wrestled on the ground, Ariadne ducking and twisting so that the blade wouldn't have a chance to even nick her.

They struggled for long moments, matching strength for strength, before Ariadne simply let go. Propelled by his own force, the man couldn't help but stagger off-balance, and that was all the opening Ariadne needed to wrench the sword from his grasp.

A moment later, she had buried the sword in his exposed forehead, splitting the enforcer's face in two. His body spasmed for a moment before falling back, already beginning to curdle into rot. Ariadne pulled the sword loose, studied it in the flickering light. Then she

reared back with all her strength and drove it into the wall. Plaster splintered, and as she slammed it home into a support beam she felt the sword bend with a satisfying buckle that reverberated up her arm. Poor workmanship. It seemed unlikely that this was the other soul-stealing sword. If it were, it certainly wasn't going to be of much use to anyone now.

She slunk away, dissolved into the shadows, ducked inside rooms whenever she heard footsteps. She was not here to fight back all of the Council's soldiers. All she needed to do was find Marie, and that should have been easy. Under normal circumstances, the smell of her living blood would have shone out like red beacon in a sea of Kindred stench. But the house was awash in blood right now, much of it from the mortal ghouls that served as the Council's soldiers.

Ariadne strained and sniffed, following the trail as best she could as it led downstairs.

Po-Mo had Marie. Would he be sticking close to Liliane?

The deeper she went, the more Ariadne's senses failed her. She began opening doors one by one, finding rooms empty or full of corpses. She paused when she reached the door to the armory.

Something was moving inside, although Kindred or kine she couldn't tell. She edged closer, strained her perceptions.

A sharp pain lanced through her stomach, a fire that blossomed all the way through to her lower back. Ariadne gasped as she saw the hand that had burst through the door, holding the knife that had buried itself hilt-deep in her gut. She tried to pull away by pushing off the door, only to find it opening inward. She lost her balance and fell to the ground, her sword dropping from her hand.

Po-Mo was standing above her, clicking his tongue.

"Huh. Thought you knew better than that."

Despite the pain, Ariadne thrust her pelvis upward, kicked out at the other vampire, but he jumped back out of her reach. She grabbed the knife and unstuck it from herself as she rose. Po-Mo seized the advantage, barreling into her and knocking her back up against the doorframe. His shoulder pinned hers. One hand seized her throat, and the other, claws extended, ripped into the fresh wound in her stomach. Ariadne gasped as he twisted and tore at her innards. Her vision blurred.

"Ahh," Po-Mo sighed as he pressed his nose against hers. His shamrock tattoo loomed like a green cloud before her eyes. "This is gonna be good."

Ariadne screamed at her senses to focus, to shut out the pain. His claws were raking her from the inside out. She could feel the impacts pressing up against the skin of her chest from within.

"Ain't you the one who taught me that you can't let stupidity slide?"

His mouth gaped wide, revealing jagged fangs, browned with the stains of dried blood, caked with remnants of rotted flesh from previous kills. He craned his neck to move toward hers.

Mistake.

In baring his neck, he gave her a window—a small one, but it was all she needed. The very pain of her injury gave her the drive to push herself forward, to seek Vitae to heal. She plunged her own fangs into Po-Mo's jugular, and the sparkle and rush of his blood exploded like lit gunpowder in her mouth.

He bucked, but Ariadne wrapped her arms around his back, pulling him tight, using the press of his own body pinning her to secure the hug.

The fountain gushed up her fangs into her skull, her temples, her eyes. It spread to every nerve in her body, singing a mad song of pleasure and violence. Sharing Vitae in the unity ritual, she and the others had only sipped the blood of their fellows. This was the first time she had ever drank long draughts of another vampire's blood.

She tasted Po-Mo's life in flashes, in barely comprehensible fragments of sight, sound, and memory. She smelled corned beef cooking on a leaky gas stove and hungered for it like she had never hungered for any food in her life. She drank him all the faster, heard the cry of babies, the scolding of his mother, the sighs and tears when his father was dragged away by the police.

In the space between seconds she sat through every boring class of high school until he gave up and shared every cigarette from his choking first to his choking last, disappointed at how dead lungs rejected the tobacco, how dead taste buds no longer let the drug calm a restless soul. She shared his first kiss, the awkwardness and fear of his first sex, the pounding need to prove himself and the yearning questions about where love existed in all of this.

His first drug sale, his first murder—again, a panicked, fearful moment, full of desperate questions he never received an answer to in prison. Only more fear, more panic, more need to prove himself.

Po-Mo was coughing and sputtering in her grip as she drank him, but the Po-Mo in her arms was unreal compared with the Po-Mo in her mind and in her blood. She felt his Embrace, underwent all the torment and exhilaration she felt during her own change all over again. Abruptly the memories ran dry and she released him, actually threw him to the ground as the wild orgasm of his life burst inside every cell in her body.

Ariadne collapsed against the armory door, her breath wild and out of control. Po-Mo lay in a heap beside her, silent and unmoving. Ariadne sank beneath the ocean, unable to feel her body. The only sound from the world beyond was a small cry, like a cat, or a bird, or ...

Marie. The woman lay propped up in the corner against a crate of ammunition, a life-sized rag-doll whose eyes still stared blankly. Still, she was making small murmurs. Ariadne zoomed in on those sounds, narrowed her focus until they were all she could hear, then used them as a beacon in her climb back to reality.

Ariadne rose to her feet. Her hands ran over her stomach and could find no scar, no sign of Po-Mo's mauling. How was that possible? A wound like that should have taken hours to heal, yet she felt fine—better than fine.

She had never drained another Kindred into destruction before. It was forbidden, called Amaranth or diablerie, a crime Liliane had told her was punished in all Invictus courts. It also wasn't supposed to be possible unless the other vampire was in torpor, helpless.

In the heat of the struggle, it had seemed the natural thing to do. The power coursing through Ariadne reassured her of that. *You're done with Liliane's court*, it told her. *You're done with the rules.*

She approached Marie. "Um, hi?"

Marie gave no response.

Ariadne refused to look at Po-Mo's decomposing body, trying desperately to sort out present from past, to separate the Gaelic from the English in her thoughts.

"I saved you. Whatever he did to you, he's not going to bother you again."

Marie resumed her whimpering.

Ariadne cursed under her breath.

"I'm not sure I ever properly introduced myself. I'm Ariadne."

Marie inched up against the crate, as if to push herself backward through it. Her wide eyes shimmered as she stared up at the woman before her.

Ariadne slapped Marie across the face, without much effect. She looked past her, up and down the armory, reaching out with her senses. Had Po-Mo screamed? Would help be arriving? Where were the Council soldiers?

"We have to go. Come on, snap out of it."

As she drew close, Ariadne could feel that magnetic buzz around the perimeter of Marie's body, an invisible caul. Whatever enchantment Liliane had placed around Marie, Ariadne could sense its presence and map its boundaries. If only she knew how to get rid of it.

"I've got magic, too, right?" Ariadne whispered. "I should be able to do something."

She made a few random gestures to no avail. She tried to "pull" the way she had in the hidden storeroom, but nothing happened.

Ariadne scooped up Marie awkwardly in her arms. Since becoming a vampire, she had seldom held another human being without the intention of harming him or her. Andrei's return had changed all that. Ariadne tried to determine if Marie's skin, her smell, felt anything like Andrei's, but all she could smell now was the rotted cabbage from Po-Mo's childhood meals.

Footsteps. Real, or in her head?

"I'm going to get you out of here. I promise," Ariadne said, releasing her. "Just give me a moment."

She placed Marie behind another stack of crates, then turned.

Invictus Council agents came charging up the stairs. Either they had heard Po-Mo's scream or they were just making their sweep of the facility. Either way, they put two and two together. Ariadne saw blood in their eyes, smelled the rage in their hearts.

Good.

They fell upon her, one by one at first, then in a swarm. She was a blur, a rage of jabs and kicks and swings of her sword. Here, her fist broke a nose. There, her foot shattered a kneecap.

She felt different. Heavier, but not in an awkward way, as if she just possessed more mass. She assumed this must have had something to do with Po-Mo's blood inside her. She would ponder it later.

The men pulled back, and the closest one opened up with his automatic rifle. Ariadne braved the hail of bullets, knocked the gun from his hand, kicked him back into a stack of ammunition. She staggered back, blood oozing from a dozen punctures.

There were too many, and they were too well trained. The space was too confined. Even with the heady rush of Po-Mo's blood singing within her, with the Beast rearing its howling head, some part of her brain recognized she could not win this confrontation. She had to get Marie and get out.

They had her pinned now. She was hunkered down behind an empty crate, and they were shooting at her from all sides. She crouched, hoping they ran out of ammunition and gave her an opening, but they were too savvy for that.

They advanced as they fired, moving as one entity, coming toward her from all sides. She lashed out, swinging her blade, but they kept their distance. The second the sword completed its arc, they pounced.

All five of them piled on, overmatching her strength. A face loomed before her, and she saw a gold tooth flashing in its mouth. Then the back of her skull crashed against the stone floor, and something in her screamed with two voices, hers and Po-Mo's. The magnetic buzz was back. It seemed to be spreading down her arms to her hands.

Her hands. Her hands felt as if they were on fire. Were her opponents severing them? Ariadne couldn't tell. She could only feel the flames spreading, engulfing her vision in bright blue flame.

She heard screams. They were not her own.

In a scrambling pile, her assailants fell off her at odd angles, their bodies consumed in azure lightning. She watched dumbly as the blue fire flayed the flesh off their bones in a ridiculously short time, far faster than ordinary flames should have accomplished that grisly feat. Some managed to rise to a staggering stance, while others writhed helplessly.

Ariadne snapped herself out of her stupor, grabbed her sword, and cut them down one by one, easy targets that they now were. With each man's destruction, the blue flame snuffed into sparkles. The corpses dissolved, leaving a pile of familiar black ash.

Her mind felt strangely quiet. Po-Mo's thoughts and memories were gone. A strange calm suffused her. She moved to reclaim Marie, scooped up the dazed mage once again.

Across the room, Po-Mo's body made a small exhalation. She didn't want to look, afraid of what she would find. Drawing near, her suspicions were confirmed. Black ash lay in a pile where his remains had been.

Was Liliane attacking them from afar? Why would she have destroyed Po-Mo's body? How would she have a sympathetic link to the Invictus soldiers?

In her arms, Marie gave a long moan, then cursed. Ariadne peered down.

"You're back?" Ariadne asked brusquely. "Can you walk?"

"I don't feel so good." Marie brought a hand to her forehead and blood trickled all down her arm.

Bullet wounds. Who knew how many. Ariadne could feel and smell Marie's blood pouring all over her own body. Damn it! Ariadne wasn't used to fights where she had to worry about trivialities such as ricochets. Her own wounds were already healing. Marie's wouldn't be.

"You'll be all right," Ariadne said flatly. She had no words of comfort; these, too, hadn't been staples of her training.

"Bullshit," Marie coughed. "But wow, I'm psyched you tried to rescue me. Never saw a Dracula do that. Especially one of Liliane's."

"I'm not one of Liliane's," said Ari. "Not anymore."

"Good," said Marie. "Because that statue has to go. Or the whole city goes."

I'm leaving the city, thought Ariadne. She must have thought it too loudly, because Marie, her eyes growing glassy, suddenly made a fierce grab at Ariadne's shirt.

“You can’t let that thing take everyone’s souls!” she hissed. “You have to promise me that. This isn’t just their lives. It’s their very being, the shards of what makes this world more than just dirt and stone!”

Marie was sweating, her teeth chattering. Her grip on Ariadne’s shirt began to loosen, but her eyes still sought out those of her would-be savior. “Listen!”

Ariadne leaned down to hear, even after she realized she didn’t have to. Her senses worked fine at any distance. But somehow the human gesture just came back to her.

“Promise me! Even if it’s only to keep enough of us warm-blooded types alive for you to feed on, dammit!”

Ariadne stared at Marie, felt the power of her life and her determination seeping away. When Hera died, she had felt nothing, not even after knowing her for ten years. But something in Marie—perhaps that shard of which she spoke—called out to her, made her keep eye contact when every instinct told her to drop the woman and start running.

“I ... I ...”

A crackling sound. Ariadne turned to see fire—red fire, real fire. Some stray shot from one of the Council soldiers must have sparked off a pile of ammunition. At once, something ignited.

Flares shot up from the corners of the armory. Ariadne felt her insides seize up.

“Pay attention!” Marie’s hoarse voice demanded. “I think I know what I did wrong. I tried to cut off the flow of souls to the Almavore, but I didn’t have the power to create a big enough dam. I didn’t put my entire soul into the spell. If I did, it could create enough backflush to—”

With a *whoosh*, the combat dummy caught flame, became a headless angel of fire passing holy judgment on the fallen denizens who had defiled his chapel.

“We’ve got to go,” Ariadne said. Marie in her arms, she began running.

“No!” Marie pounded uselessly on Ariadne’s arms. “Take us back down there! You can use my soul to do it. I’m dying anyway—”

“I don’t know how to cast any damned spells!”

Ariadne ducked around the corner as two Council gunmen ran past, shouting warnings about the fire.

“Besides,” she whispered, “the flames would kill us both before we got anywhere near the statue. We have to get out.”

Marie murmured a protest. Then her head lolled. Ariadne propped it up with one hand as she took off down the hallway.

Ariadne’s life—her unlife—whatever it was she had known, was burning up behind her. Would Liliane be caught in the flames as well?

The fire roared away such thoughts as the panicked Beast inside demanded she flee. Marie in her arms, Ariadne barely outran the flames as they rushed to claim every room in the subterranean complex beneath Eagle Hill. She raced up the stairs, stepping over the fallen and the decomposing. Ariadne flew through the interrogation room, but Bourne and Silas had long since departed; bent and broken brass was all that remained of Lucifer’s offer of the apple to Eve. Only now, in fleeing the flames, did Ariadne truly understand the expulsion from Eden. The thrill, the horror, the newfound power, the uncertainty about what lay ahead and the certainty that there would be no returning.

Flames at her heels, Ariadne fled the garden and stepped out into the world of pain beyond.

She immediately threw an arm up to shield her eyes. The glare of lights from fire engines and police cruisers blinded her. How long had the fire been raging? Long enough to attract attention, apparently. People were running everywhere, shouting orders.

Were they in league with the Council? Were they just arriving to investigate the conflagration? Either way, Ariadne needed to be elsewhere.

“Here!” She shoved Marie’s prone form into the arms of an approaching firefighter. “She’s been shot!”

Then she turned and ran, ignoring the shouts receding behind her. She ran with speed they couldn’t match, ducked into shadows where even their flashlights couldn’t find her. Ariadne knew these streets better than any others, knew every broken wall and open drain-pipe, every ripped fence that could be made to look mended behind her with a moment’s effort. She wasn’t used to running from foes, but a fight here would be pointless.

Soon enough Ariadne was alone in the night wind.

Alone. No shelter. No safe haven for when the sun rose.

As the sounds of the sirens faded, Ariadne opened herself to the rush of the wind, the moan of airplanes landing at Logan, the yowling of a neighborhood cat. And beneath it all, the low throbbing of the *Almavore*, which she could still feel in her veins. It had tasted her blood. If she ran far enough away, could it still claim her soul?

Almavores. Souls. Magic spells. Too much to think about.

Marie might live. The wizards would handle it. Or they wouldn’t. There wasn’t anything Ariadne could do about it any longer. She had winnowed down her responsibilities, one by one, until at last only Andrei remained.

She was free.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ariadne drew near the covered bridge on the campus of her daylight days, stepping silently across the well-tended green that had turned brown for the season. The chemically treated lawns still shone unnaturally bright and verdant into late autumn, but winter always won in the end. The trees were bare, the ponds iced over, and the students, wrapped in expensive down coats and alpaca scarves and mufflers, scurried from one warm den to another, leaving the campus a frozen ghost town patrolled at intervals by a sad-looking campus security van.

At this time of night, the campus was a necropolis. It was here, at night, that Ariadne had died. It was here, in the frozen, monochrome shadow of the world she had known and loved, she would finally bring Andrei underground to join her. She was an inverse Orpheus, come to drag her Eurydice into Hell.

Liliane would not own him. But what about Roarke? Was Roarke even still walking the nights, or had someone finally slain him? Would Ariadne have felt his destruction if it had happened?

Bundled in a giant coat that she didn't need, but which obscured the blood and grime from the night's battle, Ariadne walked ghostlike down the pathways out from the quad, her sword making an awkward bulge beneath the jacket. These paths ringed for her what had once been the most welcoming of homes, the source of so many firsts and the promise of so much more to come. Now all she saw was the bridge, hunkered over like the shell of a corpulent turtle, mottled and dilapidated, dissuading visitors from seeing what lay within. The tape in Ariadne's mind had played the scene of this bridge and what happened beneath it so often over the past ten years that she was surprised to see all the details she had accidentally altered or forgotten. The rock that she thought was on the left had really been on the right, and she hadn't remembered that cedar tree at all.

Had it always been that way or had landscapers changed things? Certainly the paved paths that circled campus hadn't always been diverted away and the stream beneath the bridge had been active, not dried up and filled in with cement blocks. Time had moved on, relegated this place to the realms of the forgotten.

Still, Ariadne could find *the* spot as unerringly as she could find her own limbs. Then she waited, playing an odd sort of goalkeeping with her memories, allowing this or that one past her defenses so it could blossom in her mind, deflecting this or that one before she

could even start to dwell on it. She watched a phalanx of hardy New England ants march doggedly across the cement path, undaunted by the low temperatures.

As the clock rounded 2:00 A.M., Ariadne began to worry. He said he would wait here all night for her, but perhaps the cold or late hour had forced him to give up his vigil.

