



ALIETTE  
DE BODARD

THE HOUSE OF  
SHATTERED  
WINGS

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# **The House of Shattered Wings**

## Chapter One

### The Falling Star

*It is almost pleasant, at first, to be Falling.*

*The harsh, unwavering light of the City recedes, leaving you in shadow, leaving only memories of relief, of a blessed coolness seizing your limbs. Nothing has turned yet into longing, into bitterness, into the cold that will never cease, not even in the heat of summer.*

*The wind, at first, is pleasant, too—softly whistling past you, so that you almost don't notice when its cold fingers tear at your wings. Feathers drift off, blinking like forgotten jewels, catching fire and burning like a thousand falling stars in the atmosphere. Some part of you knows you should be experiencing pain; that the flow of crimson blood, the lancing pain in your back, the fiery sensation that seems to have hold of your whole body—they're all yours, they're all irreversible and deadly. But you feel nothing: no exhilaration, no relief, not the searing agony of your wounds. Nothing but that sense of unnamed relief, that knowledge you won't have to face the judges in the City again.*

*Nothing, until the ground comes up to meet you, and you land in a jumble of pain and shattered bones; and the scream you didn't think you had in you scrapes your throat raw as you let it out—like the first, shocked breath of a baby newly born into a universe of suffering.*

It was Ninon who first saw her. Philippe had felt her presence first, but hadn't said anything. It wasn't a wish to protect the young Fallen so much as to protect himself—his status in the Red Mamba Gang was precarious as it was, and he had no desire to remind them how great a commodity he could become, given enough cruelty on their part. And Heaven knew, of course, that those days it didn't take much for cruelty or despair to get the better of them all, when life hung on a razor's edge, even for a former Immortal.

They'd been scavenging in the Grands Magasins—desperate and hungry, as Ninon had put it, because no one was foolish enough to go down there among the ruins of the Great Houses War, with spells that no one had had time to clean up primed and ready to explode in your face, with the ghosts and the hauntings and the odor of death that still hung like fog over the wrecks of counters and the faded posters for garments and perfumes from another, more innocent age.

No one, that is, but the gangs: the losers in the great hierarchy, the bottom feeders surviving on the carrion the Houses left them. Gangs could be huge, could number dozens of people, but they were fractured and powerless, deprived of the magic that made the Houses the true movers of Paris. And as far as gangs went, the Red Mambas were small; twenty or so members under Bloody Jeanne's leadership; and Philippe, on the bottom tier of the bottom tiers, just doing his best to survive—as always.

He and Ninon had been under the dome of the Galeries Lafayette, crossing over the rubble in the

center—what had once been the accessories department. On the walls were fragments of advertisement posters, colored scraps; bits and pieces of idealized human beings, of products that had long since ceased to be manufactured; and a fragment promising that the 1914 fashion season would be the headiest the city had ever seen: a season that, of course, had never been, swallowed up by the beginning of the war. Ahead were the stairs, blocked by debris; the faces of broken mannequins stared back at them, uncannily pale and expressionless, their eyes shining like cats' in the dim light.

Philippe hated the Grands Magasins—not that he was as superstitious as Ninon, but he could *feel* the pall of death hanging over the place, could almost hear the screams of the dying when the petrification spells had struck. Like any Immortal—even a diminished one, far from his home and his people—he could feel the *khi* currents, could sense their broken edges rubbing against him, as sharp as serrated knives.

“Ninon—”

Ahead, on the stairs, she'd turned back at him, her face flushed with the excitement of it all, that incomprehensible desire to flirt with danger until it killed you. A wholly human thing, of course; and he was meant to be human again, now that he had been cast out of the Heavens; but even as a mortal in Annam he'd just never had that kind of reckless death wish. “We should go—” he'd started, and then he'd felt it.

It was pure and incandescent, a wave of stillness that seemed to start somewhere in his belly and spread to his entire body—a split second when wind ran on his arms and face, and darkness stole across his field of vision, as if night had unexpectedly fallen in the world beyond the dome; and a raw sense of pain rose in him, a scream building in his lungs, on the verge of forcing its way out . . .

And then it was gone, leaving him wrung out, panting on the staircase as if he'd just run for his life across Paris. The pain was still at the back of his mind—a faint, watered-down memory that he would recognize anywhere—just as he would unerringly be able to find its source.

A Fallen. A young one, barely manifested in the world, lying in pain, somewhere close; somewhere *vulnerable* in a city where young Fallen were merchandise, creatures to be taken apart and killed before they became too powerful and did the taking apart and the killing.

“You okay?” Ninon asked. She was watching him, eyes narrowed. “Not going to go all mystical on me, are you?”

Philippe shook his head, struggling for breath—couldn't show weakness, couldn't show ignorance, not if he wanted to survive . . . At last he managed, in something like his usual flippant tones, “No way, sis. This is about the worst place in the world to get an attack of the mystical.”

“Doesn't mean you idiots wouldn't get one,” Ninon said, darkly. “Come on. Alex said there was good booty on the third floor, perfumes and alchemical reserves.”

The last thing Philippe wanted to do was go upstairs, or hang around the place any longer than he had to. “And they've remained miraculously untouched for sixty years? Either Alex is misinformed or there's some pretty heavy defenses. . . .”

Ninon grinned with the abandon of youth. “That's why we have you, don't we? To make short work of anything.”

“Sure,” Philippe said. He could cast some spells; call on some small remnants of who he had been, drawing from the *khi* fields around him. He would, however, have to be seriously insane to do it here. But he daren't protest too much, or too loudly; he was, as Ninon had reminded him, only useful as long as he could provide magic—the conscious, mastered kind, one cut above the lures of angel essence and other adjuncts. When that ceased . . .

He forced himself not to think about it as he followed her upstairs—past landing after deserted landing, under the vacant eyes of models in burned posters, past the tarnished mirrors and the shards of chandeliers. As he had feared, the pain at the back of his mind grew steadily, a sign they were approaching the Fallen's birth site. Ninon herself wasn't a witch—the magical practitioners had long since been snapped up by the Houses—but for all that, she was uncannily, unerringly headed toward the

newly manifested Fallen. “Ninon—” he said, as they rounded a ruined display promising exotic scents from Annam and the Far East, a memory of a home that was no longer his.

Too late.

She’d stopped, one hand going to her mouth. He couldn’t tell what her expression was, from behind, if it was horror or fascination or something else. As Philippe got closer, he saw what she saw: a jumble of crimson-stained feathers, a tangled mass that seemed to be all broken limbs and bleeding wounds; and, over it all, a gentle sloshing radiance like sunlight seen through water, a light that promised the soft warmth of live coals, the comfort of wintertime meals heated on the stove, the sheer relief just after the breaking of a thunderstorm, when the air was cleansed of all heaviness.

Philippe recovered faster than Ninon. While she still stood, gaping at the vision, he cautiously approached, circling the body with care, just in case the Fallen turned out vicious. But Philippe didn’t think it would.

Close up, the body was a mess: bones broken in several places, not always cleanly; the hands splayed out in abandon, loosely resting above dislocated wrists; the torso covered with blood and unidentifiable fluids. There was no smell, though; no stench of blood or ruptured guts; just a tang to the air, an acidity like a remnant of burning wood. Young Fallen never smelled like much of anything, not until the light vanished. Not until they joined the mortal plane like the rest of their kind.

The face . . . the face was intact, and that was almost the most gruesome thing about the Fallen. Eyes frozen in shock stared at him. The gaze was somehow ageless, that of a being that had endured beyond time, in a City that had nothing human or fragile about it. The cheekbones were high, and something in the cast of the face was . . . familiar, somehow. Philippe glanced back at the mess of the torso, noting the geometry of the chest: this particular Fallen manifested as female.

He hadn’t expected to be so . . . detached about things. He’d thought of a thousand ways she could have reminded him of the Great War, of the bloodied bodies by his side; but in some indefinable way she seemed beyond it all, a splayed doll rather than a broken body—he shouldn’t think that, he really shouldn’t, but it was all too easy to remember that it was her kind that had torn him from his home in Annam and sent him to slaughter, that had gloried in each of the dead, that had laughed to see his unit come back short so many soldiers, covered in the blood of their comrades—her kind, that ruled over the ruins of the city. . . .

“Awesome,” Ninon said. She knelt, her hands and arms bathed in the radiance, breathing in the light, the magic that hung coiled in the air around them. Fallen were magic: raw power descended to Earth, the younger the more powerful. “Come on, help me.”

“Help . . . ?”

Ninon’s hand flicked up; it came up with a serrated knife, the wickedly sharp blade catching the light.

“Can’t carry her. Too much work, and there’s only two of us. But we can take stuff.”

Stuff. Flesh and bone and blood, all that carried the essence of a Fallen, all that could be inhaled, put into artifacts, used to pass on magic and the ability to cast spells to others. He put his hand in the blood, lifted it to his mouth. The air seemed to tremble around his fingers as if in a heat wave, and the blood down his throat was as sweet as honey, warming his entire body, reminding him how it had been when he’d been an Immortal; and a flick of his hands could have transported him from end to end of Indochina, turned peach trees into magical swords, turned bullets aside as easily as wisps of vapor.

But that time was past. Had been past for more than sixty years, turned to dust as surely and as enduringly as his mortal family.

Ninon’s face was bathed in radiance as she knelt by the body—she was going for a hand or a limb, something that would have power, that would be worth something, enough to sustain them all . . . It—the thought of her sawing through flesh and bone and sinew shouldn’t have made him sick, but it was one thing to hate Fallen, quite another to cold-bloodedly do *this*.

