

**Chapter Twenty-Three, "The Tide Turns"**

Manny drove through a war zone. Around every corner - down every street - cars, buildings and people were on fire. He stopped often, helping who he could, putting down a few Blind Dead here and there, but it wasn't really doing any good, not making any real difference, and he knew it. His goal of finding Camille and getting her help seemed to be drifting further and further away.

"Shit," he said to himself and pulled over.

The street he had stopped on was one of the few that wasn't on fire. There were patches of rain throughout town, but even those places that had been unscathed by fire were decimated, windows broken, car alarms blaring. Bodies were strewn about, many of them stripped of flesh completely, only bloody skeletons left behind.

This was one such street. Manny put his head in his hands and pushed away the tears, tears of desperation, tears of anger and sorrow. They would do no good now. He needed to change his game plan, needed to switch gears. He couldn't rely on Camille, had to assume that she was dead by now. Kimberly was gone, as well, meaning he was alone. He had to take the fight to these beasts. But how?

The answer, when it came, was crazy. There was someone he knew, someone he remembered from his days as a youth. But, surely, she couldn't still be alive? She would be ancient. Yet, somehow, he knew that she was. And she didn't live far from here.

But he had to speak to his wife, had to speak to Dana. If only there was an undamaged phone booth nearby. Slowly, deliberately, Manny looked up from the unilluminating view of his palms to the enlightening view out the car window. There sat a phone booth. Undamaged. What were the odds? It seemed as if something was helping him, some puppet master that none of them could see. God? Manny wasn't even sure there was a God anymore, not after this Hell on Earth. But something.

He darted out of the car and ran to the phone booth, shut himself inside it and rummaged through his pockets for change. He found a dime, drove it into the coin slot and dialed.

"Come on," he said.

Dana answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello," she said.

"Dana," Manny said, "thank Christ."

*"Manny, where have you been? It's all falling apart out there. Jenny next door died in my arms on the front porch. Manny, someone had skinned her face off, just peeled it off like the skin of an orange. Who would do that?"*

"Dana, listen, I want you to take the truck and get the Hell out of town. Don't stop for--"

*"I won't go without you,"* Dana broke in.

"I can't, baby, I can't," Manny said. "I have to put a stop to this. Now, don't stop for--"

*"Put a stop to this?! Who are you, Shaft? You have some kind of obligation here? Come home and we'll leave together."*

"Dammnit, I do have an obligation! This is my home, I've lived here my whole life. And if it's done, all right, fine, it's done. But I'm gonna at least try to save the lives of anyone who's left before I go. This is not up for discussion. Okay?"

There was silence for several seconds, then Dana spoke.

"Okay," she said.

"I'm sorry, baby," Manny said. "I have to do what I can. I'm going to see the Old Woman. I think she can help."

*"The Old Woman?! She can't still be alive, can she?"*

"I think she is."

*"Jesus, you think she's more than just a mad woman, honey?"*

"After all I've seen tonight, yes, I think she is."

"Okay."

"Okay," Manny repeated. "Now, take the truck, drive to Providence. Don't stop for nothing. If there's a bridge out, I want you to jump it, you hear me?"

*"I hear you,"* Dana said.

"Now, I want you to go the hotel we stayed at for our honeymoon."

*"We can't afford that place, not even on the credit card."*

Manny shot a glance at the car and the briefcase full of cash sitting on the passenger seat. He allowed himself a small smile.

"Oh, we can afford it, honey," he said. "Just put it on the credit card for now and I'll take care of it tomorrow." He paused, sighed, decided to be perfectly honest with her, and added, "if I make it through the night."

*"Jesus, baby," Dana said. "I love you. You hear me? I love you. And you are going to make it. I won't accept anything less. Come back to me."*

"I'll try my damndest. I love you, too. Goodbye."

*"Goodbye."*

"Now go!"