Their plan to run away together seemed increasingly insane with every moment he delayed the rendezvous. Even with how little he knew, he had surely seen enough. She wouldn't blame him for coming to his senses. Not that he knew it, but this was his last chance to do anything she didn't want him to.

But no. When Andrei made an appointment, he always kept it.

Liliane, or even Bourne or Silas, might have intercepted him. There would be no profit in it for them, of course, but the sheer spite of revenge might suffice for motive. Then Andrei would become yet another innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of the war. Or perhaps his car just wouldn't start.

She stiffened. What if he never came and the sun began to rise?

A crack of branches. Ariadne turned to see Andrei tromping through the dry, crackling leaves to the bridge. It took all her composure not to run up to him.

"Ariadne!" he called out.

"I'm here, Dre!"

She could not fit any of the anger, the impatience, the worry, or the relief into her voice. In this place, on this bridge, the strange power he held over her was at its strongest. He could ask her for anything, to stake herself through the heart with her own blade, and she could not refuse him.

This would all change after the Embrace.

As Ariadne awaited him, the wind brought her the scent of another warm life.

Cassie.

She was small, pudgy, compact, but her hair was as golden and full as Andrei's, her eyes as deep and blue, albeit bleary-eyed and scrunched against the cold, half obscured by a pink windbreaker. Her nose was small and buttonlike. Her mother's contribution?

"We had to find a bathroom," Andrei apologized. "This is a little past her bedtime, and she's not used to going out in nature. Right, Princess?"

"I wanna go home," Cassie moaned, burying her face in Andrei's thigh. "It's cold!"

"I know." He rubbed her head beneath her hood. "You've been a brave, brave girl tonight, out here on our adventure. And now it's all paid off. We're finally going to go someplace warm and nice, and stay there for a long, long time."

Ariadne couldn't help staring. She had seen Cassie's pictures, but that was entirely different from the living, breathing proof of her. It was proof of her mother, of Andrei's last ten years, of a world where people lived and loved and changed and moved on. Without Ariadne.

Ariadne could dimly perceive Andrei's words—his apologies for being late, his comments to Cassie about this stranger being "the nice lady Daddy told you about"—but somehow they never quite penetrated. The bandage around his four-fingered left hand seemed to glow accusingly in the dim security lights.

Ariadne suddenly remembered the pounding, anxious, always-abortive forays she made to the train station during the last ten years, sometimes going so far as to actually buy

a ticket to Andrei's home town. Travel, of course, had become much more difficult since her unlife, but she still could have risked it. Something had always stopped her.

"It's not any easier that you look just the same," Andrei had told her during one of their trysts at the Fresh Pond Motel. "I mean, some part of me kept wanting to just walk back on campus and see you as you were, age twenty, still reading the same poetry books."

He could have no more imagined Ariadne's life in Eagle Hill than Ariadne could truly understand his life in a suburban wonderland with a wife and child. Yet it was fear of seeing that very life that had kept her off the train each time.

Andrei had seen her world, even if only in small, traumatic bits. Could she bear to see his, live in his?

Ariadne wondered suddenly how long she had until dawn. She shouldn't waste any time. She had to Embrace him here, now, and get away to shelter before the sun rose and destroyed them both. Otherwise, she would have to explain too many things before he was ready.

"Here." Andrei led Cassie forward, tentatively. "Come on, say hi. I bet you'll be great friends."

Cassie looked up at her father, then to Ariadne, as if looking for support in her conclusion that this whole meeting was insane.

Ariadne squatted down. "I'm Ariadne. Can you say that name?"

Cassie inched backward, bracing herself against Andrei's legs. Her wide eyes shimmered.

"Come on. Ahr ... ee ... ahd ... nee."

"Go on." Andrei placed his hands on Cassie's shoulders.

"Let's get a better look," said Ariadne, and she scooped Cassie awkwardly up in her arms.

"Eew!" said Cassie, pulling back as she peeled away the lip of Ariadne's coat. "You're all smelly and sticky!"

"Cassie," Andrei chastised, "that's not a very nice thing to ..." His voice trailed off.

"What?"

Cassie began struggling, finally wriggling free of Ariadne's arms and dropping to the ground. Ariadne's coat was thrown open momentarily in the process.

"Blood," Andrei said softly. "My God, you're covered in blood!"

Ariadne stared down at herself, then up at Andrei. There was fear in his eyes, and in Cassie's as she ran behind her father.

"Ariadne, is that a sword?" he gasped.

"It's all going to be okay." Ariadne reached out a hand. "Just come close, and you'll see."

He batted her hand away. It was a gesture without much force or violence, but to Ariadne it felt like the golem's punch.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"It's a long story," she said, "but everything's fine."

"Fine? You're bleeding. Let me take a look—"

"No!" Ariadne took a step forward. Andrei and Cassie took a step back.

"Ari," Andrei began, looking all around them, "is it safe? Those people, are they after you right now? We have to go. We've got Cassie to think about."

"I didn't tell you to bring her!" Ariadne yelled, far more forcefully than she had intended. "I told you to trust me, to follow what I said."

"You didn't say *not* to bring her. I'm not going to abandon my daughter, Ari. I thought we were clear that she was going to come with us."

Cassie began to whimper.

"*You* thought ... *we* ..." Ariadne sputtered. She shook her head in disbelief. "Doesn't this violate your custody agreement, or—"

"Ixnay!" Andrei hissed, cocking his head toward Cassie. "We'll, ah, discuss those details later."

Great. So now this had become a child kidnapping. What a perfect way to stay below the radar.

What now? Embrace both Andrei *and* Cassie? Embracing one mortal was ordeal enough. Ariadne had never heard of a Kindred who could do two at once. What else would she do with Cassie? Kill her right in front of Andrei's eyes? Just abandon her out on campus after turning her father into a monster?

This wasn't how it was all supposed to happen. The Embrace should have been a beautiful, hideous dance, where she would usher him under the cloak of night into a world of painful union. Instead, she was starting to succumb to fear once more, and it was here again, on this bridge, this damnable bridge, this link between the present and the past, between the living and the dead.

Ariadne held up her hands, as if she could will the world to stop for a moment while she reassessed. If she could only get Andrei alone.

Andrei was still looking around, trying to spot hidden menaces lurking in the trees. The shadows obliged his paranoia by shifting with every gust of wind.

"I want to go *home*," Cassie whined.

"I have the train tickets for the 3:00 A.M. Red Eye," said Andrei, fumbling for words as if he, too, were trying to salvage a plan from this debacle. "It's 2:15, so we can still make it. But now we'll need to get you cleaned up first. I'm pretty sure I can exchange the tickets for the 6:00 A.M. departure if—"

"No!" Ariadne cried.

"If it's the, um, logistics of Cassie, don't worry. I know a lawyer who says this can all get ironed out."

"It's not that," said Ariadne. "I—we can't be on a train at 6:00 A.M."

"Well, we certainly can't stay here. It's freezing, and you're bleeding. Come on already!"

It was that voice, the voice he had always used to reprimand her, to chastise, to treat her as if she were a child Cassie's age. Something inside her quaked.

"Dre, please. You don't understand—"

"Then *tell* me, Ari. God knows, I've been patient. I've been helping you for weeks. I came out here and waited all night, and I've been letting you take your time with your explanations. But if you're backing out now, I think you at least owe us an explanation!"

“Daddy, don’t yell!”

“Dre—”

Andrei grabbed Ariadne by the shoulders, tried to pull her with him. “Come on, damn it! Tell me!”

Ariadne stumbled as she pulled away and fell to the ground, dragging him down with her weight. Cassie cried out as she watched her father and Ariadne tumble down the embankment, over and over, in a hideous parody of lovemaking, into the dry riverbed.

They came to a stop with him straddling her. Ariadne shuddered beneath him, tossed her hair back, and then opened her mouth wide and let her fangs extend to their fullest. A sharp hiss escaped her mouth.

Andrei’s face froze. He staggered to his feet, took a step back and then tripped. His mouth formed wordless questions of horror.

Ariadne smiled, a smile of infinite sadness, of infinite relief.

“That’s what’s going on, Andrei.”

For the second time in ten years, the bridge echoed with the sound of tears. Ariadne couldn’t even tell whether they were Andrei’s or her own.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Later, Ariadne would remember the rumble of car engines, the men in dark suits clambering out of vans with guns and badges raised. They were all images from a dream; surely, if they had been real, Ariadne would have reacted. She would have reached for her sword and fought or fled, not just sat there staring at the expression of horror and fear on Andrei's face.

Liliane had been right. Mortals could not tolerate a monster in their midst. There had been no love in Andrei's expression, in his wide eyes, in the meaningless noises that came from his throat. When the men with the guns surrounded them, he turned to them not in fear, but for protection. They swept him and Cassie in one direction, dragged Ariadne's limp form in the other. Yellow letters—F-B-I—glowed faintly in the security lights.

Ariadne's eyes followed him until too many bodies blocked him from her sight and the doors of a van closed it all off. The campus receded in the small window, shrinking to a vanishing point where only the covered bridge remained.

Ariadne had already died there once. Tonight, she had died again. Maybe this time she would have some peace.

Time passed. Ariadne sat in a white, windowless room lit by pale halogens. Although the frame was metal and not stone, it might as well have been her cell beneath Eagle Hill. Bare, blank walls. A slab for a bed. A small basin for washing, which she didn't need. Trays appeared and disappeared through a slot, containing a single saline bag filled with blood. So they knew what she was. She was surprised how little she cared.

Her hands and feet were bound in shackles. Perhaps she could break them. Likely she couldn't. She didn't make more than a few token attempts. Mostly, she just sat.

Ariadne had never had this much time to be still, to think. She found herself lost in images of the world in which she and Andrei would have lived, had they made it out to the suburbs:

Ariadne stands on a wobbly stool, hanging a crepe-paper lamp on a hook above the desk in their bedroom. Orange, bright, star-shaped, it spreads a soft light upon the five-by-eight space that she has tried to make seem slightly bigger by using scarves instead of curtains, by angling them in the corner instead of along the wall. She remembers someone once telling her that a mirror makes a room seem larger, but she cannot bring herself to place one here.

Ariadne, wearing a sundress that will never see the sun, has dinner waiting when Andrei returns home after another day of looking for a job. A decade has passed since she last tried to cook something. She never really made a successful meal even when living.

They adhere to the script of dinnertime pleasantries as Andrei eats the half-hard pasta unconsciously, talking the whole way through, as if he too were Kindred and only ate to keep up appearances.

Try as she might, these are the only scenes she can imagine. No romance, no scenes of solace. Only monotony, only the awkward jerking dance of marionettes on stage. Cynicism or, at long last, a look at the world through open eyes?

It was Cassie who kept her visions in monochrome. Cassie, who, in Ariadne's imaginings, gave her fish-eye looks, who stopped playing and stared whenever she walked by. Even in the scene where she imagined herself cooking, Ariadne kept seeing Cassie's tiny eyes peeking out from behind the half-stove in the kitchenette, watching, accusatory.

No. It was not just Cassie. She kept the film rolling, moved Andrei into place and gave him the voice she always remembered from college, the voice that, the more she thought about it, had never truly changed.

"Notice anything?" she asks Andrei, inclining her head toward the newly hung lamp.

"The hooks are uneven," Andrei grumbles, placing his coat on one of them. "I know. I'll fix it tomorrow."

"No," Ariadne says sweetly, or at least, in her best memory of what sweetness sounds like. "Look around."

Andrei does, but she can tell his eyes are still seeing the bus ride back from the unemployment office, home to this tiny apartment on a side street in a New Hampshire town the name of which keeps escaping her.

Ariadne glides over to the star-lamp she has installed. "See?" she grins, clicking it on and off.

"Oh," says Andrei. "That's nice." With only a few moments pause: "Did you fill out those forms to register Cassie for school yet?"

"No. "I'm sorry. I promise I will tonight. I just ... I just thought the room needed more character."

"I think Cassie's education is a little higher priority than décor, don't you think?" He is smiling, but his words are not.

Maybe it wouldn't have been like that at all. Maybe Ariadne had just spent too much time around Bourne and his pessimism had rubbed off on her. Maybe it was the endless waiting that did this to her.

Even in her visions, she waited. Waited while Andrei and Cassie had their time together. Waited until Andrei came back from his day of work. Waited all night, awake, as he slept. Would she surf cable channels in the wee hours of the morning? Pace the quiet streets up and down, unnerving the neighbors and fanning the flames of their gossip? Would her whole world be some tree-lined street, a late-night grocery store?

She would never know.



It could have been day or night, but it must have been night, because she did not feel sleepy. During her last round of sluggishness, she remembered the movement of bodies. Someone had brought in a table, and now a mug of coffee rested on it, beside a plate of raspberry Danish. Ariadne watched an ant make a determined summit attempt at the crest of the frosted crust.

“Well,” the man across the table from her was saying, putting up his legs and crossing his arms behind his back, “shall we cut to the chase?”

Ariadne inclined her head just so.

The man was a welcome addition, if only because he was now the only other real thing to look at in this room. As such, Ariadne saw him very well. She could see his crew-cut brown hair, the starched and pressed white collar of his shirt bearing a polished American flag lapel pin, the black tie free of lint. He was dressed in much the same way Andrei used to look, smelled nearly the same way Andrei did. With one important exception.

“I didn’t realize the FBI had a habit of employing our kind,” Ariadne said coolly.

The man in front of her smiled, revealing the barest hint of fangs. “The Bureau has its uses. Besides, even if they don’t know we exist, our goals still intersect at times.”

He tossed a folder onto the table in a move meant to look nonchalant, but Ariadne was well versed in the language of body motion, particularly wrists. His were the reflexes of a swordsman.

The folder label announced something about narcotics enforcement.

“It’s entirely *quid pro quo*,” said the man. “The field director received a commendation for busting up a ‘drug ring’ in East Boston, ending the wave of arson and gang violence that had been gripping our fair city for the past two months. And us? We received the hardware and the permission to carry out a long-overdue operation.”

“You’re Council. The Invictus.”

The man nodded. “You can call me Saul.” He opened the folder, flipped through the pages that Ariadne, with her still-bound hands, could not turn. “Go on. Look.”

The notes told Ariadne what she already suspected. Two dozen “persons with criminal ties” involved in a feud with “drug lords” had all been killed or arrested at their base on Eagle Hill and shipped to an undisclosed facility for interrogation. Saul had not even bothered to change the names. She scanned the list, tried to find Bourne, Silas, Roarke, or Liliane among them.

“We’re just tying up a few loose ends.” He snatched the folder away from her, knowing she wasn’t reading. “Your pal Andrei—he’s the one who hacked our financial records a month or so ago.”

Saul clucked his tongue. “Ballsy. Or it would have been, if he knew what he was actually doing. If he knew just who owned those accounts. Which I sincerely hope he did not.”

“He didn’t know,” Ariadne said. She began straining at her cuffs. “I was using him for his access. It was entirely my idea. He never had an inkling that Kindred were involved.”

Saul’s blue eyes did not blink. His thin mouth remained taut. “Does he have an inkling now?”

“No,” said Ariadne, her heart clenching. “He has no idea what he saw. I’m convinced of it. Trust me.”

“Trust?” Saul raised an eyebrow, but not his voice. “An odd request, coming from the former Hand of a treasonous Prince. A Senechal who, from all accounts, helped murder our last agent on the scene, Mister Rose.”

She closed her eyes. “Please. Whatever I’ve done, punish me. Let him alone. I’ll do anything. Please.”

Even before she opened her eyes again, Ariadne was aware of Saul’s piercing gaze roving up and through her, eating her alive as thoroughly as Liliane’s ants.

“You mean it,” said Saul at length.

“Of course I do,” said Ariadne. “Andrei isn’t a danger to—”

“No,” said Saul, his soft voice somehow still sharp enough to cut her off. “You mean it when you say you’re willing to die. I’ve seen this before.”

He rose, palm dragging across the table between them as he made a slow circuit toward her. “I’ve seen that look in Kindred who can’t face what they are, who are ready to run from the Beast.”

His coat fell aside and now she could see the scabbard beneath it, from which protruded the hilt of a sword. Once again, she saw the familiar patterns. This time, it seemed to shimmer and bend in her vision, just like Mr. Rose’s had. Here, then, was the true mate to his sword, the second soul-stealer.

“You think you’re a monster. You think you deserve death.”

Ariadne stared up at him, felt an ache at the base of her eye sockets.

“I can see it in your aura. You’ve committed Amaranth. You’re a monster even among monsters.”

Ariadne tried to summon the feeling of Andrei’s body pressing against hers as it had night after night. She could remember every incident. She willed, with all her might, to feel a yearning for it.

A yearning indeed came. It was a yearning for the pulse in his jugular, drowning out his breathing, the pulse that called to her every night she was with him, as she stared out the window and pretended to count the stars.

“Yes,” she said, defeated. “Yes. I am.”

“Then we’ll be doing the world a service, won’t we?” Saul lifted the thick weight of Ariadne’s raven hair, exposing her neck. She could see the sword rise from the corner of her eye, feel its electric presence. “We should kill both of you right now.”

“Please, just me. Not him.”

“What do you care? You’re a monster. Monsters feel no love. Let him die.”

Ariadne winced. She felt the prick of something against her neck, but it wasn’t a sword. It was a photograph. Saul shoved it in front of her eyes.

“Who is this woman?”

It was Marie. Ariadne remained silent.

“You ran out of Liliane’s sanctuary carrying this woman. You delivered her into the hands of emergency workers. Frankly, if you hadn’t done that, we would have had a much harder time tracking you. Why did you save her?”

Ariadne kept her mouth closed.

“You’re a monster. Monsters don’t save people.”

“What do you want from me?”