“We could take the blood,” he said, forcing his voice to come back from the distant past. “Use the

old perfume bottles to mix our own elixirs.”

Ninon didn't look up, but he heard her snort. “Blood's piffle,” she said, lifting a limp, torn hand and eyeing it speculatively. “You know it's not where the money is.”

“Yes, but—”

“What's the matter? You feeling some kind of loyalty for your own kind?”

She didn't need to make the threat, didn't need to point out he was as good a source of magic as the Fallen by her side.

“Come on, help me,” she said; and as she lifted the knife, her eyes aglow with greed, Philippe gave in and pulled his own from his jacket; and braced himself for the inevitable grinding of metal against bone, and for the Fallen's pain to paralyze his mind.

Selene was coming home to Silverspires when she felt it. It was faint at first, a chord struck somewhere in the vastness of the city, but then she tasted pain like a sharp tang against her palate.

She raised a hand, surprised to find she'd bitten her tongue; probed at a tooth, trying to see if the feeling would vanish. But it didn't; rather, it grew in intensity, became a tingling in the soles of her feet, in her fingertips—a burning in her belly, a faint echo of what must have been unbearable.

“Stop,” she said.

There were four of them in the car that night: two of her usual guards, Luc and Imadan, and Javier, the Jesuit, the latest of several incongruous additions to the House. He had volunteered when Selene's chauffeur fell ill. She'd found him in the great hall, stubbornly waiting for her, his olive skin standing out against the darkness of his clothes; and had simply gestured him into the car. They'd hardly spoken a word since, and Selene hadn't probed. Like the rest of the motley band that constituted the House, Javier would open in his own time; there was little sense in trying to nudge or break him open—God knew Selene had had enough experience, by now, of what it meant to break people. Morningstar had taught her well, from beginning to end.

“What is it?” Javier asked.

Selene raised a hand to silence him, seeking the origin of the magic. Young, and desperate; she'd almost forgotten how that tasted, how bittersweet it all was, that mixture of bewilderment and pain that came just after the Fall.

West, in the ruined blocks that had been the great department stores and the great hotels before the war, their names like a litany of what had been lost: the Printemps, the Galeries Lafayette, the Hôtel Scribe, the Grand Hôtel . . . West, where the House of Lazarus still stood. And if she could feel it, so could every other Fallen in the vicinity; and perhaps their pet mages, too, if they had the right artifacts or were pumped up on essence.

Needless to say, Selene did not approve of essence.

“We don't have much time,” she said to Javier. “It's an infant Fallen, and it's in trouble.”

Javier's face was pale, but set. “Tell me where.”

“Right,” Selene said. “Left at the next intersection.”

The car moved smoothly under Javier's hands—though of course there was nothing smooth about it, and the battered and old metal carcass ran as much on magic as it did on expensive fuel.

Left, straight ahead, right, left. It was in her bones now, a dull vibration, a vague hint of something red-hot and searing, something that would overwhelm her, given half a chance.

Ahead was the dark mass of the Galeries Lafayette: the dome had miraculously survived the war and everything thrown at it, but the insouciant crowds that had once filled the shops at the beginning of the twentieth century, marveling at hats and brocade robes, sitting in droves in the tearoom and reading rooms, were all gone. It had been sixty years, and none but the insane would enter the Galeries now.

The insane, or the powerful.

“Park here,” Selene said, pointing to a somewhat clear space among the rubble. She glanced at the

shadows; there were people there, the lost and the Houseless, but they wouldn't move unless Selene showed weakness of some kind. Which wouldn't happen. She was old enough by now to know the rules of the city, and not foolish enough to leave her car unprotected. Anyone who attempted to open it after they were gone would get a nasty shock as a warning, and incineration if they persisted.

"Here?" Javier asked, slowing.

"Yes. Come on, there isn't much time." She could feel the pain and the fear, the way they were building up, faster and harder than they should have.

Which meant only one thing.

Someone was trying to hurt the Fallen. In her city, within her reach.

She didn't think. Without pausing to check if Javier was following, she strode under the dome and onto the vast stairs, vaguely feeling rubble shift and crumble under her feet. The pain and the need were within her, rising—a sharp, short stab followed by agony that would have doubled her over in pain, but her wards took the brunt of it, leaving only anger, only fear. . . .

Magic was building within her—drawn from the House, from the city and its river blackened by ashes, from the devastated countryside that surrounded them all beyond the wastelands of the *Periphérique*, layer after layer of gossamer-thin spells, not as powerful as they had once been. But she was old and canny, and forged into a weapon by her master, Morningstar, and what she'd lost in power she more than amply made up in skill. The pain in her mind receded, to be replaced by white-hot anger; so that, by the time she reached the third floor and saw, among its shattered counters, the two people crouching in the unbearable radiance of a newly manifested Fallen, her thoughts were as clear and as sharp as glass blades.

"You will stop," she said in the silence.

They looked up, both of them: a girl no older than fifteen or sixteen, her face coated with grime, her malnourished frame making her seem even younger; and a boy of perhaps twenty, dark-skinned, narrow-eyed—an Annamite, by the looks of him—and then she saw the blood splayed on their hands and on their clothes; and the blades they'd been using to saw two fingers loose from the Fallen's shattered hand.

That was the fear she had felt—waking up, fuzzy and disorientated after the Fall, still struggling to adjust to a bewildering world; and finding only pain and the slow, excruciating sawing of a knife against her hand. . . .

"You will stop," Selene said again, coldly. "Now."

The girl laughed. Her lips were stained with blood and her high-pitched voice was all too familiar, the voice of someone drunk on strange and unaccustomed power. "Or what? You'll make me? I don't think you can. You're old and scarred and the magic doesn't sing to you anymore."

"Ninon—" the boy said—no, not a boy. Selene had been mistaken; he must have been older, twenty-five or thirty. He was breathing heavily, his pupils dilated; but apart from the blood, nothing about him indicated he'd consumed the flesh of the Fallen. Or perhaps he was merely more experienced. Either way, she was the real danger: the leader, the hothead.

Selene threw a thread of magic, intending to pick up the girl and fling her aside from the prone Fallen—but Ninon laughed, and the power buried itself among the shards of glass from perfume bottles.

"Told you," she said. "My turn."

What she sent snaking toward Selene was brutal, undiluted, with the potency of a wildfire, its heat as scorching as the naked sun—and somewhere in its heart was the pain and hurt and betrayal of being cast out from the City, as raw as open wounds. Selene had to take a step back while she wove and reweave furiously, knitting her wards so that the magic, instead of shattering them, was guided until it buried itself into the floors of the *Galleries*.

Fallen blood. Fallen magic. Stolen magic, hacked away in a rush of pain, the same pain that was now at the back of her mind like a coiled snake.

That upstart girl would never steal again.

The young man was tugging at Ninon's sleeve now, his face twisted in panic, though Selene could still hear his exhausted panting. "Please. You can't go up against her. Not for long. She's *House*, Ninon."

Ninon turned and threw him a withering glance, opening her mouth for some scathing retort. Selene didn't wait. She gathered all that she could, pulling in from the ghosts of the Grands Magasins, from Silverspires and the throne where Morningstar had once sat, from the mirrors and water basins where witches strove to recreate glimpses of the City—and sent it, not toward Ninon, but toward the floor. It left her hands, a barely distinguishable tremor, a pinpoint that became a raised line, and then a rift across the faded ceramics tiles that would tear the girl apart.

She had no pity. Not tonight, and certainly not for people who fought for the right to dismember Fallen as if they were cattle.

Too late, Ninon saw it. She turned away from the young man and, raising her hands, tried to absorb the magic as Selene had done. But she was untrained; and the light of the magic left her face, the little flesh and blood she'd consumed burning like wastepaper in a hearth—her face twisted as she realized that she didn't have power anymore, that she didn't have time to find more, that it was going to hit whatever she did. . . .

"Get out!" Ninon screamed to the young man, in the split second before the rift was upon her.

There was no time left. None at all, and the young man was still there by her side as the rift hit, and the light flared so brightly that even Selene had to avert her eyes. She braced herself for the impact, for the wet sound of bodies twisted past endurance, for the gouts of blood to join the Fallen's on the floor.

Instead . . .

It was like nothing she'd ever felt: a stillness, a quiet like the eye in a storm, a slow, delicate weaving that drew, not on the ghosts, not on the City, but on something else entirely. The rift stopped, inches from the young man, who stood with his hands open and sweat glistening on his face, his hair raised on his scalp. For a moment—a brief, sharp moment that etched itself indelibly in Selene's mind—he seemed to hold the weight of her spell in his hands, the whole of her fury and her anger—and then he opened his hands and it was gone, harmlessly snuffed out.

A witch, here? Why hadn't he—?

She had little time for introspection. Time seemed to resume its normal flow; the young man crumpled like a puppet with cut strings, lying bathed in the Fallen's radiance. The girl, Ninon, stood for a moment, looking at him, looking at Selene; and then she spun on her heels and ran.

Selene made no movement to stop her. Ninon was hardly worth the trouble, and in any case it was all she could do to stand.

"You're a fool," Javier said gruffly, coming up behind her.

"You felt it?"

Javier shook his head as he moved to survey the wreckage. "Credit me with a little perception. You can't draw on this much power and hope it'll suffice to end fights. You usually don't get a second chance of casting that kind of spell."

"With amateurs, it usually suffices," Selene said absentmindedly. She looked at the young man again. There was nothing special about him, no tremor of recognition racing up her arms. He was clearly no Fallen. But no witch—even high on angel essence, even with the most powerful artifacts of a House at her disposal—should have been able to do anything like this.

