

Chapter Thirteen

Ajax hovered in the birch branches during the sabbat, a murky ball of energy. Had the mates not been so caught up in the proceedings, they might have seen him twinkling, occasionally throwing off amber light. But Raven had not required his presence, nor had he been called upon at the last minute to assist in the evening's unforeseen magic. He was thankful his mistress hadn't ordered him to kill Seth, for Seth's power could send him back to the Light. The fact that Seth was Raven's son in their current lifetime was an irony too incredulous not to ponder. Fate worked in strange ways! It was almost as if Ajax had impregnated Raven, and Seth was the offspring, a manifestation of the curse—and the possibility of breaking it—that tied Ajax to the coven.

Ajax had memories of his last life as a man. He recalled the forests that surrounded his town, the rushing river full of fish and turtles, the inn he operated, and his family—a wife, two daughters, and a son. He also remembered, though not willingly, the deeds that had cost him his life and soul. It was a bad dream he endured again and again. Ambition. Greed. Black magic spells for prosperity. And the most painful memory of all, which nagged at his soul—his son.

He lived in a timeless void—an eternal moment—neither past, present, nor future. His world was composed of mists and miasmas, thin gray fogs that cloaked him in a shroud of nothingness. He had lost track of his time as a spirit; the absence of something to anchor his existence made him confused, and then afraid. He thought he would never be able to leave his limbo. He served a succession of McWycke priestesses who could require him to perform feats against his wishes; this was horrible to him. The sole notion that occupied him was the idea of being freed, of being sent into the Light. Being sucked to the dark side for the misdeeds of his last earthly life was his greatest fear.

Lacking a material body, Ajax was an energy form that could take on the appearance of his last human existence. He could also manifest as an aura of amber light. As pure energy, he could float in the air and fly through walls. He could appear and disappear in the human world at will, revealing himself to some people and not to others as he preferred. He could move objects to call attention to himself. Most importantly, he could materialize anywhere he chose simply by concentrating on the location. He could even cross bodies of water and appear under water, contrary to old superstitious beliefs.

A newly born earthbound has much to learn about his ghostly powers. Ajax dimly recalled his first moments as a spirit. It was like being a baby, confused and helpless. He was barely able to negotiate the lack of physical laws and the novel abilities granted him in the spirit world. At the moment of his death, he was bound to an earthly mistress; as a result, his contact with the material world remained constant, as he was required to act as an emissary and guide to his realm. The McWycke mistresses commanded him to carry out tasks, some for the good of the coven, and some for selfish gain. With each base act he committed—a haunting to scare off a rival wise woman, a suffocation or strangulation to destroy a financial competitor—his spectral powers increased thricefold. He could flit from one corner of the valley to another in the wink of an eye; he could enter a person's dreams and scare them nearly to death; and he could serve as a conduit to the black energies that his mistresses sometimes sought. As his ghostly powers grew, something peculiar happened—he developed an odor. His olfactory sense was gone, but he heard it in the reaction of the living. “Sulfuric,” “gassy,” “rotten eggs,” “stink,” and “burnt leaves”

were used to describe his presence. In his last life as a human, he had been fastidious as to his person, so this dismayed him. What bothered him even more was that, although his human existence has been far from perfect, he never intended to harm others. In the eternal now in which he lived, his presence terrified people. He dwelled on the menacing acts he'd been commanded to perform and saw that instead of moving toward a release into the Light, he was going in the opposite direction. He would remain in the swirling mists of timelessness, and gradually move to the dark side. Already he could feel those forces beckoning him, telling him to hate the human world, to be jealous of those who had not been caught in the net of evil, and to be angry at his plight. Unseen voices urged him to increase his power by creating chaos in the world of the living and then feeding on the bedlam that resulted. These voices tormented him until he understood that he was living in a perpetual hell, his punishment for his previous life's actions. A fresh torment was the feeling that he'd never break free of this cycle. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a ray of the Light, a glimpse of God's mercy, in his world.

Seth did not appear to be a radiant ray of light when Ajax first encountered him. He was a helpless human who could scarcely protect himself against Ajax's otherworldly energy. But how quickly the shock of recognition occurred! The Light works in unexpected ways, for Seth was his ray of hope, his passage out of hell.

Ajax took advantage of the sabbat time, in his world where there is no time, to forge a plan of escape. He would find Seth and compel him to cross him into the Light. Seth could do this. His shamanic powers carried over through lifetimes. They had to; once attained, such illumination stayed with a soul through each incarnation. Ajax knew Seth lived in New York City, but his exact location was a mystery. He saw himself soaring above the darkened New Jersey farmlands, casting an infinitesimal shadow across the dazzling face of the moon as he flew through the sky. He crossed the mighty Hudson River—easy!—and found himself in a forest of concrete structures, the likes of which he'd never encountered. The electricity of the city, the energy generated by so many people and machines, was daunting. It confounded him, leaving him a disoriented speck of energy blown about the avenues on a humid breeze. He couldn't materialize in an unknown location because he had nothing on which to base his thoughts. But he could think of Seth, and he could hold the image of him in his imagination. He thought of his son, he remembered his lover, and he visualized himself materializing in Seth's apartment.

He thought it, and it was so.

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