The blade returned to her neck. Liliane’s Silent Knife would never have tolerated this situation. But she wasn’t Liliane’s Silent Knife any longer. Neither was she Andrei’s girlfriend.

“If you’re a monster, why do you care about this woman? Why do you care about Andrei? Why did you inform the local wizards there was some sort of threat to the city? What do you care about Boston?”

His words ran into a fog as a random memory intruded into Ariadne’s mind. In college, she was sitting on the Longfellow Bridge, seeing the lights in windows, the pale blue glow of televisions, imagining she could hear the hiss of steam radiators. She was thinking of the thousand glows and hisses of Boston, trying to transport herself into every single one of those points of light. That young woman had wanted to know what was going on out there, at each and every one of those homes. She’d wanted to drink in the experience, to make it real. The thought of all those lights being snuffed at once would have horrified her beyond imagining.

Ariadne sighed. “I guess even a monster can do some good on occasion.”

Ariadne wasn’t entirely sure she had said those words aloud. But her statement carved a gouge in the sand of her mind; the tide flood of intention began to fill it.

“Yes,” Saul said. “A monster can do some good, when directed by the right hands. Those hands are ours.”

“What do you want?”

“Everything you know.”

“Fine,” she said, voice suddenly full of the authority of a Seneschal. “Put away the damned sword and we’ll talk.”

Saul paused, then withdrew. He sat back calmly in his seat, attentive, hands folded.

“You didn’t finish the job, Saul,” said Ariadne. “You didn’t find the *Almavore*.”

Saul waited. He did not raise a skeptical eyebrow, did not mock her for trying a ridiculous ploy. He did not even ask what an *Almavore* was.

“Go on,” he said at last.

“Only if you promise you’ll spare Andrei.”

“You’re in no position to dictate terms.”

“It’s more than just information I can offer. It’s also my assistance. But I’ll stop cooperating the moment I hear anything’s happened to him.”

“Just speak.”

As Ariadne described it all, she could tell Saul was truly listening. He seemed to be one of those rare individuals she had met, in life or unlfe, who had a bottomless well for listening.

At last, Ariadne ran dry of words. Saul was still listening, legs crossed, fingers interlaced. Finally, he spoke.

“Our negotiations with the local mages,” he said slowly, “touched upon this topic. Their condition for letting *Invictus* forces continue to occupy East Boston was that we return the *Almavore* to them. I told them I knew nothing about it. And that was the truth.”

Saul pulled out another folder, this one clearly not for the FBI’s eyes. He spread its contents on the table: maps and diagrams of the Eagle Hill house, catalogs of artifacts and other recovered booty.

“We searched for days. Exhaustively. No statue. The wizards wouldn’t coordinate with us, and all our own mystics were stymied. We had assumed the mages were either making this whole story up or that Liliane had somehow got the thing out of there.”

“So you never caught Liliane?”

“As I said, we’re still tying up loose ends.”

“Who else have you missed? Roarke, too?”

Saul was silent, but the slightest flicker of a grimace across his face told Ariadne all she needed to know.

“The Almavore’s still in the city,” said Ariadne. “I can feel it, all the way from here. Every time I open my senses to it, I can hear it calling. As for Roarke, he’s my sire. I’m still a little new to this sire game. Does our shared blood give me the ability to find him?”

“It can.” Saul leaned forward. “But you would do that—sell out your sire? Sell out your Prince?”

“If you took prisoners from Eagle Hill, ask any of them and I’m sure they let you know just how badly I’ve burned my bridges on both of those fronts.”

“If what you’re saying is true,” said Saul, “then it turns out I made a good decision in keeping you here. It’s a good thing to be useful, Ariadne. A very good thing. Useful enough, even, that, when this is all done, we can let Andrei go with only, shall we say, a *stern reminder* to keep his mouth shut about all he thinks he may have seen. As if anyone would believe him, anyway. Normally I’d drive it home with a little gesture, but someone apparently beat us to the idea of removing a finger.”

“When we find the statue,” Ariadne said, “we’ll find Liliane. She’s using its power to make her vision of New Jerusalem a reality.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I think it might involve destroying Boston.”

Saul raised an eyebrow. “You honestly think Liliane has the power to do that?”

Ariadne shrugged. “Believe me or don’t believe me, but I think it’s going to happen.”

“I repeat: how?”

“I’m still working that out.”

Saul signaled. The door opened to admit two men in FBI jackets who unlocked the manacles from her wrists and ankles. Ariadne stretched for the first time in nights. As she stood, she imagined she could see her full reflection in the polished basin, see the return of confidence and poise in her posture instead of a blur.

“Come with me,” said Saul, standing by the open door, but Ariadne had already begun walking.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The husk atop Eagle Hill mocked the very idea of a house. Charred, splintered, still reeking of burnt insulation and paint, its walls and doorways bent into wicked smile-curves that seemed to be laughing at the notions of home and shelter.

If the Invictus Council soldiers were proud of their handiwork, at least they didn't show it. Saul led his team silently forward, stepping out from their unmarked black vans, saluting the hobo huddled for warmth on the sidewalk. His stupor evaporated once he saw them.

"No one's been in or out," the fake vagabond reported. "The ones we didn't eliminate or lock up must be long gone."

"No," said Ariadne simply, not even slowing her pace as she passed the rag-clothed sentry. "Not all of them."

She did not wait for Saul's men, but she heard their footsteps behind her. The sound was soft, an afterthought to the pounding heartbeat of the Almavore statue within. Ariadne felt the statue's presence all through the drive there. Its echoes reverberated inside her bones.

She followed the sounds-without-sounds through the house's scorched halls, her boots negotiating warped floors and stray chunks of ceiling. None of it was real. Somewhere else, the real home she had known for the last ten years still existed, the linked hands and the shared cauldron and Liliane's nightly regimen of torments. Just as somewhere else still, a twenty-year old Andrei and Ariadne were holding hands and exchanging love-murmurs in a dormitory room.

Ariadne's fingers slipped gratefully around the hilt of her katana. Saul had returned it to her in the van, a sign either of his trust or his foolishness. She would take either.

Liliane's study was empty. The burned hunks of books stood like a silent congregation that had been consumed by hellfire while listening to their preacher. Ariadne saw a skeleton of charred planks that had once been the bookcase. It had been shoved aside, the secret door ripped open.

"We've been down there," Saul said. "There's nothing in there but—"

Ariadne was already walking out of range of his voice. She moved into the storeroom. This time opening the portal was easy. The magic was like a muscle Ariadne just had to flex. She did not even have to seize the invisible handholds of the hidden chamber; they split open

for her as if pulled by obsequious doormen. The atmosphere of the room seemed to boil away, revealing the cavern, the pool of blood, the statue pulsing in the candlelit darkness.

Saul had caught up. The footfalls of his men were close behind. “Looks like Liliane had a few tricks up her sleeve after all.”

Ariadne ignored him. She was busy trying to make out the lines where the statue ended and the darkness began. She wasn’t able to.

“Okay, boys, you know the drill.” Saul motioned to his fellows. “Tag it and bag it. The eggheads back at base can figure out what it is later.”

As two of the soldiers waded into the blood pool, Ariadne shook her head.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Tell me about it.” said Saul. “I’d love to know how Liliane made a warded room that even wizards couldn’t penetrate. I’d love to know how that’s even possible.”

“No,” said Ariadne. The pounding of the Almavore’s heartbeat, the throbbing of the darkness, was making it impossible for her to think clearly. “Something’s wrong. With the darkness.”

As Saul’s question began to form, Ariadne saw the black wall ahead crack and splinter, forming shapes. The shapes at first looked human, but then broke down into jagged outlines. They were missing pieces, and the limbs were at all the wrong angles.

Ariadne’s blade rose even before the first soldier screamed. By the time the second soldier went down in a cacophonous red splash, Ariadne had leapt into the fray, Saul close behind her.

The statue’s defenders snapped into focus as Ariadne waded into their mass. They were still spilling out of the dark and into the pool—men and women, or things that once had been men and women. Putrid, rotting flesh splattered her face as she slashed limbs loose from her attackers, hacked their heads from their trunks. This was the dance, the dance she had always known. One by one, the animated corpses fell before her.

Guns sounded all around. Rotting flesh flew.

Ariadne removed her sword from one corpse as she buried her heel in another. Her opponents were puppets with no brains, no skill, but they were many and they were strong. One grabbed her blade, indifferent to the cutting edge, and with a yank removed it from her grasp.

For a moment, the candlelight revealed her attacker’s face: Po-Mo. The shamrock tattoo festered like an open wound in the stitched-together flesh of his cheek.

In her moment of shock, the things swarmed her. Ariadne went down beneath a pile of suppurating limbs, and even then, recognized more faces. Hera—her green hair now white and the consistency of cobwebs, her underconfident posture now collapsed into a hunch. Some of Roarke’s rebels, several she knew she had killed before. And there—that meaty hand was from Mister Rose, a loose canvas of dried obsidian skin stretched like a tanned hide across his broad frame.

Ariadne recovered, ducked, twisted. She rammed her fist through a chest, kicked a pelvis loose from its connecting sinews. With a roar, she launched herself forward, up through the gruesome sentries, hurling them one into the other.

Beside Ariadne, a soldier had fallen, impaled by a dozen bony arms. She grabbed his rifle, slammed it into autofire, and braced herself. The kickback shook her form, but, steady, she directed its deadly spray of metal at her attackers. Ribs flew, bones splintered. When the gun coughed up its last shell, she used the weapon as a club.

Saul flashed at the corner of her vision, leaping in and out of the pool in a haze of red spray, his own wondrous sword singing as it decapitated and dismembered. Yet even a sword that stole souls served limited purpose against foes whose souls had already been stolen.

“Fall back!” Ariadne heard him shout.

Slowly Ariadne gave ground. She ducked a blow, grabbed her sword from the cavern floor in time to parry an undead thing’s charge, and then retreated behind the hail of covering fire that the surviving soldiers laid down.

The team scrambled back up the stone ramp into the storeroom. The guardian corpses shambled a slow pursuit.

Saul cursed, noting how many of his men had not returned. “You didn’t tell me there were zombies!”

“I didn’t know,” said Ariadne, angrily knocking a chunk of rotting flesh off her red-soaked bodysuit. “I saw a lot of those those people die—Kindred and even some kine. Not only die, but turn to black ash.”

“I saw Rogers there!” one of Saul’s men was shouting. “And Chang! I recognized his gold tooth.”

A gold tooth. Ariadne remembered it from when the Invictus soldiers had cornered her in the ammunition room, when she was trying to save Marie. She watched that man and his fellow consumed in the blue fire she had somehow summoned, saw them turn to ash. So they had been claimed body and soul by the Almavore. She had sent them there. And now, apparently, they had been returned to the physical world by the statue, albeit in altered form.

“So that’s what it can do,” Ariadne whispered, putting it all together. “It doesn’t just take souls. It can regenerate bodies.” Perhaps it could do so indefinitely; she couldn’t count how many times she’d torn apart Po-Mo’s corpse down there.

“That’s what Liliane is up to,” Saul said. “She’s building an army.”

Ariadne shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe New Jerusalem needs shock troops.”

“Well, they’re good ones.” Saul gazed down the slope of the secret passage, to where the walking corpses had begun to advance up the incline. “But not good enough.”

He motioned with one gloved hand, and four of his men unclipped grenades from their belt.

“Get back!” He waved to Ariadne as he retreated back up the passage toward Liliane’s study. Ariadne needed no additional persuasion. A cloud of heat accompanied the thunder of the explosion.

They turned around and saw nothing but smoke.

“That’s an end to that,” said Saul.

“No,” said Ariadne. “They’ll re-form. And there will be more. Many, many more.”

Saul shook his head. “You told me that Marie explained how the Almavore needs a sympathetic link to claim a soul. A piece of flesh or blood. Liliane’s got access to her whole court that way, and to victims of the civil war. But how many others? There can’t be an army’s worth.”

Ariadne stared.

“Look,” said Saul, “I know you still believe she’s going to claim the whole city, but think about it. Is she going to sneak around all of Boston, down each chimney at night to take skin samples from every last kine, without any of us, or any of the wizards, spotting

her? We've had a dragnet out for over a week and have come up empty. We've blocked off all access to this house. If she's still communicating with this statue, bringing it bits of hair and skin, then she's doing it by means of a very well-trained team of mice."

"No," said Ariadne, eyes widening as the realization gripped her like the hand of a corpse. "Not mice. Ants."

Of course. It had been in front of her, in front of all of them, the entire time. *Solenopsis invicta*. Ants that did Liliane's bidding, ants that as a mass could eat a body alive ... but in twos and threes they could tear tiny, unnoticeable chunks of flesh from ten thousand bodies, then deliver their prizes back home to the Almavore. The distances, in ant terms, were vast, but what if they passed along their precious cargo to others, who gave it to still others, forming a tiny, but vast bucket brigade dedicated to New Jerusalem? It would take time, but Liliane had been at this for decades, maybe even longer.

Ariadne recalled the ants in Ronnie's office at the cab company, ants on the campus of her alma mater the night of her doomed attempt at Embracing Andrei, even on the Danish in Saul's interrogation room. How many were simply insects, and how many were Liliane's tiniest couriers?

"Everyone in the city's at risk," said Ariadne. "She could have gotten to anyone. Even you. At any moment, she could claim all our souls."

Saul shook his head, unbelieving. "Then why hasn't she done it yet? Why not take yours, for example?"

Ariadne didn't know, and she didn't have time to mull over the question. A shudder in her ears, like the change in pressure from an airplane changing altitude, turned her back around. Po-Mo's skull, rotted flesh knitting itself into a hideous tapestry around the breaks in the bone, was poking out from the heap of bodies in the tunnel, crying a soundless battle scream. Behind him were massing a legion of other soulless skeletons scorched by the fires of the explosion.

Again the swords flew, the guns blasted. Again Saul gave the order to retreat, to toss their grenades. This time, drawing on the invisible magnetic hooks, Ariadne magically sealed the hidden entrance to the cavern as the explosion shook the ground beneath them.

Clouds of dust and shredded paper floated through Liliane's storeroom, with no sign of a breach in the door to the Almavore or the Almavore's army.

"We'll bury this place if we have to," said Saul. His Kevlar mesh was torn and his face was splashed with blood. Ariadne noticed grimly that their team had been halved. "We'll collapse the house."

Ariadne shook her head. "Those caverns could extend beneath the whole city. Liliane's minions might strike topside at any time. She gave up an army of Kindred for those things, and she must have done so for a reason. We can't just seal them in and hope they go away."

Saul nodded, as much an admission of defeat as he was likely to give her. "Okay, so continue to earn your keep. You bought your existence, and Andrei's, on the condition that you could help us 'tie up loose ends.' Any idea how we're going to do that?"

"We need to find Marie."

"Who?"

"The girl I rescued from the fire. Did she survive?"

"We don't know," said Saul. "She vanished en route to the hospital. When we spoke with the wizards, they wouldn't say anything about her."

"Fine," said Ariadne. "I know some other people who might be able to help out."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ariadne had waited ten long years to see the look of terror in Bourne's eyes as the door to Room 12 of the Fresh Pond Motel came crashing down before him.

His awkward bulk shifted laughably as he tried to rise and grab the rifle on top of the dresser. She waited until the squad of Council soldiers had him on the ground, arms pulled painfully behind him, gun barrels jabbed into the small of his back, before she made her appearance.

She strode into the room, twirling her sword in a lazy series of circles. The tip accelerated fast enough to make a soft *whoosh* in the air.

She watched Bourne crane his neck painfully up to see her, waited until the realization bled into his beady eyes.

"Ariadne? What the hell are you—?"

"Goodbye, Bourne," she said, and brought the blade down close enough to whistle right past his right ear. His face scrunched in anticipation and remained tensed for a good six or seven seconds. Finally, tentatively, he opened his eyes.

"God ... damn it ... " He exhaled. "You bitch."

"Good to see you, too." She smiled cruelly as she leaned up against the nightstand. "Cavalry's here, Bourne."

At her gesture, the Council soldiers hauled Bourne to his feet, relaxed their grip on his arms. Bourne made a token gesture of snarling and swiping at them before adjusting his clothes and patting himself down.

Ariadne was not watching his performance. She was lost in the *déjà vu* that came along with their location. How many times had she stood before this door, trembling with anticipation? She remembered, as if from a half-forgotten dream, how she used to live for such moments only a few weeks ago.

"How the hell did you get in here?" asked Bourne, his eyes darting nervously back and forth. "Doesn't moving a small platoon into the hotel cause some noise? Not to mention threaten the Masquerade a wee bit? Your new friends must be real whizzes at obfuscation."

"All that should matter to you is that we're here," she said, looking around. The hotel room was a mess, with sheets and clothing strewn all over. "Not that 'here' looks terribly impressive. This is what became of the rebellion I charged you with?"

“It’s not much as command centers go, I’ll admit,” said Bourne. “But then, that’s what I get for not selling out to ‘The Man.’ So, did you cop a plea with the Council? Are you here to turn me in?”

“Maybe,” said Ariadne, arms folded. “Unless you can make it worth my while to spare you.”

“I tell jokes,” he said in the most unhumorous tone she had ever heard. “That’s why you sought me out, right? Life getting too humdrum at the country club?”

“Save it. I wasn’t even looking for you. We came here to find Roarke. Saul taught me how to sense my sire, and I sensed him all the way here. Your bulk just happened to be in the way.”

There. The words were out. She half expected Roarke to appear upon the mere mention of his name.

Bourne gave one of his characteristic choke-laughes. “If Liliane couldn’t find Roarke, what makes you think you and these bozos can?”

“Last time we spoke, Roarke wanted to find me, once I came around to his way of thinking. Well, I’m finally ready to take him up on his offer of going after Liliane. Albeit on my terms.”