Her gaze moved, at last, to the Fallen. A young girl, black-haired, olive-skinned, sharp-featured, looking for all the world as if she'd just come from Marseilles or Montpellier. In the brief interval, her innate magic had had time to start healing the worst of her broken bones, though neither her wings nor the two fingers she'd lost would ever regrow. There were rules and boundaries set on the Fallen: the bitter cage of their existence on Earth that they all learned to live in.

"I heard from Madeleine," Javier said. "She's on her way with a couple helpers. Should be there in a couple minutes."

“Good,” Selene said. “Go and prepare the car, will you?” She looked again at the young man, at the foreign features of his face. Annamites were a familiar sight in the city: they were citizens of France, after all, albeit, like all colonial subjects, second-rate ones. Emmanuelle, Selene’s lover, manifested as African; but Emmanuelle was a Fallen who had never left Paris in her life. Whatever the young man was, he was not and had never been a Fallen.

“As you wish,” Javier said. “I’ll send you the helpers to pick her up.”

Selene shook her head. “Not just her. We’ll have two passengers this time, Javier.”

She didn’t know what the young man was, but she most definitely intended to find out.

## Chapter Two

### Essence of Loss

Madeleine d'Aubin, alchemist of House Silverspires, had seen more than her share of prone bodies brought in at the dead of the night: she slept little these days, in any case, spending her nights in her laboratory, remembering the past and what it had cost her.

She arrived in one of the largest rooms of the admissions wings of Hôtel-Dieu, the House's hospital: row after row of metal beds, all unoccupied save two. Two doctors in white blouses hovered by the new arrivals' side, and her assistant, Oris, was waiting for her, leaning against the wall and trying to appear casual; though his face was sallow in the dim light.

She nodded at Oris and went to his side, pulling a chair so she could sit. Madeleine dropped her heavy shoulder bag onto the floor, and settled down to wait in silence.

The room was dusty and the air dry, and her wasted lungs wouldn't take it: a cough welled up. She desperately tried to quench the trickle that was going to become a cough, but it was never enough. The bout that followed racked her from head to toe—she was going to choke to death, never finding fresh, wholesome air again.

At last she sat back, wrung out, enjoying the sweetness of uninterrupted breath. One of the doctors—Aragon, surely—was looking straight at her with disapproval. Madeleine waved a hand, letting him know it was nothing. She'd lied about it; told him it was too much breathing the Paris air, of the areas around the blackened flow of the Seine—he'd seen so many combatants with the same problems that he'd been all too ready to believe her. She was not proud, but she was safe. The last thing that'd occur to him, prim and proper as he was, would be to question her; to realize how wasted her lungs were, and the true cause of such extensive and fast-progressing damage.

At length, the doctors peeled away from the beds, and one of them removed his mask. Madeleine found herself staring at Aragon's sharp features. The Fallen doctor looked, like Oris, on the verge of exhaustion, his skin pale and beaded with sweat, his graying hair slick against his temples.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" Madeleine asked, after the brief pleasantries were over. Unlike her, Aragon was paid for his work, not a dependent of the House, or bound in Selene's service.

Aragon shook his head. His colleague had left the room already, no doubt heading for the comfort of his own bed. "For something like this? You know she wouldn't let me sleep." He shook his head, amused. "In any case"—he spread his hands—"I don't have much to say. Both healthy, neither carrying horrible contagious diseases or hair-trigger spells. You can collect your toll from them." There was something—some hint of anger in his poised demeanor?—some feeling she couldn't quite place. But she knew enough not to ask him; he would just shake his head with infuriating politeness and assure her that nothing was wrong.

"I see," Madeleine said. "Thank you."

Aragon made his way toward the door. He paused as he crossed the threshold, looking back at the bodies on the bed, as if he were about to say something more, but then shook his head and moved on.

Now it was just her and Oris. Madeleine glanced at the beds: a girl shining with the residual light of newborn Fallen, and . . .

“Who’s the young man?” she asked. He didn’t look Fallen, but why would Selene ask her to take care of a human? There was no entry toll for humans, or at least none that an alchemist could collect.

“I don’t know,” Oris said. “But Lady Selene was quite clear that you had to take care of both of them.”

“We,” Madeleine said, absentmindedly. “You’re an alchemist as well, you know.” She still held hopes that, one day, Oris was going to outgrow his maddening shyness. For God’s sake, the boy was Fallen, with enough magic to start his own House if he had to, yet he crept through life as if he didn’t quite belong anywhere.

She moved to the Fallen first. At least she was used to dealing with those, though it had been many, many years since she saw one so young, just hours from her first manifestation, with the scars of her Fall still visible: the ribs that were slowly knitting themselves back together, the limbs that didn’t quite seem to be at the proper angles yet, the face with its high cheekbones and features that seemed to be subtly, slowly shifting even as she looked at it. Madeleine gently turned her over. The telltale signs were there: the large V-shaped scar spread across the back, where Aragon had cleanly cut off the mangled, irretrievable wings—the scar would fade a little in time, but never completely heal—the hint of ribs below the translucent skin; and the weight, much, much lighter than a human body of the same size, with fluted bones that would take much less effort to shatter.

By the Fallen’s side was a small tray, in which someone had set out three vials of blood that shone with the characteristic rippling, soft light; and two severed fingers, obviously hacked away by someone who hadn’t the time for finesse.

“Lady Selene wasn’t the first on the scene,” Oris said, apologetically. “I’ve taken the liberty of setting the blood aside; I don’t know what you want done with the fingers.”

The same thing they always did with any detached body parts. Madeleine sighed, but made no comment. “Will you see to the young man, please?”

She had no illusions; she’d be required to point out precisely what needed to be done to Oris in a moment or two, but at least it got him out of the way. Madeleine went back to her shoulder bag and withdrew her equipment: a handful of treated mirrors, a set of sterilized scalpels, a series of containers with primed preservation spells, and one last thing: a small black box, which, at a casual glance, seemed nothing more than a woman’s private vanity, a container for some small item of jewelry like a ring or a brooch. This last she hid under the mirrors, after throwing a glance to make sure Oris wasn’t looking at her.

Time to perform her role, then.

She went back to the Fallen’s side and set the mirrors, one by one, by the nose and mouth, waiting until the breath had misted them over—and the glass seemed to shine with reflected light. She closed them after she was done, muttering a brief incantation to seal them, ensuring that the magic would remain trapped in them without decaying. Then she trimmed, one by one, the long, clawlike nails on the fine hands, and similarly collected the trimmings in a box which she sealed. Any stray hairs she also took, and dealt with in the same fashion.

Madeleine worked almost without thinking; she’d done it for so many years it had become routine. The younger the Fallen, the more potent their magic—the closer their link to the City they had Fallen from and the grace of God. And this Fallen was an infant, hours from her manifestation in the mortal world. House Silverspires, like all Houses, knew the value of preserving some of their earliest leavings. Not everything; that would have been tantamount to what the gangs did, taking Fallen bodies apart before they grew strong enough to retaliate—though there were also rumors of spells strong enough to negate Fallen magic, and places where they were kept in cages or in chains like sheep or dairy cows. Silverspires was not one of those places, thank God.

Madeleine reached for the fingers next, and for her scalpels. She carefully scraped the flesh free

from the delicate bones underneath. So far, she'd done what was expected of her: preserve magic where it could be preserved.

And, as expected of her, she sealed the flesh in one of the containers set aside for this purpose.

That only left the bones.

Selene's instructions on this had been clear. Bones should be burned, nothing of them preserved. Bones could be used, with a little chemical expertise, to manufacture angel essence; and angel essence was forbidden in the House. Not because it was more refined and powerful than preserving Fallen's leavings; but because—as Madeleine knew all too well—it was highly addictive, and Selene wouldn't support junkies in Silverspires.

Bones should be burned. Always.

Madeleine's hands were shaking. She thought of the heady rush of power spreading from her lungs to her entire body, a sweet, sweet sensation that made her feel that she, too, was in the City, that she was the equal of a Fallen: what did it matter, that the stuff was eating away at her lungs? She hadn't come to Silverspires for a long life.

Madeleine threw a glance at Oris. He was still busy cleaning the young man up for her inspection, and unlikely to look up from his task.

Good.

Casually, in one practiced movement, Madeleine removed one of the bones from the tray and slipped it in the small box. There was enough there to last her a few months, if she was careful, if the need didn't come on her too often . . .

She said aloud, keeping her voice even, "I'll go and burn the bones in the incinerators."

Oris nodded. He trusted her. He shouldn't have, but he always did.

All the way to the incinerator and back, Madeleine kept expecting something to happen: some orderly jumping from one of the other deserted rooms, some nurse taking a break in the ruined cloisters, inquiring what she was doing. But nothing happened. There was only the silence of the night; and her own conscience.

Ah well. She'd never had much of one in the first place. Silverspires wasn't her refuge; it was the place where she would die, and she'd known as much since the night Morningstar carried her into the House.

If she was caught, though . . . Selene wasn't merciful. It'd be back on the streets of a city that had grown alien to her, with no easy means of sustenance—another kind of death by inches, far more unpleasant and painful than the one she'd chosen for herself.

But she wouldn't be caught. Not if she was careful, and she always was. Selene need never know what she did; Aragon would likely figure it out at some point, but she would deal with that then.

Good.

In the admissions room, Oris was fussing around the young man. He raised his gaze when she arrived. "Madeleine? May I use your mirrors?"

Madeleine nodded. She wished she could muster some anger at his lack of initiative, but she had none, too relieved he hadn't questioned her further. She turned back to her patient, and to the last thing that needed to be done.