He hung up the phone and darted back into the car, starting it up all in one smooth motion. A moment later, he tore off down the road. The clock on the dash read 4:02am. In a few minutes, he would be heading down a little side street that would take him to a small, unregarded neighborhood away from the center of town. It was the neighborhood that he had grown up in. The neighborhood where the Old Woman lived.

Kimberly floated, hovering just an inch or so off the ground, hands at her sides outstretched, a mad look in her eye. She was covered in blood, drenched in crimson. Behind her lay the body of her latest victim, a young man. He was number seven and he wouldn't be the last. The more blood she consumed, the more powerful she felt. It was exhilarating.

A small group of Blind Dead followed her, four in total. They had started following her when she had killed her second victim, sensing that she was Papa's kin. A small swarm of vermin trailed behind the Blind Dead, staying respectfully back.

As the group passed a little record shop, Kimberly heard something. More accurately, she *felt* something. She turned and stared through the glass into the shop. Her wild eyes met those of a scared girl, no more than thirteen years old, cowering in a corner, tears running down her face.

A hideous sharp-toothed smile spread across Kimberly's face. She licked her lips, which tasted of drying blood. She put her palm to the glass and leaned in closer, flashing her fangs at the girl.

The girl curled into a ball and shut her eyes, as if that would banish the demons outside the window. Somewhere in the shop, a radio was playing. Kimberly recognized the song, but it was distant, like hearing something through water. What was it?

She frowned, cocked her head to one side. It was Bowie. "Queen Bitch." Again. How could that be? What were the odds? The lyrics rang through her head, struck the right cords. Papa was the Queen Bitch. Papa had to be stopped. And...

"Camille!" Kimberly screamed.

The Blind Dead reacted immediately, sensing that something was wrong, that something had changed in Kimberly. The vampire whirled around and thrust her hand through the closest Blind Dead's face. There was a crunch as Kimberly's fist broke through the walking corpse's nose and upper jaw. The

vampire grabbed hold of the Blind Dead's brain - hard - and twisted her hand. With a wet tearing sound, she pulled the minion's head off.

She threw it at the second Blind Dead. The head struck the corpse's temple, shattering her skull.

The third one was quicker and pounced on her, tackling her to the ground. The fourth one held her down.

But Kimberly was too strong for them. She bared her fangs and bit into the fourth one's right arm. The dead flesh tasted horrible. Kimberly didn't want it in her mouth any longer than necessary. She bit down harder, severing the arm with a crunch. The limb dropped to the ground and the Blind Dead seemed taken aback, loosening her grip on Kimberly.

The vampire kicked the third one in the chest. Her blow was so powerful that it shattered the woman's rib-cage. She threw them both aside, knocking them to the ground. She stood over them for a moment, then stepped on their heads, one after the other, crushing their skulls. The cockroaches approached her but she shot them a murderous look and they stopped, turned in the other direction and sped away as fast as they could.

Kimberly walked into record store. The lock had been broken at some point. She searched for what she wanted and found it in the third aisle. A Walkman. She ripped open the cardboard box it came in and grabbed batteries. She walked into the rock section, passing the terrified girl.

"Hide better," she said to the girl. "And if the building is set on fire, run."

She could only hope that the girl would heed her advice. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to protect her for the rest of the night.

In the rock section, she found what she was looking for, a cassette tape of Bowie's album *Hunky Dory*, which had "Queen Bitch" on it. She opened the Walkman, loaded the batteries into it. She tore open the cassette packaging and punched the tape into the Walkman.

She looked up. Sitting on a shelf above the cassette tapes was a pair of drumsticks. She grabbed them and tucked them into her jeans. She was about to leave but stopped and looked at the girl.

"If the phone still works," she said, "call somebody. Anybody. The operator. They can connect you to the state police. They probably already have a lot of calls about this but one more won't hurt. At least they'll know where you are. Okay?"

"Okay," the girl said.

Kimberly started out again, but the girl stopped her.

"Wait," she said.

"Yeah?" Kimberly said.