Saul stepped into the room nonchalantly. “And speaking on behalf of the, ah, bozos, let me just point out that, if we’re good enough to hide the actions of our whole squad, we’re good enough to see through your own tricks, Roarke. We know you’re in the room. We need to talk.”

The air beside Ariadne shimmered, giving form to the feeling she had been tracking for the last hour. How easy the war against Roarke would have been, had only she known months ago that she was capable of sensing her sire. What else was she capable of, that no one had told her?

She stared at the man who had created her. The last time she had been this close to Roarke, the former Seneschal was astride her, pinning her to the ground, the force of his will holding her helpless.

Her sire did not look nearly as imposing tonight. His prized hat was gone from his head, and the hair beneath it was tousled and filthy. The rough, rugged skin of his face was torn, and one ear was nothing but a stump. His clothing was riddled with a thousand small holes, and although he still paced the room with a steady stride, his right leg dragged in a small limp.

“Evenin’, Ariadne.” He pantomimed the doffing of a hat. “Pologies for my appearance. A lady deserves a little better.”

“What a lovely time to become concerned about me. I could have used a little of that fatherly care here or there in the last ten years.”

Her words barely masked the clenching feeling inside her. Aside from Liliane, Roarke was the Kindred most able to control her, and she could barely keep down the urge to remove that threat with a swift swipe of her sword.

Sensing her discomfort, Saul moved in. The soldiers split to let him approach.

“You, I recognize,” said Roarke. He was smiling at Saul, but the hatred that spread out like a wavefront before his words was unmistakable. “You’re the feller that’s leadin’ the latest posse tryin’ to end me.”

"The Masquerade is there for a reason. So are we."

"I've heard that routine plenty o' times before. I have to say, I don't quite cotton to it."

The small motel room had become very crowded. Ariadne winced at the thought of how messy a fight would become in here. Saul had assured her that the local police would stay far away from an "FBI operation." If things got ugly, there was nothing to stop them getting as ugly as possible.

"Well, you're in luck," said Saul, undaunted. "The Council is prepared to offer a truce. You can thank Ariadne for that. She let us know about the reason for your rebellion, and we agree with it. Liliane should not have access to the power to steal souls and turn them into an army."

"Hmph. You could have just asked, 'stead of tryin' to kill me."

"And you could have come to us with this information, instead of waging your own private war. So let's just go back to square one, shall we?"

Ariadne turned to Bourne. "Where's Silas? Isn't he in on this little party?"

Bourne darkened. "I don't know. The night after you left us, he just vanished. I have no idea where he is." Bourne shivered a bit, then steadied himself, forced his usual wry smile to spread across his face. This time, it only made him look queasy.

Ariadne recalled her vision of Silas crumbling, the top hat falling. Bourne broke her train of thought as he pounded the wall, his fist leaving a dent in its wake. The Council men all trained their guns his way, but Bourne waved them off with a fat hand.

"Whatever. He was a bastard. Good riddance, right?"

With a heavy sigh, he turned back to face the others. "Anyway, once he was gone, I went looking Roarke myself, and found him. We've been planning ways to take down Liliane this whole time."

"Looks more like hiding with your tails between your legs," said Saul.

"Well, that'd be your doing," said Roarke. "You haven't made it too hospitable for us, especially with the warrant still out for my head. Lucky I got me some tricks."

"Those tricks are why we're here," said Ariadne. "The Almavore's guarded by an unstoppable army, and the local wizards either can't or won't help us. The one wizard I trust is nowhere to be found. The only two Kindred I know who can control magic are Liliane, who's obviously not an option, and you."

"Ah ha," said Roarke, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall. "I see."

"You're going to help us, old man," said Saul, "or else we pass our sentence on you right here and move on."

"I reckon you'll *try*."

"Wait," said Ariadne. "Give us a moment alone." She turned to Bourne. "All of you."

Saul stared at her long and hard.

"We'll be right outside," he said at length. "*Everywhere* outside. One way or another, we'll be seeing you in a moment." With a swift motion of his head, he led his troops in a withdrawal.

The moment they left, Roarke closed his eyes, chewing on an imaginary reed.

Ariadne stood before him and could not control the sudden shaking of her body. Here he was. The prime mover. The hand, the fangs, that had started her on this journey ten years ago.

Ariadne swallowed hard, forcing herself to ask the question she had been yearning to ask ever since he first appeared in the room. “Why?”

“Why did I make you, girl?” Roarke’s eyes opened into deep, brown pools full of sadness. “Ain’t that the question every man wants to ask his Creator? God never answers, you know. I wonder if it’s because no answer would really suffice.”

“Stop ducking the question.” Her hand flexed around the hilt of her blade. “Why did you do it, and why did you hide your identity from me?”

Roarke walked to the window, addressed his words to the night air.

“Our blood ain’t ordinary. Not even for Licks.”

“That deal you made,” said Ariadne slowly. “The one that gave you magic. Who and what did you make it with?”

“Deal was made for me,” he said slowly. “So long ago I can’t properly remember when, I got myself bitten up right and good by one of the picaninnies on the plantation.”

Roarke’s eyes stared at some point in the night sky where Ariadne couldn’t follow. “Turned out he was a Lick, all right, but no ordinary one. That boy’d come from some kinda strange voodoo-hoodoo land. He’d been a right proper wizard in his day, till he got bit, and then all the magic left ’im. Couldn’t stand not havin’ that power anymore, so he searched far and wide ... till he found something that could give him back what he lost.”

“What was that something?”

“Don’t rightly know. But I reckon that once you’re damned like us, when you go looking for something like that, you’re only gonna find devils.”

“The Almavore.”

“Ain’t no accident, said my slave-daddy. It was waiting for him. Some even bigger voodoo man a long time ago summoned it, bound it to a certain bloodline of Kindred. Wanted to keep it in the family, I s’pose, and lo and behold, my slave-daddy was a descendant of that line. Ain’t no one else, quick or dead, who could talk to it, and my daddy wanted power, so, there you go. Match made in hell. The critter moved on in, or a piece of it, anyway. It shared space in his body with his blood, gave him just a teeny bit of its power. When he passed his blood down to me, the critter came with it. Said he wanted it that way. Said his blood was too thick, that in makin’ me, I’d have more room for the critter’s presence. I’d be able to use more of its magic. He had these big plans for a slave rebellion, see...”

Roarke closed his eyes. “I don’t remember much of what happened next. The mind gets cloudy. I think that boy joined up with Nat Turner’s crowd, probably died along with ’em. Me? I mighta been damned, but even damned, I wasn’t gonna be no slave to a slave. I took off.”

“And here you are, rebelling at last,” said Ariadne. “Nice to see that even a racist can find something to stand up for when it’s his own ass on the line.”

“No need to be rude, girl. Time was when ladies were ladies and gentlemen were—well, some of them at least could rise to the occasion. Anyways, my slave-daddy, what little magic he had didn’t help him much against the Virginia militia. For years, I didn’t know how I coulda made much difference. Not till I found out how to make right use of what the critter gave me.”

He turned back to Ariadne. “You seen some o’ the stuff I can do. Wild stuff. Stuff that my daddy surely would’ve done, if he could’ve. Who knows, maybe I coulda won him his war. But even damned, I didn’t want no truck with devils. I walked away. Thought that was the end.”

Ariadne suddenly began to feel sick. “But it wasn’t. There’s me. I’m your childe. You said, as the blood thins, it makes more room for the creature’s magic.”

“Yep. Like strainin’ the water out of gin.”

“That means that I’m ... that I’ve got ...” A wave of revulsion rippled inside of Ariadne as she remembered that pulse in her blood, that call that only she could hear.

“You’ve got it inside you, yep, and a hell of a lot stronger’n I do. Leastways, that’s what I was banking on.”

“Banking on? What do you mean?”

“Liliane. Ain’t never should have shared my blood with her in that damned unity ritual. It let her talk to the critter, or it to her, or however it worked out. It started teachin’ her things in exchange for services. Now she done found the statue and set it up nice and cozy. I got wind of it years ago, watched her growin’ scarier and scarier for some time. I needed some insurance, some way to fight back if’n ever I needed to.”

“So you created me to be some sort of agent?” Ariadne blinked. “I was a sleeper ready to be activated and used against the Prince?” She shook her head. “No. Liliane would never have been fooled. There’s more to this than you’re telling me.”

Roarke closed his eyes, nodded. “Yes’m, there is. Liliane figured out what I was plannin’ almost as soon as I did the deed, and decided to move in. She snatched you away ’fore I could say more’n two words to you. She kept you locked up, raised you like her own, made you into a charity case. She used the blood bond to help make you worship her, cast a mojo on your blood to hide your legacy, even from yourself.”

“At one point, she told me *she* was my sire.”

“Really? I’m surprised. That damned well begged for investigation.”

She only did it when she thought I was having doubts, Ariadne recalled silently. *When I had been breaking through her cloak. When she thought I might pick Andrei over an eternal life of servitude to her.*

“Maybe she thought you were ready to draw in close,” Roarke went on. “Sooner or later she was bound to try and unlock that magic inside of you. But whatever plans she might have had for that, I imagine they’re loused up right good about now.”

“Everyone thinks I’m a pawn on their chessboard. What about *your* plans for me?” she asked acidly.

“I reckon you can see them plain as day,” said Roarke. “The Prince’s off her rocker. The Council can’t stop her. All they did was kill off or drive off anyone who might’ve stood in her way. That was all part of her plan. She used the Council like she uses everybody. She bought herself time to plan in solitude, and now she’ll deliver the *coup de grâce* any day.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“You haven’t figured it out? Maybe you ain’t as smart as I figured.”

“I know about the Almavore,” said Ariadne, “and the corpse army. I think the ants play a role, grabbing little bits of people all over the city. But what has all that to do with New Jerusalem?”

“Think about why the first one fell, girl. All the lessons’re there. Heck, all the lessons’re there in the tragic tale of my dear ol’ Dixie. Two problems with any walled city. First: the folk outside the wall always outnumber them that’re inside. And second: not everyone inside’s thinkin’ the same way. From without or within, every dream falls. Us who’ve been around long enough, we’ve seen that.”

“But Liliane’s been around even longer than you,” said Ariadne, starting to finally see the pieces assemble before her. “If even a city of Kindred won’t last, maybe she’ll build one full of things that last even longer.”

Roarke nodded. “Things that won’t disagree, either. Things created out of souls both living and un-living. Souls with all that the Prince don’t like about ’em just shucked right away, like cotton from a boll.”

There, for a moment, Ariadne could see it: the parapets of New Jerusalem, the avenues and streets filled with staggering mockeries of the human form, presided over by Liliane, resplendent in her unchallenged power. It seemed at once ridiculous and utterly possible. She had been in the cavern, had seen the corpses rise again and again, indifferent to blades, bullets, and bombs. She doubted that even the wizards could stop them. They might even join the ranks of the shambling undead, depending upon how many the ants had reached.

Roarke drawled on. “She’s been buildin’ that new world soul by soul for a long, long time. The more souls she claims, the more powerful she gets and the more she can take the next time. Any day now, she’ll swallow the city up whole. Who knows where she’ll go then?”

Would Liliane be satisfied with one city? Or would she move on? Had she moved on already? Had she found another young woman to pluck from the throes of childhood pain, to shape and ruin and torment into becoming a killer? Would this new Silent Knife help lay the groundwork for the next harvest of souls?

No. Ariadne wouldn’t let that happen. Maybe a monster really could do some good after all. The woman she had been would have tried to save the city, even though she lacked the power. The woman that she was when she was around Andrei would at least fight for his safety.

And the woman that she was, here and now?

That woman wanted Liliane to pay for so, so many things.

Roarke could see the fire growing in Ariadne’s eyes.

“You see what has to be done, then, girl. You see why it’s all been worth it.”

Ariadne’s sword leapt up to point at Roarke. “Don’t you dare,” she said, struggling to keep her arm in check. “Don’t you dare talk to me as if you were in the right the whole time. You started all of this. You destroyed everything I used to be. Whatever else happens tonight, Roarke, I will kill you for that.”

“What I did, I did because I had to,” Roarke huffed. “Girl, do you think I got my kicks off wreckin’ your life? Do you think after two centuries o’ bein’ what I am, I wouldn’t know what it is I was settin’ you up for? I didn’t have a choice. I needed someone to stop Liliane’s plan, and you were it.”

“Was I, now? Why did I get the honor of becoming your secret weapon? Why was I so special?”

Roarke’s eyes watched the edge of her blade with sadness, not fear.

Why should he be afraid, the bastard? thought Ariadne. *He can stop me any time. Unless maybe, if I’m fast enough.*

“No,” said Roarke, “you’re not.”

With a shout, Ariadne leapt and drove her blade forward. Roarke had time only to shake his head once to the left ...

And Ariadne teetered off-balance and nearly fell into the wall. The sword in her hand seemed heavy, unfamiliar. Clouds swarmed her vision.

"Listen," Roarke said, getting up, walking around her, tongue so close to her ear that she fought with all her might to swivel and rip it out. Or rather, she fought to even think about the prospect.

"I don't like messin' with your mind like this, darlin', but you got to listen good. I had to pick you. I spent months stalking 'round the city, trying the tenements, the parks, the schools, the offices, the clubs. It ain't easy for a man like me to sneak around. Not without someone noticin', 'specially one of them wizards. I had to find someone I knew it'd take root in. The magic, that is. Use the critter's own power against it, against Liliane."

"Why ... not ... just ... hire ... a wizard?" Ariadne spoke through the fog.

"Needed more than a wizard. Woulda needed a damned powerful one. Ain't easy to get close to those kind, and all the boss wizards were on Liliane's side. She fooled them but good. 'Sides, you can't trust no one but your own." He smirked. "I needed to start fresh, and I needed someone who could see past the skein of the world. Someone with an eye for what lay beyond. Someone whose soul ran with the poets, the artists, who didn't accept the chains this carpetbagger of a world sells us all at one time or 'nother."

Ariadne wanted to cry, wanted to fall to her knees. What Roarke had valued in her was everything that Andrei had been frustrated by in her. What he had called "scattered," "dreamy," "slipshod." The very things that he had deemed in her so unworthy, those were the things that had drawn Roarke. The things that had doomed her.

"The magic's in the seeing, in the hearing," said Roarke. "Sensin' the warp and woof of the world beneath the world we perceive. The potential's got to be there, or it won't work."

"I think you could have been one of us," Marie had said, "if you hadn't, well, got bit by a bat, or however the heck you become a vampire."

"If I thought it'd matter worth beans, girl, I'd apologize, but truth be told, I ain't sorry. You've got my magic, and you've got it strong. It's how you could see the soul-eater, and it's how you'll be able to destroy it an' save the city. I'll teach you how. It ain't hard, if you got the magic in you. Nadine didn't, much as I tried to use her as my backup plan. But her grimoire—it was good for something. It taught me the spell to banish the soul-eater. I wasn't powerful enough to cast it, but I'm hopin' you are."

Ariadne managed, barely, to move her lips. "I ... have no idea ... how to ..."

"Castin' spells ain't hard, darlin'. Sometimes it's just like whistlin' a happy tune."

He pursed his lips and then began to whistle. Something that couldn't have been actual breath escaped his lips, and notes too perfect and resonant to be made by air over flesh emerged: "*Daaa-da-da-daaa, da da da ... da da da ta-ta-ta ...*"

Ariadne's confusion crystallized into terror. It was the song. *The* song. Note for note, measure for measure, in full at last. Even had he not been in command of her body, she couldn't have moved an inch. All these weeks, she had thought the song was some half-remembered piece of her past with Andrei. But even *that* hadn't been something she could call her own.

"There," he said at last, his features falling into what looked almost like fatigue. "That's all there is to it. Hold that in your mind and push for the critter to be gone. You know what I mean by 'push,' right? I can tell just by lookin' that you've let the critter's power flow through you, that you've sussed out how to make that power do all kinds of little tricks. Later, when this is all done, I can teach you even more. Or you can try and kill me, but I reckon you'll have to get in line. Now come on."

He stretched, eyeing the view out the window. “Night’s boilin’ away. I can hear the soul-eater as well as you can, and it’s getting ready. It’s happening tonight. Only another few hours left, and Liliane sure ain’t gonna make things easy. Time to go get your friends. We’re gonna need all the help we can get.”

Roarke strode easily out of the room, and the moment his form moved through the doorway, the invisible grip on Ariadne lifted. She flew forward, sword slashing into the ratty couch-chair, sending clouds of stuffing flying into the room. She screamed and cursed as she fell to the stained carpet.

“Hey, Ariadne?”

With a growl and bared fangs, she turned and seized Bourne.

“Calm down! We need you.”

“I want to kill him!” she snarled. “I want to kill him, and you, and Liliane, and Saul, and *Andreï*—”

Awkwardly, with the gesture of a confused teenager, Bourne put his arms around her.

Ariadne struggled against him, then settled. “I’m not anybody’s tool. I shucked all that off long ago. But Roarke ... Roarke can make it all come back. Did he blood bond me, too?”

“Maybe. Maybe it’s just magic, or a really good mental dominating whammy.”

“Does it matter? I can’t fight him.”

“It’s okay,” said Bourne, meaty hand stroking her tentatively.

“It’s okay?” she leered, face taut. “Did you just say that? No put-downs? No mockery?”

“No time,” said Bourne, his voice soft and sad. “This is the big one. All hands on deck.”

He was still holding her. She was still not pulling away.

“As long as Roarke’s around, I can’t be my own person. I’m going to die in this battle, and I’m going to die as his tool.”

“Technically, ah, you’re already dead.”

The look she gave him made him shrug apologetically.