She reached for the scalpels; and, carefully picking one out from the row of blades, made a small nick in the palm of the Fallen's left hand, where the heart line would have been. Blood leaked out, red and lazy, sinking into the beaten earth of Silverspires. She braced herself for saying the binding words; but before her mouth could curve around them, the young man sat bolt upright in bed, clutching at his own left hand. "No," he said. "Don't—I may not be bound to the earth of this land, of any land—"

Oris, in shock, had taken a step backward, leaving Madeleine to say aloud, "What do you mean?"

The young man's narrow eyes turned toward her, though it was clear he wasn't seeing anything in this world. "I know what you want to do, *alchemist*," he said, and there was a touch of malice in his voice. "Bound to the earth, bound to the House. Do you truly think you can have this one?"

“This one?” Madeleine said. “The young man, or the girl?” Either term, of course, was relative, since Fallen didn’t really have gender; or much that was human about them.

But the young man had fallen back on the bed, unconscious. “Don’t move,” Madeleine said to Oris. Someone had to keep a level head, and it would definitely not be her assistant.

She spoke the words of binding over the girl first, finishing what she had started. Blood and magic and earth, the oldest things, as the young man had said: a spell-oath to bind her to the House, to its welfare, though how had he known, and who was speaking through him? “By this, I bid you welcome into Silverspires; I give the House leave—”

She never got to the end. As she spoke each word, the resistance in the air grew, an expanding weight that pressed against her throat; and when she reached “leave” it was all she could do to force syllables between clenched teeth. There was . . . something vast, something infinitely larger than either of them—larger than the House, larger than the City—and it was somehow tied to those two, to either or both of them. She broke off then. “Oris, can you do the binding for me?”

She’d hoped that, since Oris was Fallen, he would have more power to draw on; but as he stumbled his way through the binding, he, too, met the same obstacle. She rose, and touched the young man’s hands; they were wet and clammy to the touch, and his complexion was paler than it should have been, for all that he was Annamite. “You’re doing this,” she said aloud. “Aren’t you?”

“Doing what?”

Madeleine whirled around, her heart hammering against her chest. Selene stood behind her.

The mistress of House Silverspires wore practical, no-nonsense clothing—even though the fashion she favored was that of fifty, sixty years ago, before the war, at the height of the Belle Epoque: a black swallow-tailed coat over black trousers, a white bow tie, and a simple sash of indigo crossing the white shirt. She had no hat, and her short, masculine bob of auburn hair shone in the light. Behind her was a crowd: Father Javier, the archivist, Raoul, Dr. Lesbros and two orderlies, and a dozen other people who worked in the kitchens and in the libraries and in the classrooms of the House: a sea of gazes unerringly trained on Madeleine.

Selene’s gray eyes were mildly curious, but as always with her, Madeleine was . . . awkward, gangly. Selene might not have been the oldest Fallen in the city, but her master, Morningstar, had been, before he had vanished; and as his favorite student she had picked up many of his mannerisms and sharpened them until it seemed nothing of Morningstar’s occasional, amused mercy remained.

Madeleine swallowed, feeling embarrassed and ill at ease. “It’s . . . not working well,” she said.

Selene received the new arrivals for a private audience, as had always been the custom of the House: alone in her office, with her bodyguards standing at attention outside the room. She received them both at the same time—not what custom dictated—because, as Madeleine d’Aubin’s report had made clear, they would not be so easily parted.

The young man, Philippe, was stiff and prim. Madeleine’s exam had confirmed he was no Fallen, that he bore no scars on his back, nor possessed any characteristics that could be of use. His breath, sealed in Madeleine’s containers, had no magical properties; to all intents and purposes, he was what he appeared to be: a young man adrift in Paris joining a gang as his only way to survive.

His behavior, though, was nothing like a young man’s; but spoke of customs and manners from another culture, from another age. “Lady Selene,” he said. “I understand we both owe you our lives.” His face was calm, expressionless, nothing of anger or of shame in it. What was he, truly? Like nothing she had ever seen or heard of—and there was potential in that. Morningstar might have considered him a threat, but she wasn’t Morningstar; and, especially, she didn’t have the magic he had used to effortlessly keep the House safe.

“You are here because I was curious. Don’t mistake it for mercy on my part. I know exactly what you were doing.” Blood and flesh and severed fingers; no better than the gang thugs in the streets, a

handsome face covering the mind of a savage.

Philippe gazed back at her, quite unfazed. "So, if not mercy . . . what can I expect of you?"

A sharp eye on him, for a start. An education, if it was not too late to bring him back to decency; to unravel who and what he was, and how he had come to be in Paris. And ultimately, how he could be of use to the House, to guard it against its rivals and make it flourish in the lean, famished times after the war. "From this House? A chance to mend your ways, I should say."

Something was in his eyes: amusement, anger? He was oddly hard to read, closed off like no human or Fallen she'd ever met. "And why should I take up this offer?"

What pointless arrogance. "I think you misunderstand," Selene said, and let a fraction of power brush against him; a cold touch to remind him of who he was facing. "You don't have a choice. But if you did have one, I would point out that living in a House is much better than scavenging in the streets."

"Being fed and fattened while you seek to untangle my deepest secrets?"

"You could always save me time and tell me what you are," Selene said.

He shook his head. "As you said, your curiosity is all that's keeping me alive at the moment, and I'm not foolish enough to sate it."

She wanted to open him like a nut: here, in her House, at the center of her power, she could burst through his thoughts, drain every drop of blood from his body if she had to. Except, of course, that he was probably more than capable of defending himself against her. With difficulty, she controlled herself. What was it about the young man that made it so hard to keep her temper in check? "Have it your way, then. I'll certainly have mine in the end."

"Perhaps." Philippe's voice was shaking, and this time the anger was unmistakable. "So I am to be your prisoner?"

Selene had little use for his anger; and no pity for the ruffraff of the streets. "For what you did—for the fingers you severed from her—the punishment would be death. You should count yourself lucky."

Philippe's lips quirked in what might have been amusement; but then his gaze turned to the young Fallen by his side; and much to Selene's surprise he said, gravely, "I'm sorry. I didn't intend things to turn out this way, but that doesn't excuse me."

It didn't, Selene wanted to say; but she wasn't the one with the grievance. The young Fallen gazed back at Philippe levelly, her hands in her lap, the left hand with its two missing fingers quite visible in the sunlight. She said nothing, until at length Philippe lowered his gaze, and fell silent.

Good. She might be innocent, but she was not altogether defenseless.

Selene said, a fraction calmer now, "I have set a spell on you that will prevent you from . . . wandering too far away from the House. I'd advise you not to tinker with it, or you'll regret it."

He looked as though he might laugh, then; and then shook his head, casting a glance in the Fallen's direction. "Security and a bed; and a golden cage. I guess it will have to do, for the moment."

She was no fool. Of course he would not submit, and would attempt to escape the moment her back was turned. But it was the best she could do. Her spell had taken long to set in: as with the binding to the House, it was as if something within him was resisting the very notion of magic. But with luck, she'd hold him long enough.

"Wait outside, will you?" she asked; and watched him leave, casual and at ease. One certainly wouldn't think he was the prisoner here, and she the jailer.

She turned to the young Fallen, who stood, watching her warily, and said, in a much kinder voice, "None of this applies to you."

"Then why am I here?" The young Fallen was quite recovered now, the unearthly light of her first hours gone. She appeared almost human, almost whole, except for the two fingers missing on her left hand. Her face in repose would never be called beautiful, but an innocence hung about her, a guilelessness that made Selene's heart ache. She had been like this once, but such things never lasted for long; not in Paris.

"Because you're one of us," Selene said; and before the Fallen could voice a question, she added,

“What do you remember?”

The Fallen’s face shifted then, became for a moment wreathed with soft light. “The City,” she whispered, and looked up into Selene’s eyes. “You remember, too.”

It was not a question. “Not as much as I once did,” Selene said. All she had were grainy, fuzzy images like old photographs; faces and voices that all seemed to merge together. “You have to be young to remember.”

Young, and innocent, and brimming with raw power. She envied that child, in that moment; who did not yet know bitterness, or how much the abandonment of God lay heavy on one’s shoulders.

What had her sin been, the one that had cast her out of the City? She’d wondered over the years—at what could be so grave that a God of forgiveness and love would condemn them all to this slow, agonizing path on Earth, with the wound of His absence lancing like salted knives—and known, in the darkness of her own room, that there would never be any answer.

“I Fell,” the girl said. And, bringing both hands up to stare at them: “I don’t remember why.”

“We never do,” Selene said, which wasn’t quite true. Morningstar had remembered; but Morningstar had been the first to Fall, the ringleader of the revolt in Heaven. “You’ll find out much of what you need to know over the coming months. We all do. You’ll—” She took a deep breath. “You’ll have to work out your own answers to what it means, to be Fallen. We have a priest here, Father Javier, if you think religion would help. And a library where you can find histories and books.” Emmanuelle would be glad to take her in hand, to show her everything that she needed to see. “As for me . . . there are three things I can give you, if you will have them. The first is help to come into your powers. The second is the protection of this House. Paris, as you will have gathered, is a dangerous place to be.”

The girl swallowed. “Madeleine told me . . . that I didn’t have that protection.”

“Not all of it,” Selene said, mildly. If the binding had taken, any attempt to put her in danger would have sent alarms rippling through the House; would have been as loud as a clarion call to anyone bound to Silverspires; but it hadn’t happened. Which meant they would need to keep an eye on her. “Be careful, will you? And we’ll find out why.” At least, she dearly hoped so, because she’d lose patience with Philippe very soon; and she doubted anyone in the House, save perhaps Aragon, had the forbearance to deal with him.