"Are you a monster?"

"Yes. But I hope I'm one of the good ones."

Kimberly put on the headphones of the Walkman - which she strapped to her belt alongside the police radio and the drumsticks - and walked out of the record store. Soon, the sounds of David Bowie were ringing through her head. She knew what she had to do. Papa was the Queen Bitch and she had to be destroyed. But first, she had to get to Camille. She sniffed the air, drank it in, let the aura of the chaos enter her. Past the fires, past the screams and the death, she could feel Camille, could sense her. She was out there, still alive.

And she needed Kimberly's help.

Kimberly ran down the road, super human speed at full strength, towards Camille. She hoped she would get there in time.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four, "The Circle"**

Manny parked in front of a well-maintained but shabby, ancient house at the end of a dilapidated lane. All of the other houses on the street had windows shattered, had fences kicked over. This wasn't due to the events of this hellish night, but just due to the neighborhood. This was how it was in this part of town.

But not this house. No neighborhood kid or small-time hood would dare throw a rock through a window in this place. And the very thought of kicking out a post in the fence that surrounded it filled them with dread.

The Old Woman wouldn't have any of it. And she had a way about her. Manny had first seen her - at least, his first memory of seeing her - walking out of her front door, a cigarette perched on her lips, to check the mail. He was four years old at the time. She had been ancient even then.

He remembered that she had looked at him. It wasn't a sinister look at all yet it filled him with terror. It was a look that told him that he meant nothing. Nothing in the larger scheme of things. Something about her eyes told him that this Old Woman knew of such things.

The neighborhood was predominantly Black but the Old Woman was white and stuck out like a sour thumb. Sometimes, the adults of the neighborhood and the surrounding ones would come to her with their problems. Health problems, domestic problems, supernatural problems. She had answers for all of them. And now Manny needed her help. The whole town did.

He got out of the car and approached the house. There was a light on inside, a lonely light in the neighborhood. Everyone else was either dead or asleep, probably the former. But she was still here. Still alive. It was incredible yet somehow inevitable.

Manny opened the door of the fence and stepped into the front yard. The house looked like it was made by the Puritans and maybe it was. It was certainly one of the oldest buildings in town. He got about halfway through the yard when a voice stopped him.

"Be mindful of approach," the Old Woman said. Manny couldn't see her but he could hear her just as if she were standing next to him.

"I don't know what kind of devil you are," the Old Woman continued, "or what kind of man you are, for that matter. But if you wish me any ill will, you'll find that you won't be able to step into the Circle.

Not without causing serious harm to your person. And if that don't put you down, my shotgun will."

Manny hesitated, then decided to be bold and continued on his way towards the house. He could see her now, sitting on her porch in a rocking chair, smoking a cigarette and cradling a shotgun in her arms.

Manny stepped over a line of what looked like salt and soon was standing at the Old Woman's side. She looked about two hundred years old, with long, scraggly white hair, wrinkles that looked like canyons and veins that looked like stereo wiring. She looked him up and down, as if trying to decide whether he was real or not.

"Well, I'll be," she said. "I guess you don't wish me any ill will. Beer?"

"Okay," Manny said, rather flummoxed by her question.

The Old Woman got up out of her chair, propped the shotgun against the wall and walked, slowly, over to a little cooler sitting on the other side of the front door. Manny made to grab a beer inside the cooler himself but she slapped his hand away.

"I'm the host here, young man," she said. "I can get it myself."

She fished a can of beer out of the melting ice, handed it to him and grabbed another for herself. The two of them popped open their cans. The Old Woman held up her bottle in a toast.

"To the end of the world," she said.

Manny said nothing but he did raise his beer and drank when she drank. She gave a satisfied sigh and returned to her rocking chair, sat down. Manny didn't know what else to do so he sat down on the porch next to her.

"The Circle comes in handy from time to time," the Old Woman said, pointing to the circle of salt that extended all the way around the house, or so Manny presumed. "Salt. Who woulda thought? Still the most potent magical element."