“Hey, come on, Ariadne. I’ve charged a hell of a lot of battlements in my day, and the lost causes are the most fun. No pressure to figure out what you want to do with yourself once the battle’s done.”

“Stop it. You don’t have to be a part of this. You can leave any time. In fact, why haven’t you?”

“Dunno. With Silas gone—dead, I think—any number of Licks I’ve pissed off are gonna try and do me in sooner or later. Might as well go down in flames.”

Ariadne didn’t believe that for a second. Bourne was the consummate survivor. And yet here he was, by her side, holding her.

Bourne was holding her.

Ariadne finally pulled away. “How much of what he said did you hear?”

Bourne shrugged. “Enough. He’s a bastard. For now, he’s a bastard we need. Believe me, once we’re done with him, I’ll help you kill him. That’s a promise.”

“That, Bourne,” said Ariadne, “is the first promise of yours that I think is actually sincere.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

They were an unlikely army: Ariadne had shed her blood- and gore-soaked bodysuit for an ill-fitting duty jumper from Saul's stores, her sword hanging incongruously at her side. Roarke, the tattered Southern gentleman. Bourne in his baseball cap. Saul and his men in their SWAT uniforms. Refreshed from the Council's blood supply, they emerged from the van and pushed past the fence thick with overgrowth at the foot of Eagle Hill.

"We tried the direct approach before," Ariadne was saying as she led them to a sewage grate. It felt so natural, heading up a war party. "This time, we go in the back way."

"I remember this entrance," Roarke said as Ariadne stooped to tear the manhole cover loose. "I had it walled up as a security risk after that rogue lich wizard got in."

"We reopened it," said Ariadne, "after you rebelled."

"In case you ever needed to make a quick escape?"

Ariadne rolled her eyes. "Hardly. It was my idea. If you tried a frontal attack, we would send an assault force out this way, double back, and make you fight on two fronts."

"Not bad, little lady, not bad. I'm proud of you."

She spun around. "Don't you dare act fatherly."

Saul put a hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off.

"No. We need to make one thing clear." Ariadne pushed herself up in Roarke's face. "I'm going to take care of Liliane because I want to, because this is personal. Not because I'm your childe. You are under *my* command here. I am the only reason the Council hasn't killed you. Your job is to help me out and, when the time is right, to stay out of my way."

Bourne held up a hand. "Um, let's wait until after we've killed Liliane to start fighting amongst ourselves, okay?"

"You think she's even here?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Yes." Ariadne and Roarke spoke as one.

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They proceeded through the sewer tunnel. The passageway was narrow, crisscrossed by a dozen pipes and tangled in thickets of fiber-optic cable. They were constantly forced to duck, to step over, to contort. It was a marvelous security feature, certain to bottleneck

a potential invasion. Ariadne knew all about it; she had helped oversee connecting this tunnel to the main catacombs.

“Here,” she said, lifting an unremarkable metal plate to reveal the turnoff into pure darkness.

Saul motioned, and two soldiers stepped inside, guns drawn, tiny stabs of laser sights sweeping into the indifferent black.

Ariadne and Roarke followed, shoulder to shoulder. Bourne was too bulky to go in with a partner. The remaining two soldiers were next, and Saul stalked alone behind them, bringing up the rear.

Other than the dripping of water, she heard nothing. That shouldn’t have been. She should have been able to smell and taste the quick life-pulses of rats and other sewer life, but all was silent. The animals had all fled, knowing something she didn’t.

Ariadne put up a hand, and the party stopped. She sent the two soldiers up, heard their footsteps recede and suddenly cease.

“What the hell is—?”

“Sssh!” she hissed to Bourne. Ariadne extended her senses, trying to map out heartbeats, footfalls, scrapes of cloth, something. But the silence was complete. Then she realized it wasn’t silence at all.

She was blanketed in the buzz of the Almavore’s call. It filled her head like white noise, rendering her senses useless.

She turned around to the pack, signed her frustration.

The look on their faces made her suddenly snap back around.

One of the soldiers was running back, something weighing down his arms. A body.

Ariadne looked it over. Male, young, average build, clothing torn and skin ripped open. She followed up the length of his form to his face. She couldn’t find it. It had been torn off.

Searching the body, Ariadne found a wallet, but her night vision did not afford her the ability to read the text on the license in complete darkness. Still, the feel of the charms strung around the wallet, the ankh and other symbols, told her what she needed to know.

“The wizards must have tried something,” she whispered. “It doesn’t look like this one succeeded. I think—”

She was cut off by a low growling. The remaining point guard backpedaled toward them. His rifle blasts echoed at deafening decibels in the closed space. The flash of his weapon’s muzzle briefly illuminated several low forms leaping forward. Then he screamed and fell.

Dogs.

The next second the dogs were upon them all, too fast to shoot. They slammed several of the party to the ground. Ariadne felt the wet mass of stinking fur flying toward her, grabbed it in mid-leap, used its momentum to flip it into the wall beside her. The crunch of bone was audible, as was its throat-rending yelp.

Silas’s pack, she realized. What was the elder up to?

Then it bucked in her grip. Its wet fur was slick enough to slip loose from her. Once free, it charged again. She ducked just in time for the snap of jaws to miss her face. She smelled the fetid breath, caught a quick flash of red in its eyes—the light of more gunfire.

One of the soldiers screamed. “Simone, watch your—” Then a growl, and he fell silent.

Ariadne realized the quarters were too close for guns, and the dog in her arms wasn’t giving her a moment even to draw her sword. She sensed another cur approaching, but as she swiveled she heard it shriek. Saul was diving forward, burying his blade deep into the dog’s gut. The dog fell writhing, its body shriveling rapidly.

“They’re ghouléd,” he said, swiveling to stab another one.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” said Bourne, wrestling with one himself. “Now could you come over and kill it?”

Ariadne finally maneuvered her dog into a headlock and snapped its neck. It flopped to the ground, trying to attack even as it spasmed its last. This wasn’t feral rage. It was loyalty to a master. But was that master Silas or Liliane?

I am no dog, Prince. Ariadne strode forward, drew her blade, and in a clean stroke beheaded the dog atop Bourne. *My leash is broken. And I am coming for you.*

More footfalls. More growling.

“We can’t stay here,” said Saul. “Simone, Rafael, draw the dogs away. The rest of you, push forward.”

Ariadne leapt ahead, bounding atop one of the possessed curs and stomping it into the ground. Then she was gone, followed quickly by Roarke and Bourne, then Saul, and finally the remaining two soldiers, who sprayed automatic fire in their wake. The hounds snapped at their heels, but then turned around to face the greater threat: the rear guard. Simone and Rafael stood ready to confront them.

“Bad doggie,” Ariadne heard one of them say. Then she heard the sounds of a dozen legs rushing in unison, a pack leaping as one, and no more words. Ariadne did not look back.



Ariadne felt the air thicken, become stuffier with each step. There was definitely a fire blazing somewhere close, although she couldn’t tell how much of the fear rising inside her stemmed from that and how much from the call of the statue. A pale red glow issued from any metal surface around them, and the paint on the walls as they ascended into the house’s sub-basement had already begun to run.

“This corridor will take us to Liliane’s study,” said Ariadne. Once again the soldiers took the lead. They rounded the corner up ahead, and she wondered if their unquestioning obedience was the result of mere loyalty to Saul or of a blood bond. In either case, she was grateful.

“All clear,” one called, and the party continued on.

The house on Eagle Hill now seemed from another universe, its halls the dimly remembered phantoms of old nightmares. Ariadne saw none of the familiar sights, but only a path to the heart of the din in her mind, the din of the *Almavore’s* call and of her own hatred for Liliane.

With all that noise, she almost didn’t hear the soldiers’ screams up ahead.

Their bodies came hurling back around the corner, crackling with fire.

Ariadne swept her blade up into defensive position, as did Saul beside her. The two crept forward, checking on the men at their feet. The soldiers’ mouths were contorted in agony as the skin crawled back across their faces, revealing muscle and bone.

“This isn’t any natural fire.”

In the time it took Saul to state the obvious, a figure stepped into the hall before them. The man’s clothes were shredded and soaked in blood that couldn’t have been just his own. Ariadne could not discern if his face was wrinkled or just twisted, and didn’t have time to look closer. Fire lighted in his palms and blazed forward at them.

Ariadne felt the rush of panic well within her. She clawed at the stone floor as the heat tore like the talons of an angry hawk at her hair and back. Bourne and Roarke were shouting at once, and she couldn’t hear them.

The wizard staggered back and forth across the hall, supporting himself against one wall or the other. Pain wracked his face as he hurled fireballs every which way. Ariadne glanced back to see Saul writhing in the corner beside the completely charred remnants of his men. Roarke was retreating down the corridor. Bourne was nowhere in sight.

With a snap of her arm, Ariadne sent her sword spinning out at her foe, the metal blade flashing in the light of the flames. It hit the corona surrounding the man and exploded. She heard the telltale snap of metal, a cry of material agony heralding the end of the sword that had served her so well.

Ariadne did not mourn. *She* was the weapon, not her blade.

The scream of the metal masked the wizard’s own shout as he collapsed. He fell forward to the ground, his flames flickering out. Face-first on the floor, the man revealed that his back had been torn open, was raw and putrefying. A coat of ants was devouring his flesh.

Ariadne backed away from the swarm, which for now seemed content to feast upon one victim at a time. Still, there would be no saving him. That left precious little time for an interrogation.

“You!” She made eye contact, pressed her will upon the gasping man. “How many of you are here? I know Marie. Tell me!”

The man let loose a tortured gasp. “All ... dead,” he groaned. All around, the fires the wizard had started flickered and died.

“What were you trying to accomplish?”

“Couldn’t find the statue ... were listening in on you, tried to move in ahead and take it ourselves ... weren’t prepared—”

“Idiots! Instead of spying on us, you could have coordinated with us. Was Marie here?”

The wizard’s eyes rolled.

“Answer me!”

Too late. Ariadne could feel the life expire from him like a cool breeze washing over her senses. Then a scorching white blast of power streamed past her, whipping her clothes and hair. The dead man’s body and its coat of ants faded to powder.

She turned around to see Roarke, his hands raised in a casting mudra.

“Couldn’t let those varmints get near us,” said Roarke. “And he wasn’t gonna be no more use to us neither. Come on. Let’s survey our forces and move on.”

“You do that,” said Ariadne, walking forward into the swiftly cooling hall and testing the door before her. The room was bare, containing just a single slab. It was a slab she knew well. She had rested on it nearly every night since her death. It seemed smaller now.

Her room.

“Ariadne?”

She heard Bourne’s voice, light years away. She walked inside, pulled open the secret compartment in the floor. The album. The pictures of her and Andrei, purloined from her home, guarded even from Liliane all these years. Andrei was in the Council’s hands. For all she knew, he could be dead already. This book was her only link.

She could not be the girl in those photos, not here and now. She needed to be the Silent Knife. Wordlessly she picked the album up, fought the hunger to peer inside just once more. She brought it into the hall, found a still-flickering patch of fire, and tossed it on top. The chemicals in the photos made them burn quickly.

Roarke stared at her. “What was that all about?”

She ignored him, walked past him to where Bourne was trying to revive Saul.

“Ar ... i ... ad ...” Saul gestured in frustration at his throat and mouth, which was fused into a mess of blackened flesh.

Ariadne shook her head. “I don’t have time to wait for you. I’m going ahead.”

“Well, don’t go ahead unarmed,” said Bourne. He reached behind Saul’s body and carefully handed Ariadne the Council agent’s blade. “Here’s a nice souvenir, eh?”

Saul shook a fist, and for the first time Ariadne saw emotion in his blue eyes: panic.

Ariadne stared at him.

“I could kill you, right now,” she said. “I could tell all your men that Liliane did it.”

She took Saul’s weapon gingerly from Bourne, testing its weight. She marveled at the electric shine of its blade, remembering Mister Rose showing her his companion back at the parking garage, an event that now seemed like three lifetimes ago. She dipped it in a pool of the now-departed mage’s blood, watched the blade crackle with power, then raised it up again.

“One touch,” she said, bringing the tip toward Saul. Struggling while Bourne held him fast, Saul bellowed wordlessly.

The sword was elegantly forged but seemed ill-balanced. Swords were not guns, dumb tools that any wielder could use instantly. It would take time to acquaint herself with this one. In a fight, that unfamiliarity could prove a liability. Still, its soul-stealing properties weren’t to be underestimated.

“Remember,” she said, directing the tip to his mutilated nose. “Remember what I could have done—and didn’t. If we both survive, I’ll even give this blade back.”

She pulled away and motioned for Bourne to let go. Saul fell back to the ground, his tortured body healing at a snail’s pace.

Then she turned and walked down the hall, gesturing for Bourne and Roarke to fall in line.

Behind them, the album was swiftly turning to ash. Ariadne was shedding traces of herself with every step, shucking them off like the plaster melting from the superheated walls. But she was the Silent Knife. There was steel beneath, and fire did not harm steel. Fire tempered it.

“Bourne,” she said, “scout up ahead. Whatever’s up there is bad enough to kill a man who could toss flames from his hands. I want to be prepared.”

Bourne shot ahead. He returned a moment later, shaking his head.

"I don't see any more wizards, just a whole boatload of creepy crawlies coming this way fast!"

A thin brown wave rounded the corner behind Bourne. Ariadne's first thought was that the carpet was moving of its own volition, rolling and rearing up like some giant, flat snake to strike at the human forms around it.

But these halls had no carpet.

Ants. Billions and billions of ants. They moved as one, a great flowing sheet of them, waves that crested over the fallen debris in the hallway and lost no speed in doing so.

"Fall back!" Ariadne cried out.

Bourne needed no convincing, but Roarke remained. "*Stop.*"

Ariadne felt his voice inside her bones and slowed down instinctively before realizing that the command was not meant for her.

As one, the swirling brown horde milled in a holding pattern, seething with a helpless bottled energy.

Roarke stepped forward, concentration furrowing his brow.

"Damnation," he said. "Liliane's will's too strong. I can't hold these critters long."

"Come on." Ariadne tugged at Bourne. Before she could let herself think, she walked atop the stalled mass of ants, never looking down as she felt her boots crunch through their numbers as if they were semi-frozen snow.

Bourne, less gracefully, followed suit.

He adjusted his hunting cap when they made it to the other end of the swarm. "What about Roarke?"

"He can take care of himself," Ariadne said, not looking back.

"Wow." Bourne trotted to keep up with her. "First Saul, then Roarke. You ain't the sentimental type, eh?"

"Like I said, I'm here for myself."

"Don't we need his magic to destroy the statue?"

"I can take care of that," said Ariadne, though she was uncertain how true that was. The music in her head was clear, but it was Roarke's music. His, or perhaps that of some composer whose language hadn't been spoken in millennia. A perfect way to record a spell! Words could be lost to time, but music was eternal. That didn't mean it could be trusted.

"Assuming we can even reach the damned thing," she added.

They were now standing before the door to Liliane's study. There was a roar in Ariadne's ears like the ocean.

"Last chance to turn back," said Bourne.

"Feel free. With you or without you, I'm taking her down."

Bourne drew himself up to his full height. Even though he was only an inch or two taller than Ariadne, he somehow seemed larger tonight. It was something in the way he was staring at her. Something was welling inside Bourne's eyes that had nothing to do with either humor or rancor.

Ariadne met his gaze. "I will never love you." She said the words slowly, in measured tones. "I hope you know that."

"I know." Bourne shrugged. "But hey, who says I'm doing this for you?"

"In your own twisted way, I suppose you think you've been helping me all these years."

"Naw. I was just messing with you. I'm coming clean here in these final moments before the fur starts flying."

Ariadne opened the door, half expecting another wave of ants or a secret squad of soldiers, but saw only the burned-out bookshelves and the wide-open secret passage.

She turned to Bourne again. "I'm not going to thank you. You've been too cruel for that. But ..." She hesitated. "But I want you to know that at least I recognize it. Recognize you. Beneath all that flab and bluster."

"I've got a heart of gold—is that what you think? You're right, then. It's hard and yellow."

"You can't stop joking for a second, can you?"

Bourne smiled, the grime on his teeth visible even in the dim glow. Did the man ever clean his fangs?

"Ha! You're not totally changed. You still don't get the joke, Ariadne, and that's what I've always liked about you. Oh, you're on the way. Sooner or later, you'll either get it or you'll die because you don't. But I'm always going to remember you just like this."

"If one of us lives through this," said Ariadne, "it's going to be me."

"In that case," said Bourne, stepping over the threshold into the passage, "remember me ... as a peacemaker."

He looked so ridiculous, with his jack-o'-lantern grin at a time when both could be facing certain destruction, that Ariadne could not entirely fight back a smile.

Bourne snapped his fingers. "There. That. That was worth all of it."

"Shut up. Let's get this over with."

They proceeded down the tunnel in silence. In a sickening whirl of *déjà vu*, Ariadne once again lifted the veil over the storeroom, once again descended to the caverns below that housed the blood pool, now overflowing. Where had the fresh blood been coming from? Deliveries from the ants? There were small phalanxes of them here, living conveyor belts going to and fro. And there were other things. The ranks of the corpse army, larger than ever, lumbered in the candlelight.

Behind them, stranger, darker minions stirred. Corpses of dogs, of horses, of birds and beasts of all description, and some that defied reason. Giant beasts with jaws of crocodiles, armor of rhinoceri, tails of scorpions. Seemingly Liliame had played sculptor with all of the stolen flesh and fueled her creations with purloined soul-force.

"This is not good," Bourne murmured.

Ariadne ignored him. She forced herself not to think of odds, not to think of strategy. She simply attacked.

The corpse soldiers rose to meet her. Ariadne made herself as relentless as they were, as mindless. She tore through their ranks, creating storms of severed limbs in her wake, of pulverized bone, as she headed for the Almavore.