“You said three things,” the girl said, her large eyes on Selene’s face. “What’s the third one?”

Selene rose, feeling the weight of the earth against her bones: that odd, awful sensation that everything should have been lighter, easier on her. “*Angels but touch the earth*,” Morningstar had said, but his smile had been bitter as he said it—he who had felt the weight of age and loss more keenly than most, who had watched so many centuries pass by, patiently gathering his kin to him—as Paris grew from a small town to the bloated capital of an empire; and from this arrogant, conceited city to the devastated wreck huddled around the dark waters of the Seine. At least he’d disappeared before he could see how far the damage ran; how far the House he’d founded had tumbled.

Though, damn him, she still missed him: she’d wake up in the morning and remember that the House was hers, that he was not there to offer biting comments or advice; that he had walked out of the House twenty years ago and never come back. They’d searched for him, of course—turned the House upside down, gone into every nook and cranny, and never found anything, a body or a hint of where he might have gone—Selene didn’t even know if he was still alive or not, or if he was truly lost, truly beyond any meeting she might have dreamed of.

“Fallen have no parents,” Selene said, extending a hand toward the girl. “And no kin, beyond those that are willing to claim us. I will give you what my mentor once gave you: a name of your own.”

Morningstar had liked old-fashioned names, drawn straight from the pages of some of the obscure books he’d favored: Selene, Nightfall, Oris, Aragon; even Emmanuelle had been called Indigo before she changed her name.

Selene chose something far simpler. “Isabelle,” she said. “It was the name of a queen once. Wear it well.”

“Isabelle.” The young Fallen sat very still, repeating the name to herself as if testing it for suitability. Her gaze, for a moment, was disturbingly adult, as if Philippe had contaminated her. “It is a good name. Thank you.”

Selene nodded. “You have the run of the House. Use it well.”

She watched Isabelle leave the room. She heard voices outside, guessing that she’d be talking to Philippe. The link between those two concerned her; but if it was Isabelle’s choice, what right did Selene have to interfere?

“She’s strong, this one,” Emmanuelle said behind her.

Selene turned, only half-surprised. Emmanuelle had thrown open the curtain that lay between her office and her private quarters, and stood wreathed in the light of the lamps. “You should rest,” she said.

Emmanuelle walked into the room, and laid a hand on Selene’s cheek, briefly, affectionately. “I’ve rested enough for a lifetime. Or several of them. Have you given thought to the young man?”

“He’s no Fallen,” Selene said.

“He said he was born abroad.” Emmanuelle’s face was thoughtful. “Who knows what this might mean? There were other creatures in Annam, and other rules of magic—before the French came over and brought the word of God to those benighted shores.” Her voice was lightly ironic. Emmanuelle manifested as an African woman. Most people mistook her for a Senegalese, though they couldn’t place her in a precise ethnic group.

“I don’t know anything about Annam,” Selene said. They had people there, of course; got the occasional shipment of silk and rubber, but she hadn’t had any reason to focus her attention on the colonies. Travel after the war was slow, expensive—boats to Asia almost inexistent, and communications difficult and infrequent. Heavens, it had taken them ten years and an armed battalion to get back Calixta, and she’d only been stuck in London. Asia might have been another world entirely.

“Indochina,” Emmanuelle said, distractedly. “Once called Viet Nam. Annam is just one of the five regions, but everyone calls them Annamites anyway. Not that most French can make a difference between an Annamite and a Cochinchinese. He might just be one of the witches trained by French schools, you know.”

Witches, even Annamite ones, shouldn’t have been able to stop her magic. Perhaps younger, more remote areas retained a vitality that old, bloated cities like Paris never could recapture. Selene sighed. Either way, she would find out more about Philippe and his magic; and how best to use him for the good of the House.

## Chapter Three

### Buried Darkness

It was a hard spell to untangle.

Back in his rooms, Philippe had sought traces of what Selene had done to him. He found, without too much trouble—Fallen magic was never subtle or hidden, especially not House magic—the magic that Selene had woven.

It stretched around his neck, an invisible collar that trailed around his entire body before earthing itself into the floor of the House—a tangled labyrinth of ten thousand threads, each of which burned like living fire when he tried to touch them. When at long last he managed to get hold of one of them, heedless of the pain it caused him, it was only to discover that it went straight into the heart of the tangle, where he lost it.

He tried severing the threads closer to the ground, to burn them with the little fire in the House, to dry them out with metal. Each time, he felt the pain of his own spell reflected back at him; until, shaking, he had to stop and suck in burning breaths, waiting for the agony to pass him by; and the threads merely reformed, seconds after he had burned them.

Demons take Selene, she was thorough, and powerful. But then again, what had he expected of a Fallen; of one of the ruling elite of the city?

He lay on the bed, shaking, and stared at the ceiling until the wooden carvings seemed to dissolve into blurry water. He might not escape this time. He was her prisoner until her goodwill ran out; her victim after that. She had made it clear she would kill him, for what he'd done in the Galleries Lafayette. It was . . . frightening, a prospect for which he had no name; as if he were back in the regiment during the war, prodded and poked until he ran with the rest under mortar fire, under a hail of bullets, in the midst of spells that could drain the breath out of him.

He'd survived *that*; but it had been sheer luck, and nothing else. Heaven no longer looked upon him with favor, as he knew all too well. He was not Fallen, but he might as well be; exiled from the Imperial Court of Immortals, and unable to speak with his own kind; his kin long since dead, the only remnants of his blood descendants who worshipped at a distant altar.

He might not survive this. But did it matter? There was no way forward, no return to the Imperial Court. He was trapped in Paris, all the paths back to Annam closed to him—and now worse than this, trapped in a House as a prisoner.

Sometimes, on the edge of sleep, he would dream of when he had first ascended, and turned from mortal to Immortal. He was back in the cave where he had fasted, a thousand years ago—shivering with hunger, hanging on the knife's edge of unconsciousness as he meditated—and there was a sound like the bell toll of a pagoda resonating in his bones; and the shadow of cloud-encrusted buildings and of a vast courtyard, materializing a hand span away from him; and the Jade Emperor awaiting him on the throne, congratulating him for overcoming his banishment. . .

Such a wishful, childish dream. There was no truth in it, not a single gram. He was stuck in France, in Silverspires; and no amount of meditation would make the Imperial Court's power stretch to foreign shores.

The door opened. Philippe was on his feet, drawing on the few scattered hints of *khi* currents in the room, before he saw that it was Isabelle.

"Oh," he said. "Hello." After the interview with Selene, he'd walked away, back to the room he'd

been assigned. The last thing he'd wanted was to talk to her—his brief apology was all he felt like extending to her. He fully intended to stay away from Selene's prize; and he didn't want to be reminded of what he'd done to her. But it was a small room, and there was only one exit, in front of which she stood.

She looked at him for a while, speculatively. Her brown eyes were still halfway translucent, the irises dilated and washed out, as if some of the light he'd seen resided still in her. "I thought I would find you here. We need to talk."

"I'm not sure we do."

Isabelle smiled. There was something primal and innocent about the look, something that seemed to set the whole room alight—but then again, she knew the power of that smile, and she was using it. Fallen all over, that curious mixture of naïveté and guile. She raised her hand; the one that was missing the two fingers, the ones he and Ninon had cut off. Demons take him, he wasn't one to shirk away from responsibilities.

"I owe you that: apology for inflicting that wound," Philippe said. "But nothing else. Can we leave it at that?" He sat on the bed; which wasn't much, but was the farthest he could get from her.

"Do you think I can? Breath and blood and bone—" She sounded as though she was quoting an old children's rhyme—"all linked in the same circle. Can't you feel it?" To Philippe's horror, she bent her hand toward the parquet floor in a graceful gesture, letting him see the two threads of luminous magic that started from the stumps of her fingers and stretched through the air, straight toward his face—no, straight toward his mouth, which was suddenly filled with the same sweet, electrifying taste of Fallen blood, a memory from his nightmares.

"I can't do more than apologize." Philippe swallowed, trying to banish the taste in his mouth. Never get tangled with Fallen—a lesson he'd learned, over and over. Why hadn't he listened to it? "I'll apologize again, if that's what you want to hear, but it won't change anything. . . ."

"Can't you feel it?" Isabelle asked, again; and suddenly she was no longer ageless or terrifying, but merely a young, scared girl.

"The—" Philippe swallowed, trying to banish the taste of blood from his mouth. "The link? Of course I can. I'm assuming it's not a usual thing." He meant to be flippant, and regretted it when he saw her face. "I'm sorry." It seemed all he could do to her was apologize.

Plenty of people drank Fallen blood without any side effects; but then again, plenty of people weren't a former Immortal. Blood was the body's embodiment of *khi*, of the vital breath that saturated the universe—the source of long life and stability. He closed his eyes—could still feel her, a tenuous presence at the back of his mind, like a distant pain.

"I don't know what to do," Isabelle said.

"And you think I do?" Philippe shook his head, unsure of where the conversation was going. He doubted the link could be broken, and with Selene's spell on him he wasn't about to attempt experiments.

"You have more experience," she said, slowly.

"I'm no Fallen," Philippe said. "And not experienced in magic, either." He'd never made use of magic that wasn't his, or consumed the more refined magical drug of angel essence, save for that one moment of weakness—why did such a small thing always have such large consequences? But of course he understood about discipline, and how the smallest lapse could lead to the largest failures. "I can't tell you what to do."