"Ma'am," Manny said, "I used to live around here and--"

"I know," the Old Woman interrupted. "Think I don't remember you? Little Manny, 'bout pissed your pants when you first saw me. Oh, I remember you. I remember all of you. I remember your parents, too. Had trouble having a baby, you see? Came to me. I gave 'em some advice. Appears they took it, doesn't it?"

"I..." Manny said. "I guess so."

The Old Woman nodded.

"So this is how you intend to spend the end of the world, is it?" she said. "Sitting here talking to a crazy old woman. Some plan."

"Ah, no, ma'am, that's not what I had in mind."

"It isn't?"

Manny put his beer down beside him. "No. I thought I could ask you for help."

The Old Woman gave him a sour look. "Help? Are you shittin' me? This town deserves this. Deserves every fuckin' thing that's happened tonight. We brought this on ourselves. Believe me."

"Say that I do, say that the town does deserve this. What about the people in it? What about all the kids? All the innocent people?"

The Old Woman was silent.

"You helped us," Manny continued. "Helped whoever came asking for it. What happened? What changed?"

"The world changed," the Old Woman said. "Damn warmonger in the White House with a smiling face. Looks like a damn puppet. And that's exactly what he is. The world's changed, young man. Gas companies and the like calling the shots. We deserve to go down."

"Ma'am, my wife and I, we're trying to have kids ourselves. And I know that it's crazy, I know that we're too old and the whole damn human race is about a minute away from nuclear Armageddon, but I don't know, I think we still have a shot. If we bring 'em up right, you know what I mean?"

The Old Woman threw down her cigarette, half-smoked. She stood up.

"Ah, well, fuck it," she said. "Gotta die sometime. Why not tonight? And for a reason. Come on inside, we're gonna need a few things."

Kimberly approached the little clearing past the deserted house slowly, with caution. She knew she was in the right place but it was dangerous nonetheless. Blind Dead could be hiding anywhere, true, but she also had to worry about the wolves.

There were three of them, all of them digging furiously in the mud, rain pouring down on them. It was a futile business: the hole they were digging was rapidly filling up with water and the wolves kept stopping and jumping out of the hole in trepidation.

Kimberly took a moment and turned her head skyward, letting the rain wash over her, letting it clear away some of the blood that had splattered onto her body. Her hair was sticky with it and it would take more than rain to clean it but it was a start. The headphones were slung around her neck; she had turned Bowie up loud enough to still hear without having to always wear them over her ears. She sighed and approached the wolves.

Immediately, they turned on her, formed a circle around the grave and growled as she approached. Kimberly held out her hands, hoping that she was indicating that she was unarmed and meant them no harm. They weren't having any of it. They knew something was wrong with her, that she was different.

"It's okay," Kimberly said. "I'm a friend. I want to help Camille."



The wolf nearest her nipped at her as she approached and Kimberly backed away.

"Easy," she said. "I know, I know, I'm a vampire. And you guys don't like me. But I like you...a little. And I like Camille. Let me help."

She looked around and saw a few shovels lying on the ground near the grave. Slowly, she made her way towards them.

"I want to help," she repeated.

Subtly, she was hypnotizing them: with her voice, with her eyes, which never broke contact with the lead wolf. She bent down to grab a shovel.

"Easy," she repeated. "Easy."

She picked up a shovel and very, very slowly walked past the lead wolf and into the hole they had managed to dig. The water reached up to just under her knees. She looked up into the sky again, concentrating, eyes burning. They glowed red for a moment and the clouds cleared, the rain subsided and the moon shone bright down on them.

The wolves around her howled in triumph as Kimberly struck the shovel into the muddy earth and started to dig furiously, supernaturally fast. She looked like a demon working a mine in Hell.

Soon the water was distributed around a larger area as Kimberly made the hole wider as well as deeper. She began to hear a sound, a banging sound, and knew it was Camille.