Bourne was beside her, blasting a path as best he could with his Council-supplied rifle. The corpses fell upon them, but the giant beasts at the rear did not charge. They merely pawed the ground and circled as the two Kindred, hip deep in the blood pool, reached the Almavore statue.

Bourne kicked aside a skull only half-clothed in flesh. “That’s unsettling to the appetite. Not even any blood in ’em. I’m tempted to just take a drink right here from the pool.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Ariadne.

“Yeah. Liliane’s probably spiked the punch.” His eyes remained on the chimerical behemoths circling expectantly only a few meters away. “So why are the big uglies just sitting there?”

“Quiet.” The Almavore was screaming in Ariadne’s skull and in her veins. She reached for that feeling of magnetism, tried to recall how the blue lightning felt when she had first summoned it.

Roarke’s music began to play in her head, of its own volition. All it needed was her voice to give it life. She began, but her voice slurred and skewed. She shook her head, tried again, but the Almavore’s call was a harpoon in her heart, pulling her in. The sounds just wouldn’t form correctly on her lips. Everything was falling into a jumble, a mishmash of voices from present and past, visions of cities on fire and children pierced through on sword points.

“Ariadne? Hey, Ariadne! Snap out of it! Don’t you have a job to do?”

Bourne was calling to her from across a chasm as wide as the pool of blood, as wide as the Jordan River, swirling around the banks of New Jerusalem.

Bourne grabbed her, tugged her aside and dragged her out of the pool. Snorting breathless grunts, the beasts circled slowly around the pool’s edges and moved slowly toward them.

“Oh ... damn ...”

“Quite the opposite,” said a soft, airy voice. “Salvation is at hand.”

Ariadne and Bourne spun around to watch two figures walk into view.

One was a short, hunched form wearing an elegant tuxedo with all the trimmings. He held the arm of Prince Liliane, who was veiled and robed in a long white gown. A laurel of white lilies wreathed Prince Liliane’s head, completing the bridal image. “This is the night when I wed myself to the Almighty. I am pleased to have witnesses.”

Bourne swung his rifle around, trained it on her. His hand froze on the trigger as Liliane’s companion raised his head.

“Silas!”

It was Bourne’s sire. Or something that used to be him. Silas’s face, always seemingly on the verge of decay, looked as if it had finally lost that battle. His small red eyes were vacant, half-sunken into their sockets, revealing no intelligence or will of their own.

An unmistakable top hat crowned his head.

As Bourne hesitated, Liliane pursed her lips delicately and blew. A massive gust of wind slammed into Bourne, flinging him into the thick of the beasts, sending his weapon sailing beyond his reach. The creatures pounced.

Bourne’s screams snapped Ariadne’s world back into focus.

“No!” Ariadne charged at the monsters, swinging a sword that seemed smaller than ever.

Amazingly, the beasts backed away and withdrew into the shadows. Torn and brutalized, Bourne was at least still stirring.

“Daughter,” said Liliane, “I have been led down the aisle. It is time.”

Ariadne whirled around, brandishing Saul's blade. "I am not your daughter."

Liliane's soft, delicately sculpted eyebrows raised. "Ah. I can smell Roarke's stink upon your soul. He has claimed you at last?"

The Prince harrumphed gently. "What claim does he hold? That he sank his fangs into your veins, filled you with a dram of his blood? It is we who raised you, we who made you what you are, we to whom you owe everything."

"No." Ariadne stared the Prince down. "I no longer serve you."

"A weapon needs a hand to wield it, a purpose to guide it. What are you, without us?"

Ariadne sliced her own wrist with a talon, felt but did not watch as her blood charged up the sword. Its power had already drained since the fight in the halls, but now it was ready again to claim a soul. "I'm not one of your zombies. I never will be."

Liliane smiled. "You only see part of the plan, dear one. The mockeries around you?" She gestured to them, and then tapped Silas beside her. At her touch, part of his skull crumbled away. "They are not the denizens of New Jerusalem. They are merely husks, useful tools in this world. But their souls—their souls will delight in the paradise to come. They will live on, in that new world, that new city. *In me.*"

Ariadne didn't think she could feel any more rage toward her former Prince. She had been wrong.

"You're telling me your utopia—it's just inside your own twisted head?"

Liliane was unperturbed. "Did God not say that the body and the blood transform inside the bearer? Ah, I do not expect you to understand yet. But you will, once you serve your part."

"Didn't you hear me?" cried Ariadne. "You're done using me!"

"We are all made for use, all pieces in God's plan."

"Then He's the next one I come after, when I'm through with you!"

Ariadne leapt forward, sword swinging. Silas, or what was left of him, stepped jerkily forward to block her. Ariadne tore through him; his desiccated flesh, deprived now even of the spark of unlife, crumbled without resistance. The top hat fluttered to the ground, capping the growing mound of ashes.

Ariadne did not pause to watch her vision of the elder's demise come true. Smashing through Silas's dissolving form, she advanced on Liliane. Her blade sang through the air. The Prince backed away at the last moment, her speed preternatural.

She was not fast enough.

Ariadne saw with triumph that the blade had nicked the Prince in the arm. A thin trickle of blood ran along that porcelain flesh. A nick was all she needed.

Ariadne waited.

Liliane stood, smiling regally.

"For shame, Daughter," she said at last. "To think that we would have Mister Rose's toy in our possession for all this time and not discover a way to counter its power. We are many things, but we are never idle."

Ariadne tensed with rage. Fine. The sword's magic wouldn't work on Liliane. But a blade was a blade.

Ariadne charged forward again. This time Liliane's hand moved in a blur, seizing Ariadne's and tearing the sword hilt away along with a good chunk of Ariadne's flesh. With a

casual gesture the Prince hurled the sword far away. Ariadne could barely hear the distant *plunk* as it fell into the blood pool. She could barely hear anything above the sound of her own pain and the pounding of the Almavore's call.

"Come," said Liliane. She pressed forward, maneuvering Ariadne toward the edge of the pool. Ariadne tried and failed to arrest her backward motion, but managed to divert their path to the cavern wall beside the red waters. "All will be forgiven," the Prince noted with deceptive calmness. "Join with us once again."

Ariadne was drowning in three seas at once: the agony in her wrist, the Almavore's cry, and Liliane's presence. She retreated as far back as she could into her mind, flailed out with her good hand, felt it smack against the cavern wall.

Roarke's music still played stubbornly in Ariadne's mind. Summoning the remaining slivers of her consciousness, Ariadne reached to the cave wall, felt the cold magnetic buzz that was becoming more and more familiar. The Almavore's power sang through her, its flesh-and-blood instrument.

Beneath her fingers Ariadne felt the cavern wall shiver, shimmer, and groan. At once, several stones pushed themselves out from their fellows in a cloud of dust and mortar. Like a child rousing from a deep slumber, the stone golem awakened.

A flash of fear sparked in Liliane's eyes. Ariadne looked away, stared into her new creation's eyeless, stony face, and whispered two words: "Kill her."

The newly made golem lurched forward toward its ivory-clad prey.

The Prince dropped Ariadne to the ground. Ariadne fell into a crouch and watched the scene unfold.

The golem threw a stony punch, but Liliane was already at its side. The creature pounded the stone floor with stone knuckles. The Prince's claws extended, swiped, cut through the stone as easily as flesh. The fist remained on the floor, severed, as the homunculus pulled back.

Long, precious moments burned away before Ariadne could force herself to avert her gaze, to get up and back away. The golem was to be a distraction, nothing more. Ariadne turned to stare across the pool of blood to the bulbous, tumorous form of the Almavore statue. Its white pustules brimmed with dozens of faces she knew and hundreds she didn't. Its welcoming song beckoned her, lapping at her hunger like the smell of freshly baked pastry cooling on a windowsill would have in her living days.

It would make her strong. Stronger than Roarke. Stronger than Liliane. No one would ever dare try to control her again. No one would ever dare reject her again. She could crush them with a thought, crush an entire city with a thought.

As Liliane contested with the golem, Ariadne jumped into the pool, waded up to the statue, and placed her hands on its skin. An electric charge jolted through her, arcing across her back and head. Ariadne cried out in a wordless scream of ecstasy. But something was wrong. *Something is missing*, the Almavore told her, not in words but in the language of raw sensation.

On the shore of the pool, the golem was clumsily telegraphing its moves in slow motion compared to Liliane's graceful attacks. The Prince chopped off one limb, then another. When the golem was nothing more than a helpless trunk, Liliane thrust her hand within it and twisted. Stone shattered in all directions.

Lying nearby, Bourne weakly tried to cover his head as fragments pelted him.

Liliane turned, calm, a beatific smile twisting her face. She stepped into the pool and

swept toward Ariadne, who was still fighting the Almavore's call.

Bourne, barely able to draw himself up into a sitting position, cried out: "Ariadne! Look out!"

Somehow his voice pierced the din. Ariadne turned just in time to see Liliane's outstretched hand flying toward her. She let go of the statue and dove to the side, but the Prince was faster, skewering Ariadne through the chest. Claws that moments ago pierced stone easily sliced through flesh and bone. Ariadne gasped.

Holding Ariadne aloft on her extended arm, Liliane swung Ariadne around and around as she stepped back out of the pool. Then the Prince rushed forward and smashed her back against the stone wall of the cavern.

Ariadne pounded, pushed, and kicked uselessly against Liliane's form, looking to the world like a stubborn child being dragged unwillingly off to bed.

"Enough, Daughter," the Prince said. "There is a carefully ordered plan at work here, and you cannot jump ahead. Fear not, though. It is time for you to play your role."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Gunshots. Liliane shivered, then turned slowly. Ariadne's pierced body hung on her hand like a bangle.

Roarke, torn and bloody, caked in dust and the corpses of a million dead ants, staggered into the room, rifle loaded for bear.

"That ain't no proper way to treat a lady," he said. "'Specially my daughter."

"Finally." Liliane smiled, indifferent to the struggling Ariadne skewered on her hand, fighting madly to stay conscious and free herself. "Our two Hands have come home, our left and our right."

"Ain't a soul in here that follows you of its own free will, Liliane. You're alone."

Soul. The word echoed in Ariadne's mind. Of course. When Marie had tried to cast her own spell and failed, what had she said?

"I didn't put my entire soul into the spell."

Pain tore Ariadne's thoughts apart every time she tried to form them, but at last she knew what she had to do. She grasped Liliane's arm in both hands, and then pulled herself forward, impaling her body even farther, drawing herself closer to the Prince.

Opening hidden doors, making golems—that had been easy. But the blue lightning Ariadne had cast at the Council soldiers? Before creating that she'd consumed Po-Mo's soul. The Almavore only gave its full power in return for a soul. To get that sort of power again, she'd need to feed it first.

The pain was excruciating. Ariadne crossed the distance of inches that seemed like miles, reared her head back, and threw it forward, fangs aimed right at Liliane's neck.

Those fangs smashed up against cold, ivory stone, sending a terrible rattling through Ariadne's jaw and skull. She felt her fangs chip, a new kind of pain she had never known, one that screamed out through her even louder than the gaping wound in her torso. A squeal like the whine of a whipped dog issued from her mouth.

Liliane turned her smooth, beatific face to meet Ariadne's scrunched, reddened expression.

"Daughter, did you seek to feed on us? To draw strength from the power of our soul?"

With her free hand, the Prince pushed Ariadne down off her arm. She fell to the floor, writhing, struggling to see through a cloud of fireworks.

Liliane turned to face her first Seneschal. “Was that your plan all along, dear Roarke—have her drain my soul, use it to convene the Feast of Nettles? I heard her singing that spell. Only you could have taught it to her.”

Roarke kept his gun level but gave a short, gentlemanly bow. “An’ if I did? Her using that spell, that’s the whole point of her, remember? We had a plan, Lili. You changed it up. I was just tryin’ to even the score.”

“Nonsense,” said Liliane, stepping over Ariadne indifferently. “Nothing has changed since a century ago, when we recruited a brazen young morsel named Roarke to be our Hand. We saw in your blood the potential for great things.”

“I did what you asked,” he said evenly. “I had the Almavore’s voice inside me, and I did what it asked my sire to do. What he couldn’t do. I brought it here, into our world, didn’t I? You were supposed to do the rest.”

They were partners, Ariadne realized dully. She slithered on the ground behind Liliane, streaking red smears in her path. Her mouth and skull ached.

“How could I complete the great work?” Liliane slid up to Roarke, within an easy arm’s reach. He made no move to stop her. “What you gave me from your blood wasn’t enough. It was like trying to empty an ocean through a funnel, a little bit each night. It wasn’t up to the real task.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” Politeness dripped off Roarke’s tongue. “I made Ariadne for you, didn’t I?”

“Oh yes. Our fair arrangement. You would sire her, I would raise her, and together we could claim a city’s worth of souls. We could take our place among God’s seraphim, become avenging angels truly worthy of His service.”

Liliane turned and wrapped herself into Roarke’s waiting arms. “So what went wrong?” she whispered. “The rebellion, the war ... it was supposed to be a sham, a distraction. But you made it real. Why play Judas in earnest?”

“God only had one begotten son, Liliane.” He dropped the gun and held her close, as if whispering love poetry. “Ain’t no mention of two. Just as a Prince has but one Hand. Every time there’s two, there’s trouble. Cain and Abel. Jacob and Esau.”

“You think me so faithless? You think I would turn on you, once we ascended? Surely our minds would dwell on higher matters.” She pulled her arm around his neck, caressed it gently.

“You always had but one love, darlin’,” said Roarke. “That was this city o’ yours. Not the one we’re standing in, which you’re willing to burn to the ground. No, the one you lost a dog’s age ago. The one you’re tryin’ to rebuild. You ain’t gonna share that with no one. If I hadn’t a’ rebelled, you woulda ground me up for soul-chuck sooner or later.”

“What of faith?” she sighed. “Why do you always need proof?”

“Darlin’, I’ve got all the proof I need. Only one of us is walkin’ out of this place. The other’s gonna become a tasty morsel served up on a plate to Ariadne so she’ll perform the rite and empower the other.”

“You don’t see the beauty of the plan. You would just use the power for earthly delights. I would create a heaven.”

“But it’s still you or me. So let’s stop waltzin’ around.”

Liliane nodded, her eyelids fluttering. If there was genuine emotion behind the gesture, Ariadne was certainly not privy to it. Her world now was a cold stone floor, the daggers of pain stabbing all over her body, and the mantra in her head: *Not my own, never my own ... always someone else's plan ... just a weapon ... used ...*

Across the room, the Prince and her former Hand disengaged from their embrace, fell to a few paces apart, as in an elaborate ritual, a dance about to begin. Without warning, it did.

Roarke leapt at Liliane, who stepped aside, seeking to pull him along by his own inertia and unbalance him. Roarke's arms lanced out, grabbing her as she moved, and they fell tumbling to the ground. There they transformed into a blur of motion, a torrent of growls and hisses. Occasionally, someone's claws scraped stone with a terrible shriek.

Ariadne could barely watch them. Her vision was clouded. She wanted nothing more than to rest her head on the ground, go to sleep forever, deny them the use of her. But she couldn't die, not even if she wanted to. Ten years ago Roarke and Liliane had made her eternal. They had made her pain eternal. She could not escape. She'd been an idiot to think she ever could.

"Psst! Hey, Ariadne!"

This was her punishment, she decided. For being a bad girl, for not knowing, for loving too much, for wandering, for ambiguity, for betrayal. There really is a Hell, and she had been foolish enough, prideful enough, to never fully realize her place in it—not as an avenging angel, not even as a monster, but merely as an implement.

"Girl, snap out of it! You've had worse!"

Bourne came crawling toward her, his body bent and twisted, oozing gore from a dozen tears. Why hadn't his bleeding stopped? Maybe the beasts' bites were enchanted by the Almavore? Ariadne didn't care. She was through with magic. Like everything else, like everyone else, it had betrayed her.

Bourne crawled up to her, picked her up into his lap. She hissed, batting at him uselessly, like a sick old tabby. "Wake up, girl! This is your moment!"

"My moment?" She rolled her eyes. Even that motion was painful. "You have to be joking."

"No, I'm not," he said. "For once, I'm not. Ariadne, I'm messed up—bad. Can't run away, can't vanish, can't heal. I get the feeling that if I stay put, I'm not getting out of this one with my head, no matter whether Godzilla or King Kong wins this fight."

Both young Kindred cast their gaze to where the elders were doing battle. The Prince and her former Seneschal were nothing but flashes of shadow and color, silhouetted forms against clouds of unholy energy.

"So what do you want me to do about it?" Ariadne's words barely escaped her throat. "I tried my best and I failed. I couldn't even give Liliane a challenge. How can I possibly beat both her *and* Roarke?"

"Haven't you been listening? They need you."

"I don't need the reminder. Whether it's Roarke or Liliane, a blood bond or magic or just hurting me enough, they can make me do what they want, and there's nothing I can—"

She turned suddenly to Bourne. "You've got to kill me. If I'm gone, they can't make that 'Feast of Nettles' happen."

"No!" Bourne shouted. "I just lost Silas, damn it, and I'm not going to—"

He shook his head, composed himself. “No. Wouldn’t do any good. Roarke could just create another one like you. There’s got to be some way take out the statue.”

Ariadne fought to solidify her thoughts. “Marie. She said that to destroy the Almavore, she needed the power of someone’s entire soul. I don’t know exactly what that means, but ... but I think I know how to take someone’s soul.” Again she remembered Po-Mo and the Council soldiers. “The Almavore taught me that.”

The cavern shook as the two elders continued their clash. Bourne stared at them for a moment. “I don’t imagine either of them is going to volunteer. But then, they’re not the only option.”