"Selene says no one can," Isabelle said. She came into the room; and sat on the bed, by his side. He held himself rigid—trying to be polite; to not frighten her, even though everything within him screamed at him to move away as far as he could, as fast as he could. He couldn't help breathing in her smell—musty, like old books falling into dust—couldn't help feeling the raw magic in her, a temptation forever beckoning to him. No wonder mortals went mad over Fallen, one way or another; hungering for essence, for breath, or even for a simple touch. "But I'm not Selene. I need—"

"Advice?" Philippe said. It wasn't much, but he could give her that, at least. "Look, it's not a bad place, as Houses go." It was the House keeping him prisoner, but that wasn't her problem. "You have people to talk to, inside and outside it. I can't give you guidance or wisdom; I'm not qualified."

"What about company?"

Startled, he looked up at her; at the dark eyes that seemed to have no expression. "You're among your kind here."

“They’re old,” Isabelle said. Her hands, he saw suddenly, were shaking; the threads between them contracting and expending on a rhythm that seemed to echo a heartbeat. “They talk about things they barely remember. I can’t—”

“Neither can I,” Philippe said, more gently this time.

“No, but you can help me. Can’t you?” There *was* something in her eyes, a reflection of the fear and emptiness the City had left behind. What would it be like, to remember snatches of what you’d lost; to know that you were in the mortal world, away from the communion of angels or whatever else had fulfilled her in Heaven?

Not far from how he’d felt, when he was first cast out of the company of Immortals: the bleak despair that had sent him roaming from end to end of Indochina; the black veil descending over the forests and the rivers, turning the chatter of town markets into small, petty tripe, and the beauty of mountain retreats into aimless desolation.

There was a gulf between them—in age, in nature, in magic. But . . .

They were not so different, after all—isolated and new to the House, trying to learn its rules fast enough to survive—and linked, by blood and magic—thrown into similar circumstances. No wonder she would see a kindred spirit in him, no matter how incongruous the thought was.

“You heard Selene. I’m not House; and I shouldn’t be here. I won’t stay,” he said.

“I know,” Isabelle said. “But while you’re here . . .”

“You realize what you’re asking?” Philippe asked. “I cut your fingers. I tasted your blood.”

Her face was turned toward his, her need bare—for the familiar; for anything that wasn’t the House and its ageless, unwelcoming rituals. “Yes,” she said. “You did. I haven’t forgotten that. But—because of it—you’ll understand.”

He raised his hand: the invisible collar Selene had woven around him rested like a yoke on his shoulders; tying him to the House, to its unbearably arrogant mistress and her will. “Fine. I’ll help you. Inasmuch as I can.”

And when she smiled, the entire room seemed to become bright with the same soft, low-key glow she’d had in the Grands Magasins—when she was young and barely manifested; before everything had changed.

The House crept Philippe out.

It was a big, sprawling place—not a single edifice, as he had assumed, but a series of buildings joined by a maze of corridors and courtyards, stretching across the entire Ile de la Cité. Most of it was derelict: the western part of the island seemed to be entirely deserted, with not even the lowest in Silverspires’ hierarchy daring to venture there, though it was not so much fear as a disinclination to go into empty rooms where every piece of furniture was covered in soot or dust or both.

His first communal dinner had been a nightmare. He had sat at one of numerous trestle tables in the great hall, surrounded by what seemed to be the entire House: hundreds of people pressed together in a suffocating mass—turning, from time to time, to stare at him, the only Viet in the room, and then turning back to their discussion of subjects and House concerns that seemed utterly alien to him.

He had fled then, back to the safety of his room, and begged until Emmanuelle agreed to let him dine alone. But even that didn’t make him feel better.

It had been weeks since that first dinner; and he hadn’t stayed that long in a House since the fall of House Draken—in fact, he’d rather have swum in a river at monsoon time than go anywhere near the fastnesses of the Fallen. And to do so while under a spell of imprisonment . . .

His only comfort was Isabelle. He never thought he’d say that of a Fallen, but she was fresh and young and naive—pulling warm bread from the oven and tearing into it with relish, while the cook, Laure, frowned affectionately at her—skipping stones in the courtyard with the children—and keeping a stash of biscuits and tea in the drawer of her room, which she shared with him around a card or a dice game—she was a terrible gambler, but then so was he, so it all balanced out.

Those were the bright spots—the few, desperately few. In between, there was the House.

Philippe had a continuous feeling of ants crawling on his skin; an itch that never went away, that woke him up at night; an elusive, ghostly pain somewhere near his heart and liver, as if his organs had been subtly changed while he’d been unconscious. Perhaps it was the House; perhaps it was the spell; but he couldn’t seem to be rid of either, much to his annoyance. He’d been on a French leash sixty

years before, in the war: taken from his home in Thu Dau Mot and conveyed to foreign shores under duress; abandoned in Paris to fend for himself when, against all odds, he'd survived the war. Never again, he'd sworn, but fate made fools of all men, it seemed.

Isabelle found him in Laure's kitchens, kneading dough. Laure, who had little time for anyone, had taken pity on him and allowed him a table corner—there was something infinitely relaxing about feeling the dough coming together between his fingers; the stretching and turning and pulling until it all came together smooth and silky, effortlessly detaching from his fingers. When he was done, Laure would find something else for him to do: chopping up meat or vegetables or keeping an eye on soup stock. He wasn't sure she ever served what he'd touched—though she did present him with his baked loaf of bread every morning—but it was a way to pass time.

"Still here?" Isabelle asked.

Philippe shrugged. "As good a place as any."

Isabelle slid in next to him, dislodging a kitchen boy—who smiled at her, though she didn't acknowledge him. "Want help?"

He held out the dough to her. She took it on both hands, and started kneading in turn. "No, not like this. Here." He moved, placed her hands, showed her how to do one stretch and one fold. "You turn, and then you do it again."

Isabelle frowned. Her hands moved, slowly, carefully.

"Feeling it take shape yet?"

"No. I feel dough sticking to everything. You make it sound much simpler than it is."

"Of course." He'd learned back in Annam, baking rice cakes he'd later steam in bamboo baskets—the dough, made with a mix of wheat flour and rice flour, had been sticky and translucent—but the kneading was the same. "Try again. You did volunteer."

Isabelle smiled, but didn't speak. For a while there was nothing but her hands, folding and stretching and turning, again and again. Philippe watched the dough. "Almost," he said. "See how it's coming loose?"

"Mmm," Isabelle said. "Emmanuelle's been teaching me more about the history of the House. It's the oldest one in Paris."

And they'd never let her forget it. "You're done," Philippe said, taking the dough from her.

"How do I know?"

He took a piece of dough the size of a ball; stretched it, gently, until they could both see daylight through it. "It holds," he said. He divided it in half and carefully shaped his half into a round, laying it in the floured basket by his side. "Try it." And, to answer her, "The oldest House. That's good. Old is safe."

Isabelle shivered. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Philippe shrugged. "It's . . . not my world."

"No." Isabelle paused, gently prodded at her piece of dough—which refused to tighten up into a ball. "I don't even know what it's like, where you come from."

He started to say, "Different," another platitude, and then changed his mind. "It functions on different rules. We . . . don't have Fallen in Annam. Didn't use to."

"But they're there now."

"They were," Philippe said. Who knew what was happening in Annam and the other colonies, after the war? Had the Fallen's arrogant, brash magic finally faltered? Had the Jade Emperor finally decided to end the court's isolation and interfere in the affairs of mortals once more? "And the Fallen carried their magic with them. It's . . ." He paused then, wondering how much he would reveal to her. No more, he guessed, than what Selene would find in books. "The Fallen were powerful," he said at last. "More powerful than any magical beings we might have had. It was . . . not pretty." The guardian spirits of the villages had been slaughtered; the dragons, the spirits of the rain, had withdrawn to the depths of the sea, to the safety of their coral and nacre palaces; the mountain spirits had retreated to their most isolated peaks, licking their wounds; and the Jade Emperor had sealed the court, forbidding Immortals to approach mortals.

And Philippe, of course, had had no refuge.

"Emmanuelle said it was because Fallen magic was innately stronger. That it had been our destiny to conquer." Isabelle shrugged. "She didn't sound convinced."

She might not be, but there were plenty of others who would. Philippe said nothing. He stared at

the dough, trying to ignore the memories; the powerlessness he'd felt then, watching the Fallen come and take anything they wanted—and destroy what was of no use to them. “I didn't come here by choice,” he said at last. “And it's not choice that keeps me here, either. I don't know how much you'll believe, of what they teach you. But—if you can, remember that.”

Isabelle looked at him, uncannily serious for once. “I didn't come here by choice, either,” she said, dropping her piece of dough into another basket. “And I'll try to remember.”

She meant it—he could tell from the sense of stubbornness he got from their link—and yet she probably wouldn't remember. He was guessing that even Selene had started out this young, this earnest, this naive—and look at what she was now.

“Philippe?”

“Yes?” He peered at the dough, drew a cloth over both baskets. It was the kitchens' slack hour. The kitchen boys and girls had scattered, some of them playing cards in a corner, some of them listening to Laure telling a fairy tale about a Fallen who was unable to pay the price for summoning a manticore—the kitchen staff was rapt, listening to Laure's elaborate descriptions of blood, gore, and disembowelment as if their lives hung on it. Isabelle and he were alone around the large table, surrounded only by the preparations for this night's dinner.

“You're not mortal, are you?”

He'd had some inkling she was going to ask an awkward question—it was the only reason he didn't drop the cloth. His first instinct was to lie, to deny as he'd denied Selene. She was Fallen; he couldn't trust her.

But then again . . . he felt her presence at the back of his mind; her curiosity, tinged by no afterthought of greed or thirst for knowledge she could use against him.