"Camille," Kimberly called. "Hold on, baby!"

"Kimberly!" Camille said. "Help!"

Her voice was strangely muffled, as if her jaw was constricted or constrained somehow. Kimberly worked faster, harder. Soon, she hit wood. She dropped to her knees and spread the mud away from the coffin lid. The wolves looked down on her from above, at ground level.

She found a hole in the coffin lid where something had broken through. The hole was just wide enough for her to see through.

A hideous metal face stared at her through the hole. Kimberly jumped a little.

"It's me," Camille said.

It was some kind of mask, some kind of binding affixed to Camille's face. It was nailed in place at her lower jaw and upper cheeks.

Kimberly let out a little cry of horror and grabbed hold of the coffin lid tightly. With a single, powerful pull, she tore away the coffin lid - mud and all - and flung it up, out of the hole to land ten feet away in a puddle.

She dropped into the coffin next to Camille and cradled the smaller girl in her arms. She shed a few tears before regaining her composure.

"Get this mask off," Camille said in that strange, constricted voice. It was the binding, not allowing her to speak properly, confining her jaw.

"It'll hurt," Kimberly said.

"I know," Camille said. "Just do it."

Kimberly grabbed hold of the mask and pulled. Camille screamed in pain but the mask wouldn't come off. Kimberly pulled and pulled, screaming herself now. Pure rage and frustration pouring out of her.

"The shovel," Camille said. "Use the shovel!"

Kimberly shook her head but knew that Camille was right. She let go of the mask and stood up, straddling Camille and grabbing the shovel.

Camille turned her head to one side and braced herself. Kimberly put the edge of the shovel in the seam between the mask and Camille's flesh. Then, using the shovel like a crowbar, she pushed the mask away from Camille's face.

Camille screamed in pain and her blood sprayed out as the spikes were dislodged. They had healed around the nails while she was in the ground and now they were open anew. Finally, the nails on this side of her face came loose and the mask flapped open, like a half-removed Band-Aid. Camille turned over to her other side.

"Again!" she screamed. "The other side!"

Kimberly wiped away a few tears from her face and got back to work. In a few moments of abject agony, the mask was completely free of Camille's face.

The werewolf girl sat up, blood pouring down her face and chest. Kimberly dropped the shovel and sat down next to Camille. They kissed and Kimberly licked the blood off Camille's face, drinking it, feeling power coursing through her. They just sat there for a few moments before Camille spoke.

"Thank you," she said.

Kimberly nodded.

"Now it's your turn," Camille said.

Kimberly looked at her, confused. Camille turned to show Kimberly her back, where her hands were bound by a pair of handcuffs.

Silver handcuffs.

"Fuck," Kimberly said.

She clenched and unclenched her hands, popped her knuckles, mentally preparing herself for the pain. Finally, she cracked her neck and grabbed hold of the handcuffs.

Her hands immediately burst into flames. The pain was so great that she nearly passed out. She

managed to overcome it and started to pull the metal apart, tearing it with her hands. It would have been so much easier if it wasn't for that loud, annoying noise. What was that? Was someone screaming?

She realized that yes, indeed, someone was screaming. It was her. She was screaming in horrible pain. Finally, the handcuffs broke away, torn apart by her inhuman strength. She flung them away and thrust her hands into the cold mud, instant relief flowing through her.

A moment later, they embraced. Camille's wounds were nearly healed already and Kimberly's hands were feeling better as well. The wolves looked down on them expectantly.

"Okay," Camille told them, "we're going, we're going."

They stood up, climbed out of the hole. Camille grabbed hold of the binding mask and looked at it for a long moment. The sky above them had gone dark again and the rain came down once more, the grave filling up with water.

"Are you ready?" Kimberly asked, putting a hand on Camille's shoulder.

"I'm ready," Camille said.

She tossed the mask into the watery grave and howled at the disappearing moon. The wolves howled with her.

They were looking forward to a fight.

To Be Continued...

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