Ariadne looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.” He set his jaw. “Come on. Before my better sense kicks in.”

“Bourne,” she started, but couldn’t find the words to finish the sentence.

“Christ, no mushy stuff.” Bourne leaned in close, drew her head up, bared his neck before her. “Just get it over with. I ended my flesh and blood life dyin’ for a cause I thought was right. I’d rather go out of this unlife that way too, rather than some elder’s pickings. Just do the damned thing, will you, and kill the Almavore?”

Ariadne stared into his eyes. She shook her head no, but she was already moving closer, opening her aching jaw. Her fangs felt brittle.

“You fat bastard,” she whispered, feeling a small burning at the edges of her eyes. “You got me to kiss you after all.”

Bourne chuckled. The spasm from his laugh made his neck veins pulse, right up into her waiting mouth. Ariadne sank her teeth in and drank, deep and long.

Po-Mo’s soul was violent, passionate, a sensory overload. Bourne’s, to her surprise, was melodic, textured, a symphony of yearning and doubt and pain punctuated by violent librettos of anger and scorn. She tasted love, lust, loss, shame, frustration, pride, dreams. So many dreams.

She felt as if she would rupture. How had Liliane done it, slurping souls as if she were merely slaking her thirst? The rapture of this new fuel for her burgeoning magic filled her. It wrapped around her broken body, sought to flee heavenward before the gravity of her personal sphere drew it back in.

Only for a moment, Bourne. Just a small detour.

In her passion and confusion, Ariadne rolled over, saw the cavern lit by the flashes from the battle as the two elders unleashed magic upon one another. Liliane, her fearsome and terrible mother. Roarke, her rugged, brutish father. Both cruel, both deceptive, and Ariadne was the product of their twisted love.

You two made me to be a weapon. You brought this upon yourselves.

The light from their battle illuminated the pulsing, writhing black form of the Almavore. Like Ariadne, the Almavore was built to be a weapon, a tool of those with ambition. Like her, it contained a consciousness, a will. She could feel the entity’s rage and desire, but also its helplessness, its dependence. It was mute, frozen, utterly unable to act.

Unlike her.

In her mind, she let go the fingernail-grip on herself and let her consciousness fall into the pounding pulse of the Almavore’s presence. Roarke’s tune was her lifeline, the cascading slide that conveyed her down, down into the depths of the Almavore’s bottomless

hunger. As she fell, she felt herself begin to splinter and peel away. The Almavore's will peeled her apart to get at the morsel of Bourne's soul inside. It could hear Roarke's music; she knew that, somehow. As it had ripped all veils from her thoughts, she could stare into the madness that was its own mind.

Thoughts that were not her own raced through Ariadne's mind, half-formed images of half-impossible things from the Abyss that beckoned and begged her attention; she refused, sensing that even to consider them would drive her insane. She swam instead toward what she understood, the basic emotions that she knew she and the entity shared.

Fear. She was terrified. It had been too, at first ... but now it wasn't.

Why? It should have been. It knew what she was trying to do, knew that somewhere far away her voice was starting to sing Roarke's melody, the one that would banish it forever. It wasn't afraid in the slightest.

No.

There wasn't much of Ariadne left, not much more than a voice that was singing mostly of its own volition. Mostly, but not entirely. Roarke didn't really want to banish the creature, she remembered. Roarke wanted it to consume the city. That was what his song was for!

She tried to stop her voice, but found she no longer remembered how. She kept on singing, and the Almavore's excitement filled her.

Roarke hadn't wanted to banish the Almavore, but Marie had. And Marie had had her own song—the song Ariadne had heard beating in the Almavore's pulse when Marie had come so close to banishing it. That was the song she needed.

The Almavore's thoughts reached out like tendrils, suddenly keen to snatch these thoughts away from Ariadne. Coiled smoke smothered her ideas, leaving Ariadne nothing but a memory of music. A fast-tempoed series of pulses—wild music, for the wild energies being unleashed.

Not Roarke's tune, although a variation on it. Ariadne had forgotten why it was so important, but she knew she had to sing it, and fast, before the Almavore took even that ability from her.

Still singing, she changed the tune, and the wave of fear that hit her was so strong that she could not tell if it was hers or the creature's. There were no more boundaries between them. They were one. Except for one impurity.

Bourne's sacrificed soul. A wind kicked up from no discernible source, buffeting Ariadne from behind, spreading her hair in a billowing fan.

Her father's voice, her real father, called to her in her mind. "Let's go down to the garden, Pumpkin."

Her mother, stretched out on her bed with angry fistfuls of fresh linens, relaxed her grip, turned around, said, "Ariadne, dear, you always know the right moment to come in. Leave the water by my bedside."

Mom, Dad, Ariadne cried in her thoughts, suddenly remembering some small piece of herself. Wherever you are, I miss you. I'm sorry for these false parents. I'm not their child.

She swore she heard a voice, like Andrei's, only much deeper. "Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices."

Ariadne released Bourne's soul. So blackened and mangled in life, to her eyes it now looked like a shining yellow comet, sparkling with all the beauty of the daylight sun that Ariadne missed so terribly much. It streaked across the underground cavern, tearing the fabric of the air itself with its song. The Almavore, as if in recognition, increased the pace of its pulsing heartbeat to a fever pitch.

Nearby, Roarke and Liliane, each torn and gasping, paused in their struggles. They broke apart and tried to race for the Almavore. All around, the giant corpse-beasts sprang to life with unnatural grace, teeth snapping for Ariadne.

They were all too late.

The statue glowed brightly, the white-hot bubbles of its stolen souls ballooning outward, ready to burst. Then they did. They showered the room in sparks of every color, sounding like a billion chimes all in perfect harmony.

Ariadne found her consciousness rudely slammed back into her own body, but the pain didn't matter. She was seeing with her own eyes once more, and they had never seen such beauty. All the torment and pain for her whole unlife, for the briefest of moments, seemed worth it. That pain had brought her to this point, to witness this moment. She could swear she saw New Jerusalem spread out its parapets and avenues before her.

Then the souls freed from the Almavore flew away, up out of the cavern, undaunted by stone walls or warding spells. They took New Jerusalem with them, and the room seemed to shudder with the vacuum they left behind. The wall torches all blew out, leaving Ariadne with her night vision in a dark, cold cavern.

For a moment, all was quiet. Then, with a sob, Liliane fell to her knees. Her white robes were torn, mottled with dust and blood. She ran her hands through the pulpy mess of scattered fragments that used to be the Almavore. She looked up to the ceiling, her lips mouthing something Ariadne could not catch. The Prince's body shivered and convulsed.

"Don't leave me." Liliane's face was wracked with grief. "Father, I have been faithful! Please, don't leave me." She clawed at the ground, digging deep gouges in the stone. "Don't ... leave ... me!"

She doubled over.

The corpse army crumbled to dust. A soft mist rose from their remains.

Roarke, a few paces behind the Prince, dusted himself off. Like a demonic rag doll that had lost half its stuffing, his body was shattered beyond the point where he should be able to stand. Yet stand he did.

"Tarnation," he whispered.

Silence reigned for what seemed like decades. Ariadne lay prone on the cold stone ground, helpless.

Liliane rose at last, staggered toward Ariadne, talons extended. "I should destroy you."

Ariadne could only watch as the Prince swayed in the grips of some unseen force; she wondered dimly how closely Liliane and Roarke and the Almavore had become tied, wondered how its destruction might be diminishing the two of them even as its life had given them power.

It didn't matter. Liliane still seemed strong enough, as she lifted Ariadne up with one hand, brandishing her talons in the darkness. She threw Ariadne into the blood pool, where the red liquid closed in around her.

It was all right. After what she had seen, Ariadne could die now.

“Liliane, enough.”

Ariadne rose to the surface. Her vision was too blurred to see properly, but she heard Roarke’s voice drawing near.

“You would defend your childe, Roarke, after all she has wrought and ruined?”

“Didn’t you always tell me that the Lord tests us?”

“How dare you suggest that this whelp is a tool of the Lord.” For all her anger, Liliane somehow sounded very small, very young, very lost.

Roarke was there, his hand on the Prince’s shoulder.

“There’s nothin’ more to be gained here. There’s a time to kill and a time to heal.”

“And the Devil can quote scripture for his purpose.”

“Let her go. There’s work to be done.”

“I must start over again?”

“You did once before.”

Ariadne could feel something inside Liliane shift. “Is that Your test, Father? Is that Your will? Must I begin to rebuild the city yet again, from the first stones, with nothing?”

“Not with nothing.” Roarke put his hand on her shoulder. She rocked backward, falling against him. Her grip on Ariadne weakened.

“You brought me into this plan o’ yours so you wouldn’t ever be alone again.”

Liliane cocked her head. “The taste of betrayal so fresh on your lips, and now you seek to ingratiate yourself once more?”

“We’re back to step one. That means we’ve got the same goal again.”

“And in the future?”

“Darlin’, ain’t a body living nor dead that can tell that.”

“You’ll leave me,” Liliane mumbled. “Like you did before. Like Peter. Like Astro-labe. Like Ariadne.”

“Maybe,” Roarke said nonchalantly, as if considering the future price of corn. “Maybe that’s your destiny. Maybe it ain’t. The man upstairs ain’t exactly forthcoming.”

“Forgiveness is the mark of the divine.” Liliane turned to Roarke. “Your youth has ever inspired me, as much as it has driven me to fury.” She ran her talon across his face, tracing a small red line in a cruel mockery of a caress.

Liliane looked at him with eyes Ariadne had never seen before. Eyes full of hope, of promise. In this moment, more than any other time, she looked human.

Roarke moved so fast that Ariadne could barely see the motion of his hand as it flew to Liliane’s neck, tensed to snap it. But the Prince was just a little bit faster as she drove her fangs into his throat, ripping it apart.

Ariadne’s body, still neck deep in the blood pool, spasmed of its own accord. Every thrash of her sire’s dying body was matched by a twitch in her own. Even in the moments of his destruction, he sought to control her.

Ariadne focused her will, forced her hand to stop in its flailing arc, felt an object knock into it. Her fingers ran along a familiar shape, closing around it.

A thud shook the cavern. Roarke had fallen, and Liliane, swooning like a drunk, careened toward the pool. Her eyes were raw and ablaze with the rush of another elder's blood. Ariadne could see the veins bulging in the Prince's skin, making impressions against the white muslin of her dress, already stained deep crimson with blood.

Gone was the grace and majesty of Liliane's bearing, replaced with an animal passion that erupted in a growl from her throat. When she spoke, it was not English that emerged but some other tongue, awkward as if unused to being voiced by human speech in millennia.

Ariadne could barely move. She could only watch Liliane drawing close, watch the shreds of the Prince's disguise peel and melt away. There was no radical transformation, no eruption of horns or wings or tail, but the odd angles of the Prince's posture, the sudden drawing of the flesh around the bones of her skull, the distended stomach in which Ariadne could actually see the waves of churning blood, all cried loud and clear what the Prince had always been.

Liliane lurched up to the edge of the pool, mouth foaming with blood, eyes wild yet wide and alert.

Ariadne heard the sounds of crashes and muffled booms from above. Was the house collapsing above them? Had Saul's soldiers broken through? Had Marie brought reinforcements from the wizards?

Liliane grabbed Ariadne by the shoulders, and Ariadne felt her own flesh rip and tear as the Prince dragged her half out of the blood pool. Liliane raised the iron-gray claw on her index finger. The tip pressed against Ariadne's flesh, against her carotid artery.

Ariadne could barely make out the syllables through the Prince's growl. "I made you. Not Roarke. Me."

And I destroyed you, Ariadne thought. I can carry that with me to my grave.

Another crash, followed by footsteps.

"Do you hear that?" Ariadne croaked.

"And the rock cried out, 'no hiding place.'" The Gospel seemed to sizzle on Liliane's lips. "There is no rescue from God's wrath."

"They're not coming for me," said Ariadne. "They're coming for you. Again, Liliane. With the torches and pitchforks."

The skin of Liliane's face rippled. The talon by Ariadne's neck quavered.

"Just like last time." Ariadne pressed. "Everything you built, everything you dreamed. Gone."

"No!"

"Yes," said Ariadne. She raised the arm that still dragged in the pool of blood, the hand that had found the hilt of Saul's sword.

As it rose from the blood pool, the blade shone with a brilliant light that cast shadows through the entire cavern and forced Ariadne and Liliane to close their eyes. The blood of one Kindred charged the sword enough to steal a soul with one blow. What would the collected blood of so many do?

Ariadne did not need to see to strike. She felt the blade connect, felt the sensations up her arm and shoulder as if the sword-edge was just one more cluster of nerves. Striking with it was as natural as breathing used to be.

Ariadne felt every snap of sinew and tendon. She felt the crunch of bone and the rapid shift in resistance, the sudden ease with which the sword, no longer impeded, sliced

through the empty space, then shattered when it hit the cavern floor. Ariadne opened her eyes in time to see the shocked gasp on Liliane's face as the Prince's torso corroded. Ariadne watched the arms that held her up snap away from a body that crumbled to dust. She watched the billow of skirts raised by the wind of disappearing legs.

Liliane's face was the last to go. The expression of surprise lingered for a moment like a sand sculpture as the skin and bone pulverized. Then there was only the soft echo in the air, the faint reminder of a presence, a shooting star that passed in the night and was already half a memory before its light even faded.

Three Kindred whose eyes had seen the passage of centuries had walked into this cavern. Now, all that remained of any of them was some empty clothes and a battered old top hat. It was the last thing Ariadne saw as, spent, she sank into the blood pool and disappeared beneath its surface.

Somewhere, beyond the walls of the cavern, out beyond the charred and smoldering remains of a once-stately house, she knew the sun must be rising. Someone had reached her. Hands were grabbing at her form. A voice that sounded like Saul's was asking her if she was all right.

Ariadne felt it all pass away. Here within the earthen womb, she imagined she could feel the sun's rays touching her face. The thought made her smile.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ariadne had no idea how long she'd waited in the gunmetal gray hallway, impatiently hugging her chest with her arms. As she paced she almost wished she was facing the corpse army again.

The waiting room seemed designed to inspire boredom. It had a gray couch, a potted plant, a few prints of inoffensive art hanging on the walls, and a desk where a plain, mousy woman clicked away on a computer while some insipid Bryan Adams song played from unseen speakers. She tried to recollect the melody Roarke had planted inside her, but it was gone. She knew somehow it would never come back.

A dozen cameras scanned the room from every angle; Ariadne didn't know how Saul managed to explain her blurred presence on them, but at the moment she didn't care.

When his men brought her here, they hadn't chained her up, even though in her weakened state they could have. That was either a sign they respected her, or a sign that, after witnessing what she could do down in the cavern, they were terrified of making her angry. She could deal with either.

Andrei came walking down the hall. At first sight he looked the picture of someone who worked at this facility, not of someone who for the last few days had been a prisoner here. Cassie was trotting beside him, tiny hand gripped within his bandaged, four-fingered one.

"Hey." He said the word hopefully, awkwardly, like a teenager asking someone out on a first date.

Ariadne turned to him. Her arms remained crossed. "Hey."

"I, um ... I guess I'm free to go."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. It was sort of like a forced stay at a hotel. A nicer one than Fresh Pond, too." He chuckled nervously. "They even let Cassie come stay with me after a while. You know, the whole time, they didn't even ask me any questions. I know the government's gotten pretty screwy with arrests since 9/11, but this was just bizarre. I assume this, ah, has something to do with you?"

"Yes," Ariadne said. After a moment she added, "I'm glad you're okay."

"Don't worry about it," he said graciously, as if she had delivered an apology. "Cassie's fine, you're fine, I'm fine. Everything's fine."

He reached out his good hand. Ariadne watched with casual detachment as he rested it on her shoulder. She felt the usual quiver of longing, and fought it back.

"I keep thinking I'm just going to wake up from all of this tomorrow with a bad hangover."

"I hope so," she said evenly.

"Ari," he said, taking her chin in hand when she avoided his eyes. "Let's go home."

"No."

Andrei pulled back, hurt. Cassie stared at Ariadne warily, then looked to her father to gauge his reaction. Ariadne thought he looked more confused than anything else.

She raised an eyebrow warily. "You still want to be with me after all you saw? Knowing what I am?"

"I'm not sure what I saw," said Andrei, grimacing. "Things are a little foggy. I think it's because I finally got some sleep." He chuckled. "Most people get refreshed if they take a break from work. Me? My brain breaks down."

Ariadne nodded with relief. She had, as she had promised Saul, made arrangements that the Masquerade would remain intact.

"He won't remember anything that breaches the Veil," Marie says, removing her hand from Andrei's forehead. Aside from looking a little pale, there is no sign the young wizard has suffered multiple gunshot wounds just a few days earlier. She is wearing a knit sweater with images of gingerbread men all over it.

Saul looks unimpressed. "I've seen minds wiped before. They can sometimes be unwiped. A bullet's a lot more permanent a solution."

"We had a deal," Ariadne says. "I'm not reneging on my end. And in case you're thinking of backing out on yours ..."

Marie knows her cue. "We'll be watching. My Consilium can use a man with good computer skills. Especially a cute one." Marie pinched Andrei's cheek. He stared blankly ahead, his mind still enthralled. "Bottom line: this man and his family are under our protection. Understand?"

"Well, whatever happened," Andrei was saying, bringing Ariadne back to the present, "I'm not angry. I promised myself that I wouldn't be angry at you any more. That path led nowhere. I'm still finding a new one, I guess. This was just a bump. A weird one, but a bump. No charges. No jail time. We're free to go. We can pick up where we left off, go to that apartment, start a life."

Ariadne could see the chains wrapped around him, wished she could reach out and snap them. But just as she had to free herself, so, too, would he.

"I can't be with you. I'm sorry."