Such a child, and the thought was like a fist of ice closing around his heart. “I was mortal once,” he said, exhaling. Now he was . . . not Immortal anymore, and not mortal, either; he hadn't aged since being thrown out of the Jade Emperor's court—some remnant of what he'd achieved still clinging to him, as did the magic he'd mastered. It probably didn't make any difference. Selene knew, or suspected, that he was no young man. “Before I ascended.”

“There are others like you?”

“In Paris?” There were other former Immortals in Annam—it wasn't as though the Jade Emperor had been particularly tolerant or compassionate. “I'm not sure, but I don't think so.” During the war, he'd caught glimpses of other creatures from French books, sphinxes and golems and chimeras—made with magic, his sergeant had said, curtly and in a tone of voice that discouraged further questions—and he'd fought colonials who weren't Fallen or witches, and yet moved a little too fast, a little too smoothly out of the path of danger.

There *were* others; from other countries, other magics that weren't Fallen. But he would have known, or suspected, had he crossed another former Immortal from Annam—it was something in the way they moved, in the way they held themselves, the imprint of the Jade Emperor's Court that persisted long after they'd been cast out. “You don't have to worry about an invasion of us, if that's the question.”

Isabelle snorted. “Very funny.” She pushed the baskets aside. “We're done, aren't we?”

“I guess?” They both had lessons with Emmanuelle—and not Choérine and the children, because they were too old. But their next lesson wasn't for a few hours yet. “You can come back later and ask Laure about the ovens, if you want the bread.”

Isabelle shrugged. “Maybe. Let's explore the House.”

“I—” The last thing he wanted was to get more of this feeling of ants on his skin. “I'm not sure that's a good idea.”

“Are you frightened?” Isabelle's smile was mischievous, irresistible. “Come on.”

And he followed, because he'd promised.

The House was huge, and most of it was deserted, or ruined. Like most buildings in Paris, it was covered with soot, the blackened streaks characteristic of spell residue. Once, it must have sheltered thousands—a natural refuge, an island only connected to the rest of the city by seven bridges, but now it lay empty and dark, and the river that had once been its first line of defence had turned wild, become a power that snapped and killed anything that came near its shores.

“Come on,” Isabelle said, pushing a small stone door in an unremarkable corridor; and Philippe, with a sigh, followed.

To stop, awestruck, at what lay inside.

It had been a church, once. You could still see the columns and the beginning of the vaulted ceiling, a first row of arches gracefully bending toward each other; and the remnants of wooden benches, burned where they had stood. The stained-glass windows were broken, or absent; but the gaze was still drawn, unerringly, down the nave and to the altar at the other end—or where the altar would have been, if it hadn't been turned to rubble long ago, and the only things remaining were the wrecks of three statues—the central one was least damaged, and had probably been a Virgin Mary carrying the corpse of Jesus.

No, not a church. A cathedral, like the pink-hued edifice the French had built in Saigon. It was . . . like a knife blade slowly drawn across his heart: he could almost have been back home, except that it was the wrong architecture, the wrong atmosphere, the wrong setting. He could still feel the fervor of its builders, of its worshippers, swirling in the air: a bare shadow of what it had once been, but so potent, so strong, so *huge*.

"Notre-Dame," Philippe whispered.

Isabelle hadn't moved; her eyes were on the sky, and on the smattering of stars visible against the dark background of the night. "It's . . . like the City," she whispered. "So much . . . intensity."

"Faith," Philippe said, though her faith wasn't his, and would never be his. "That's what built this up."

The *khi* elements there were quiescent—almost too weak for him to pick them out, though. . . .

There was—a flash of something familiar: the magical equivalent of the smell of jasmine rice, a touch of something on the nape of his neck that brought him, instantly, back to the banks of the Red River, staring at the swollen mass of the river at monsoon time—breathing in the wet smell of rain and churned mud. Had some other Annamite been there?

No, it was impossible. Merely nostalgia—he was going mad, cooped up inside this House, inside this city, that was all. He needed a way out, before he lost himself.

Isabelle slowly moved, picking her way through the ruins of the benches. Throughout, her gaze remained staring upward. Was she praying; did she even remember how to pray—or perhaps it was like breathing, something that took hold of you when you had no other choice, when you were lost and cut off from your god?

She stopped long before the altar, in the raised space before it, which, like the rest, was covered in debris: the black-and-white lozenge tiles riven from end to end until their pattern had altogether gone. There was a chair left there; a stone one, battered and cracked, that nevertheless exuded a quiet power, something different from the remnants of fervor Philippe could taste in the air.

"He sat there," Isabelle said, in the silence, her voice echoing under the broken vault. "Morningstar."

"Emmanuelle told you this?"

"I don't need to be told. Can't you feel it?"

And he could; there was no point denying it. Not when the urge to abase himself was so strong he barely dared to move; afraid that anything he did would be the beginning of a bow.

"The oldest of us," Isabelle said. Hesitantly she reached out, touched the chair with her three-fingered hand; and withdrew as if burned. "He must have known . . ."

"The answers to your questions?" Philippe shook his head. "He would have been wise, yes, versed in everything. But if he had no memories of before his Fall . . ."

"You're not Fallen," Isabelle said, turning back to him. "How come you know all this?"

"I've traveled. And kept my ears open." He crept closer to the chair. It was like approaching an ancestral altar, the air thick with reverence and the coiled, deep power of old age; and the itching, of course, getting worse and worse, as if the ants had suddenly decided to become stinging wasps. "Oldest and most powerful among you, wasn't he?"

"When he was there," Isabelle said. "Now he's dead, for all they know."

Or merely gone; how to tell, without a body, without any messages? Not that it mattered much to him. Morningstar probably wouldn't have much to say to him—though it was hard to ignore the voice in his mind that whispered that age should be respected, that the oldest Fallen in existence had to be wise, had to be knowledgeable, as his grandparents had once been—in a time so far away that even the bamboo bindings of its books had rotted through.

There was something . . . He paused before the throne, though every instinct he had was telling

him to step back, to let the magic cool down to levels he could bear. But within the pinpricks of pain, there was . . . a note that shouldn't have been there, a wrong tone in a poem, a slip of the paintbrush in a painstakingly calligraphied text.

"Philippe?"

He shook his head. "Not now, Isabelle." The wrongness was coming from the throne, but not close to him. His fingers, fumbling, lingered along the delicate carvings, descended to the chair itself, the place Morningstar had been (and the power on his skin was worse, like a winter wind, like a crucible where swords were born)—probed into niches and hollows, but it wasn't that, either. Where—?

It was below the throne, in the slight hollow between the four squat feet that carried it—once glued to it, but now it came easily undone under his touch. It was all wrong, anger and bitterness emanating from it like the howls of the souls in the Hell of Hunger.

"It hurts." Isabelle's voice was a thin thread of sound.

"It's meant to hurt," Philippe said, recovering his voice from where it seemed to have fled. In his hand, it looked like a heavy object wrapped in paper; carefully, he spread the paper flat on the ground, tipping out its contents. The paper was thin parchment, translucent and covered with spiky black handwriting; and the same feeling of darkness, of hatred, arose from it. The language wasn't French, or Viet, or anything he could read.

"All you hold dear will be shattered; all that you built will fall into dust; all that you gathered will be borne away by the storm. . . ." Isabelle's voice was a whisper, but there was an echo, deep within: a hint of someone else speaking the words and imbuing them with the weight of cold iron.

"You understand it? How?"

"I don't know," Isabelle said, carefully. She laid her hand on the paper, following the curve of the words on the page. "I think it's a Fallen thing. The language of the City, maybe. . . ."

"I thought that was meant to be love," Philippe said, attempting to summon some remnant of sarcasm, though it was hard, with the cloud of anger and hatred hanging thick around them.

"The love that drowned the Earth underwater and caused Noah to build the ark?" Isabelle asked, her voice flat. "That sent us tumbling down to Earth?"

"I don't have answers," Philippe said dryly. "A priest would probably tell you about atonement and forgiveness, but that's your religion, not mine." Not quite true: the Buddha also preached forgiveness, but Philippe couldn't forgive. Not those who had torn him from Annam.

"I don't even know what your religion is," Isabelle pointed out, carefully folding the paper. Philippe searched her face, but there was no hint of reproach or sarcasm, merely a statement of fact. Her calm was uncanny: how could she not feel the magic roiling in the air, the pressure against their lungs, the irrepressible urge to pick a weapon and—? No. He was stronger than that.

"What was inside?" Isabelle asked.

It was a black stone disk, polished until he could see his distorted reflection in it; and it shimmered with the same power that was all around them. "Angel breath," he said. "Trapped in a stone mirror." And before he could think, he had reached out and touched the cold, shining surface—Isabelle cried out a warning, and then everything went dark.

He was in the House, but not in its ruins. Rich paintings and tapestries hung in the corridors, and the cathedral was whole, the graceful Gothic ribs arching into the vault; majestic and overwhelming, as it had always meant to be. Someone sat in the throne: a Fallen with pale blond hair that seemed to catch all the light streaming through the stained-glass windows. Unlike all the Fallen Philippe had seen before, this one had wings—not his real ones, but a metal armature that supported sharp, golden feathers, spreading out behind him like a headdress. Across his lap was a double-handed sword, his hand loosely wrapped around his handle; the sense of coiled power was almost unbearable, a pressure to abase himself, to bow down to age and power. . . .

Morningstar. Lucifer. The Light Bringer, the Shining One, the First Fallen.