"Is it because of this?" Andrei pointed to his mauled hand, as if that mess of knitted flesh and muscle could truly encompass what the last decade of nights had wrought in her. "What those thugs did? Look, whoever you used to keep company with, you're not like them. You're still you."

Ariadne wanted to cry out: *I'm still just the same? So are you going to marry me? How will you explain a wife who never comes out in daylight? What kind of job am I supposed to get? What skills do I have, besides murder? And Cassie, what about her? Is she ever going to love a walking corpse? Is that what you want for your child? Is that healthy?*

Instead, she just said, “No. I’m sorry.”

Andrei stared at her, then down at Cassie, who was tugging at his shirt.

“I want to go home, Daddy,” she said.

He mussed her hair. For just a moment, a frozen time between breaths, Ariadne imagined this scene as if lit by daylight. Andrei, the nurturing father, providing comfort. Ariadne, the smiling wife, looking proudly on the scene of her happy family. It was all real.

Immersed first in poetry, then later in blood, she had never even known she had wanted any of this. Not until now, this moment. She wanted to reach out, snatch the whole scene, wrap it around her.

Across the hall, one of Saul’s *faux* FBI agents tossed an obscenity in a conversation with one of his fellows. The scene around Ariadne shattered, a stained-glass window now in a million shards that could never again be assembled.

Words Liliane had spoken often came back to her. “What is it that set God above His creations? Perhaps nothing more than that fundamental declaration of self-knowledge: I am that I am.”

“Andrei,” she whispered. “I’m dead.”

“But—”

She put a finger to his lips. “This body, it’s a lie. It looks like me, it moves like me. On some days, it even thinks it is me. But it doesn’t feel. Not the way I need it to. Not the way you deserve it to.” Those last words seemed to weigh tons as she pushed them out. “You need more than the kind of devotion hunger brings. Even if you don’t, I need more than that. And I’m not sure I’m even capable of it.”

“Enough with the poetry,” said Andrei. “Let’s be serious. How do you even know what you’re capable of? We could take time, explore.”

“You don’t want that. Cassie won’t want that. For a while, I thought I could change myself. I had all sorts of plans, like you wouldn’t even believe, to change you. But I don’t think that would work any more than you could change me.”

“You mean like I tried to in college?”

Andrei looked to her, then down at Cassie nuzzling in his sweater. For a man not burdened with the weight of centuries of life, his eyes looked far too careworn.

“I always tried to do right by you. By her.” He ruffled Cassie’s hair. “I screwed up. How many times do I have to admit that? But that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop trying.”

Of course it didn’t. Andrei would steam on ahead, even if the tracks led into an abyss, so long as some light shined on a hill. He would lose his other nine fingers for her.

Ariadne sighed. “Maybe that girl with her sandals and her poetry back at college could have changed. You could have changed with her, and both could have become something better together. Not now.”

Andrei closed his mouth, looked at the floor for a while. Finally, he spoke.

“You’re strong. I know that. If you don’t like who and what you are, you can still change.”

“Maybe I can,” she said. “But it has to be without you. Every time you’re around, I feel so much ... so much less than what I can be. It’s like the clock goes back in all the wrong ways and I shed all I’ve gained without reclaiming anything I’ve lost. It might not even be your fault, but it still isn’t right.”

Andrei stared at her. Ariadne could see the arguments piling up like a maddened snow-fall in his eyes. She feared that if he started hurling them at her, she might weaken again.

“Just promise me one thing, Ari,” he said. “If you do change, come back and find us.”

Ariadne laughed softly, shut her eyes. “Please, Andrei. Please. Move on. You’re alive, which means you have no excuse for getting stuck. Go, find some woman who’ll appreciate you. I loved you, your wife loved you ... there’s sure to be a third out there.”

Andrei stared. “So this is it?”

Ariadne leaned forward and kissed Andrei lightly on the cheek, then touched Cassie’s face with her finger.

Cassie flinched away, but not before Ariadne felt her soft cheek, not before she allowed herself a momentary fantasy of how the love of a daughter might feel. Like an unexpected gunshot, she felt a startling flood of empathy for Liliane, felt how desperate the desire for a daughter’s love could be ... and how twisted it could become in the hearts of the damned.

Without saying another word, Ariadne walked out of the room. Andrei was calling something after her. She chose not to hear. He would move on. Ariadne had confidence in him. Humans were resilient. They had to be. Only Kindred could truly afford the luxury of forever wallowing in their broken dreams.

“You.”

Saul was waiting in the hallway beyond, beckoning her into a stairwell. She followed tentatively, senses alert. The heavy door closed, kicking up a gust that made the folds of his trenchcoat billow around his stout form. From beneath them, he produced two katanas, one in each hand. She took note of how he knew precisely the right way to proffer the swords.

His face was healed, his characteristic calm restored. “You did well, girl. There’s a place for you here, with us.”

Ariadne took the swords from him, felt their weight. She slid them neatly into the guitar case that Saul had procured for her. She did not reply.

“Liliane and Roarke snowed us,” he said. “I’ll admit that freely. They staged a war to distract us from what they were doing with that soul eater, and it worked. I don’t need to tell you the Masquerade would have been shredded if not for you.”

“No, you don’t need to tell me that,” said Ariadne simply. “You just need to let me go.”

“Don’t be so hasty,” Saul drew near. “The Council needs a new Prince in East Boston. We need to re-establish our compact with the wizards, and it’s clear that at least one of them gets along with you. I can’t think of a better candidate.”

“I can,” said Ariadne flatly. “Anyone else.”

“Come on, be reasonable,” said Saul. “Kindred aren’t a solitary species. We don’t last long on our own.”

“I’ll take my chances. I followed through on my end of the deal, and you’re going to follow through on yours. We’re done now.”

“Do you understand what I’m offering you here?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “More puppet strings. More masters. I’m done with all of that. If you want the swords back, fine.”

Saul's face darkened. She saw the small sparks of anger crackle in his eyes, saw the stolid demeanor crack just a millimeter.

"Keep the swords." Saul's voice grew terse. "They can serve as a reminder that we'll be watching you. You're not just any Lick. You can do things very few of us can. That makes you valuable, and it makes you vulnerable. When we let you go, are you prepared for handling all that on your own?"

Ariadne just raised an eyebrow.

Saul continued. "Think carefully. If you refuse the Council now, we may come back later with an offer on less generous terms."

"You're welcome to try," Ariadne said, then turned her back, walked away, and was swallowed by the darkness.

Epilogue

Who am I?

Ariadne rewrites those three words in a dozen different scripts, in different colors, across the inside cover of her notebook with the college logo on it, the price tag from the campus bookstore still clinging to a stray piece of plastic sheathing.

Who am I?

It sounds like a simple enough question. A few months ago, in high school, she could have answered it so freely, without any hesitation. I am either a man or a woman. I am possessed of a certain age, height, weight, and build. I came from here or there, I plan to study this or that.

Ah, but that still doesn't do it, doesn't catch the elusive little rodent in the innermost wheel of "identity" that escapes every trap she lays for it.

Am I "type A" or "type B?" People person or introvert? Ectomorph or endomorph, Democrat or Republican? Latte or mocha?

Ariadne is starting to suspect that, here in college, the answer is always "yes." Or "no." Or "check back with me in a week." Yesterday she read Erik Eriksson; he described college as a "moratorium on life," a time when young people try on all the hats in the clothing store with no obligation to buy and no charge for soiling the merchandise.

So why am I so scared? she wonders, dabbing at her lower lip with the eraser of her pencil. Is it a fear of all that potential for change, or of the thought that this might be my last chance for it? She has to pick a major, after all, as early as sophomore year. She needs to explore this time now, treasure it, before she ossifies.

Ariadne writes: There is nothing more terrifying than ossification.

Then she leans back, breathes in the fresh campus air. She is seated on the lawn outside the library, feeling the grass tickle her bare ankles beneath her flower-print skirt. The sun shines gloriously upon her, baking her skin, its rays a gift. She feels as if she can latch on to any of those beams of sunlight, follow it to the end, bump up against a wall of stars that scatter, destroying her carefully drawn map of the constellations ... and then she'll draw a new one.

"Who am I?" she calls out to the sky with a smile.

"Um, you're the girl who's laying on my bookbag."

"What?"

Ariadne rolls over, sees she has leaned back into someone else's personal space. When did he sit down? He hadn't been there when she arrived.

She sees a pair of patent-leather shoes, impeccably polished. Her eyes follow the khaki pants, up over the knees, to a leather belt. In the lap, a computer science textbook. Then a button-down shirt and tie. Finally, Ariadne sees a blond young man staring back at her. The glare of the sun bathes his face in a fiery aura.

"Oh." She exhales, drawing herself up to an unsteady sitting posture, her skirt awash in fragments of grass and leaves. "I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay," he says. His gaze lingers on her for a moment, then returns to his book.

Ariadne rubs her eyes a bit to chase the sunspots from them. She wants to see his face clearly. She wants to see if it was only the sun in her eyes that made him look like Adonis.

He looks up again when he feels her gaze still falling on him. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"No," she says, cocking her head. There is a flush behind her cheeks, a fluttered beating of her heart. "I was just thinking: it's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

She would never have tried something like this in high school. That simply wasn't who she was. But now, she can be anyone. Even the kind of girl who would start up a conversation with a complete stranger.

He cranes his neck, as if he needs to look around, to confirm her words by some sort of examination. Ariadne stifles a giggle.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is."

She has already jumped off the cliff, she realizes. She might as well flap her wings and try to fly.

"I've just decided that it's too beautiful for me to study right now. I'm going to go for a walk. Do you want to join me?"

He stares at her as if she has just asked him to jump off a cliff. Uh oh. Now she's done it. She's flown too close to the sun; it's going to melt her wings and send her plummeting.

Well, fine. At least she would make a spectacular splash. Better to die in the pursuit of living, to die on fire, to—

"I said, my name's Andrei. What's yours?"

She blinks. "Oh, I, ah ... Ariadne! My name is Ariadne."

"That's Greek, isn't it?"

"It is. I'm not. Well, I might be. I haven't ever really done a proper family tree. It's something I imagine I'll do when I'm old and gray in a rocking chair somewhere, with a glass of lemonade and a whole collection of cats."

Andrei narrows his eyes, as if trying to determine if she is in fact speaking English.

"Well," she says, scratching her neck self-consciously, "I'm going to go, then. For my walk. If you want to join me, that's great. If not, well, that's okay, too. Enjoy your textbook."

As he stares, utterly stupefied, Ariadne rises to her feet, nods, smiles, then begins walking. She has no idea of her destination. She just starts walking. Because she said she was going to walk, and if she says it and doesn't do it, then—

"Excuse me."

She turns. Andrei is jogging up to her, holding her notebook in one hand.

"You left this behind."

"Oh. Thanks." She flashes a stupid grin without even realizing it, and then it is too late to call it back.

He seems to soften, though, when he sees it. He blushes, produces a thin smile, then half-coughs. It's so cute! It's like he's almost British.

"I, ah ... I have a class in just a few minutes. So I, um ... so I can't walk with you. Not right now. But maybe later? I mean, I don't know what your schedule is like, but ... um ..."

"I don't have a schedule." Ariadne rocks nervously on the balls of her feet.

"You don't? Registration was weeks ago."

"Well, sure, I mean, of course, I have classes and everything," says Ariadne. "But I consider it all flexible. Life's too short to stay within the walls all the time. That's my new philosophy."

"New philosophy?"

"I try a new one every few days. See how well each fits."

Andrei scratches his neck, still smiling. "You're, um. You're ..."

He pauses, trying carefully to find just the right word. She waits with baited breath for the judgment.

"Different," he says at last.

"Oh."

"No, no," he says, seeing her expression sink, "not in a bad way."

"In what way, then?"

"Different as in, ah ..." He coughs. "Well, I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before."

"Of course not," she says. "I'm unique. We all are."

He squints again. "Are you really like this?"

"Really like what?"

"This. All the time."

"I told you: I'm trying on philosophies. It's the only way to find out who I am."

"So tomorrow, you might not be Ariadne?"

"That's right," she says, smirking. "So you'd better walk with me today. Otherwise, tomorrow, how will you ever find me?"

"I think I'd manage," he says. "You seem like the kind of person who stands out. That," he quickly adds, "was a compliment."

"Why, thank you, sir."

"My last class today is over at eight."

"Eight?" she says.

It will be twilight, nearly dark. Well, so be it, she decides. Think how much of life one would miss if one were only a heliophant! Perhaps it is time for Ariadne to try out the nocturnal life.

“Eight,” she says confidently.

“Can I meet you in front of the library?”

“Hmm,” Ariadne says, hand over her eyes, surveying the campus. “No, we’ve already been here. Let’s meet ... there.”

He follows the direction of her finger.

“That covered bridge?”

She nods. “It looks like the perfect place for a meeting.”

He shakes his head. His smile is now full and robust, and she feels herself shivering inside. She almost asks him to step on her feet, so she won’t float away.

“Thanks for bringing back my notebook,” she says, taking it from him. She notices that his hand is shaking slightly.

“Oh, no problem,” he says. “I just know that if that were me, I’d be going crazy looking for it. I’m a firm believer in helping people avoid misery whenever possible.”

“A regular knight in shining armor.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say—”

“Sir Knight,” Ariadne curtsies, “I shall see thee at eight. You can tell me all about whatever quest it is that you’re on.”

He walks away, looking back several times. Ariadne feels ablaze with the sun’s glow. She has stolen a piece of it for herself, and wraps it around her like a cloak.

Who am I?

I have no idea. But no matter how scary it might be, I’m going to have so much fun figuring it out.



Route 2 spread up a precipitous hill as it struck out from Boston. Ariadne followed at the margins of the highway as closely as she could, navigating the dead shrubs, junk piles, and other trappings of the suburban wasteland that ringed the city’s perimeter. Liliane always told her the world beyond the city—any city—was dangerous, that werewolves and beasts and unnamed horrors lay in wait. If that was not another lie, then Ariadne would deal with those creatures as they came. She had no quarrel with them. If they decided to make one, they would regret it.

Even at the mere thought of violence, Ariadne’s perceptions shifted to the weight on her back. Saul’s swords, inside the guitar case, did not carry the familiar weight of her old ones. Some day, Ariadne knew, she would forge new blades. For now, she almost enjoyed the eeriness, the thrill, of this new load.

Her boots tapped softly against the pavement and dried grasses, crunched broken leaves and other detritus of a long-gone autumn. The city receded behind her. Liliane’s perennial advice about not looking back on Sodom and Gomorrah was probably well taken. Ariadne looked anyway.

A light drizzle of rain was falling, and in the distance Boston twinkled placidly in the late evening fog. From here Ariadne couldn’t see the Charles River at all. For the first time in a decade, she saw the city without its perpetual mirror-companion. It was one and only one entity, calm and unchanging. So much had happened since the last time Ariadne had seen the city as a singular form, a city above and not also below. She had a hard time

remembering when that had been. But from what all the elders said, the years would eventually lap away at all the dams of her memories, grind them down until everything blurred in their irresistible flow. Perhaps that would be a blessing.

Ariadne wondered if any of Liliane's court or Roarke's rebels had survived, whether they would join or contest the Council in rebuilding the shattered remnants of the Prince's abandoned empire. Ariadne squinted into the night, trying to find the lights of the Fresh Pond Motel, knowing it was impossible. From this distance they were well obscured by some taller, prouder structures.

A fragment of Shelley floated to her lips:

*"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

Some day the Council might seek her out. If they did they would not find her a pliant weapon to wield. But if she was not a weapon, then what was she?

Bourne's laughter echoed in her mind. Ariadne could still see the grime on his fangs as he smiled. Were he there, he would doubtless interject some dry remark to belittle her soul-searching. She had never thought she would miss that.

She had been loved by two men, one human and one not, but which was which? Each had been looking for something that they thought Ariadne could help them find. Had either been right? Standing alone, whipped by the night wind, splashed by the spray from cars passing on the highway beside her, Ariadne realized it was hard enough to sort through one set of thoughts, let alone more.

Besides, love was a human emotion. Whatever Ariadne was, she was no longer human. For those like her, love was as unwieldy, as unbalanced, as a blade in the hands of a bear.

For those like her ...

Who am I?

"I am that I am," she said.

It was a beginning. Even with endless pages to fill, a single sentence nevertheless tasted to her like victory.

About the Author

David Nurenberg, PhD, is a teacher, freelance writer, and social activist who lives in the Boston area. His credits with White Wolf include writing for the Vampire: The Requiem, Scion, and Exalted lines. His nonfiction has appeared in the Boston Globe, Newsweek, USA Today, and Multicultural Review, as well as many lesser-known papers, 'zines, and blogs. *Silent Knife* is his first novel published by a major press. His favorite animal is the wombat.

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WHAT IS THE ONYX PATH?

SPRING 2012: (VTM) V20 COMPANION

SUMMER 2012: (VTM) CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION

FALL 2012: (VTM) HUNTERS HUNTED 2

FALL 2012: (WTA) WEREWOLF: THE APOCALYPSE - 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WINTER 2012-2013: (MTA) MAGE CONVENTION BOOK

WINTER 2012-2013: (VTM) ANARCHS UNBOUND



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STORYTELLING IN THE
DIGITAL AGE

THE MUMMY

the CURSE

When you trespass,
the reason you feel
you are being watched
is because you are.

THE FEAR IS REAL.

When you steal,
the dread that comes over you
is neither guilt nor paranoia,
but the cold certitude of fate.

THE CURSE IS REAL.

When you die,
know that your life was but a flash
upon the face of the deep
in the mind of your judge.

WE ARE REAL.

AND WE ARE ARISEN.

— Ankh-Nephris, the Hand of Wisdom