By his side were other Fallen, other humans. He caught a glimpse of Lady Selene, though her face was smoother, more childish than the one she'd shown to him. Younger, he thought; but the words seemed very far away, moving as if through tar through his mind. And other, younger faces: Emmanuelle the archivist; Aragon—who alone of everyone appeared unchanged, prim and unsmiling—two human warlocks holding breath-charged mirrors and watches; and a stern older woman wearing the mortar-and-pestle insignia of the alchemists, whose bag bulged with bottles of

elixirs and boxes of charged artifacts.

And then Morningstar's gaze, which had been trained on one of the stained-glass windows, turned; and fell on him.

The pale eyes transfixed him like a thrown spear—it wasn't so much the power contained within, as the rising interest; the slow focusing of a monstrous magic exclusively on him; on who he was; on who he could become, given enough time in which to utterly reshape him; and who wouldn't want to be reshaped by Morningstar, to be forged into one of his beloved weapons?

"Come here," Morningstar said; and, like a puppet propelled by his maker, he walked up the stairs and stood in the shadow of the throne, shivering as the gaze unraveled him, picked apart his body until not even the bones remained. . . .

"Philippe!"

He was back in the ruined cathedral, and Isabelle was shaking him. His hand had left the mirror; hung, limp, bloodless, by his side.

"Philippe!"

He breathed in air—burning, painful air, but he had never been so glad for the irritation of the House on his skin. Everything seemed lighter, limned in starlight; and the oppressive anger and hatred seemed to have gone, as if the night wind had blown it away. What—What happened?

"Philippe?" Isabelle asked.

"I'm fine," he said, the lie small and unconvincing to him. He could still feel the weight of Morningstar's gaze; could still feel the magic turning, slowly focusing on him: the gaze of a gigantic cobra, annihilating his will, turning his own desires into dust.

And something else, too, something darker, quieter—that had lain biding its time away from the light, and that now stretched and turned, sniffing the air like a predator searching for prey. . . .

A summoning. Of what?

"I don't know what happened. But it's gone now. There is nothing to worry about."

His gaze, roaming, found the stone mirror: the luster had gone from it, leaving only a bleak darkness. "It's gone now," he repeated; but he knew that, whatever had been contained within the mirror, it was within him now; and that whatever had been summoned with its magic was outside—within the House.

It was late at night, and Madeleine couldn't sleep.

By no means unusual. Nights like these, with the lambent starlight hanging over the House, brought back memories—of how she'd first come to it; of Elphon's death, and his shimmering blood on her hands as she crawled away from the House of Hawthorn; as she prayed so very hard to a God she no longer believed benevolent to spare her, to let her go just a bit farther, to reach safety before Asmodeus's thugs found her.

On nights like these she took angel essence; breathed it in, and let the rush of power sweep everything from her mind; let herself believe that she was safe, that nothing like Asmodeus's coup would ever take place in Silverspires; that even if it did, she would have the power to protect herself, to protect Oris. That what had happened in Hawthorn would never happen to her again.

It was a good lie, while it lasted.

An insistent knocking at the door of her laboratory drew her from her trance. Slowly, carefully, she rose, fighting a feeling of weightlessness that promised she only had to wish to take flight; the rush of power slowly settling into her limbs. In that moment, she was the equal of any Fallen, had she wished to cast spells—but of course that wasn't why she took angel essence. It never had been.

"What is it?"

She'd expected many things, chief among them either Selene or Isabelle; but the one on her doorstep, his face pale with fear, was her assistant, Oris.

"What are you doing here?"

"There's . . . there's something in the House," Oris said. "It's after me."

"Don't be ridiculous," Madeleine said, but then she took a closer look at him. His hands were shaking; and if she focused the magic within her she could see through his skin, could feel the panicked rhythm of his heart. Whatever he'd seen had badly frightened him. "Fine. Calm down. Tell me about it."

“It’s . . . I don’t know. It’s dark and angry and if I turn my head to look at it, it’s gone. But it’s following me. It’s . . .” He stopped then. “You think I’m lying.” His voice was flat.

“No,” Madeleine said. “But Silverspires has strong protections, so unless someone within the House is working magic on you, I can’t see why . . .”

Oris drew himself to his full height. “I don’t have enemies in the House.”

“I didn’t think you had.” And even if that had been the case, personal vendettas were outlawed by order of Selene. “Where did you see it?”

“First? In my rooms,” Oris said. “But it has been moving around—”

“Then let’s start with your rooms,” Madeleine said, gently.

The House at night was different; expectant, as if poised on the edge of something that Madeleine could not name. It wasn’t the first time she’d been out at night—a few weeks ago she’d gone to Hôtel-Dieu to examine Philippe and Isabelle—but surely things had been different?

Or perhaps she was just overreacting. Oris was frightened, yes, but that didn’t mean his fear was of something real.

His room was on the side of a cloister courtyard, in an architectural complex that must have dated back to the Middle Ages. The ceiling of the room was low and skewed, and wooden beams crossed the whitewashed walls—each of the two floors was actually larger than the previous one, creating an unnerving impression, from outside, that the entire building was going to collapse. Climbing the narrow stairs, Madeleine gazed left and right; but even with the essence in her, she couldn’t see or feel anything out of place. A few wards were set, here and there, and they were a little singed, but that happened, especially so close to the Seine and its magical outbursts.

Inside, the room seemed almost claustrophobic, overrun with bookshelves. On a low table was a book held open by means of another, heavier one; and a small book stand that held a sheet of paper covered with a spiky handwriting; presumably what Oris had been working on. The bedsheets were rumpled, and a simple icon of the Virgin Mary lay on the bedside table.

“Still at your research?” Madeleine asked.

Oris forced a smile. “Of course. I found a rather interesting passage, which argued that the proper translation of ‘adelphos’ was ‘brothers,’ not cousins. . . .” Bible studies were Oris’s hobby: he begged Father Javier for lessons, and had borrowed an astonishing number of religious books from the library. Together with Emmanuelle, he was one of the few Fallen in the House who was quite confident in his faith. “We’re not here to talk about books, Madeleine—”

Madeleine nodded, keeping a wary eye on the room. “I know. But I see nothing.” The room was bathed in gentle magic residue, the inevitable traces of a Fallen; and only in a few places could she feel the tug of a deeper, sharper fear. “I can’t see anything,” she said.

“It was here.” Oris pointed to the book stand. “I was working on a translation, and all of a sudden it went dark, and—” He swallowed, and fell silent.

Madeleine moved, touched the paper on the book stand. It was warm, but there was nothing wrong with it, other than that the paper seemed curiously brittle.

She withdrew and focused her essence-fueled magic on the paper, willing it to show what it had shown Oris—what had fed the fear she could feel traces of in the room. Nothing changed, or moved.

“I don’t think—” she said; and then the surface of the paper went dark—as if something huge and black had passed in front of it, spreading its wings as it moved—a moment only, and then it was gone, but she could imagine what it would have been like, to be staring at printed paper only to see *that* show up.

“That was it,” Oris said. “But it was everywhere. Every time I turned my head, it was a shadow in the corridors; every time I looked at something, it would seem to lie across it. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Madeleine sent a small, fading burst of magic into the paper; watched the darkness cross its surface, once again. Definitely something large, and she wasn’t quite sure where the suggestion of wings came from, but it was . . . unpleasant. Stomach-clenchingly frightening—a hint that it would spread, and forever engulf her, take her apart until not a trace of her was left, nothing but her screams. . . .

The last of the essence vanished from her system, leaving her drained, her lungs reddened and hoarse—while she was on it, it was so easy to forget what the drug was doing to her, but she wasn’t fool enough to lie to herself. She was dying; but she’d been dying for twenty years, ever since

Hawthorn ceased to be a haven—ever since Elphon died. “I’ve never seen anything like this, either,” she said. Her voice rasped against her throat; she brought it under control with an effort. “But it’s gone now, right?”

Oris nodded. “It could come back.”

“Mmm,” Madeleine said. She considered her options. He seemed worried, but not as bone-deep frightened as she’d been—was what she’d seen a hallucination induced by angel essence?

On the one hand, she emphatically didn’t want to be there when it came back; but on the other. . . with it gone, she couldn’t investigate further. She could take it up with Selene, but then there was a risk—a not insignificant one—that Selene would see she was on essence. “It won’t come back.”

Oris grimaced. “I don’t want it coming back, Madeleine. You saw it.”

“I did,” Madeleine said, doing her best to keep her voice level. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Are you . . .” Oris hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Madeleine said, with a glibness she didn’t feel, “It’s an old House. Not everything in it is entirely savory. You should know.” God knew Morningstar had had his share of darkness.

“I . . .” Oris frowned. “I guess I do?”

“You’ll be fine,” Madeleine said. “It’s gone. And if it does come back, you can call me. Anytime. I’ll come. Promise.”

She could feel Oris wavering—he trusted her and her opinions, and she seemed confident enough to sway him. She wished she felt as confident as she appeared to him.

“Look. Why don’t I stay here awhile tonight, and we’ll see what happens?”

It was a mark of how desperate Oris was that he readily acquiesced to this, without even a show of protesting.

But at the end of the night, there was no trace of whatever had frightened him out of his wits, nor could any of Madeleine’s spells detect any trace of an intruder. “Let me know if it comes back,” she said, as she left the room and went back to her own quarters for some much-needed rest.

Oris didn’t see anything the next day, or the next night, or for the next week. By then, Madeleine had lulled herself into thinking they’d just had a hallucination; or seen the last of a stray spell from the war, which had finally spent itself in manifesting to Oris. She went through the routine of her days at Silverspires: collecting breath and nail clippings from Fallen and making artifacts out of them; teaching the children in the House’s school the bases of alchemy—and through the routines of her nights, too, inhaling angel essence and glorying in its futile rush of power.

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