

GLASS SOULS

HOUSE OF THE ROSE
BOOK ONE



BY
MICHAELA AUGUST

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by Michaela August

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"Fate smashes us as though we were made of glass, And
never are our shards put together again."

Abul Ala-a-Maarri, d. 1057

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Chapter One

In his rage Father Enlil answered Ninshubur: "Inanna craved the great heaven and she craved the great below as well. The divine powers of the underworld are divine powers that should not be craved, for whoever gets them must remain in the underworld. Who, having got to that place, could then expect to come up again?"—*Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*, Sumer, 2nd millennium BC

The House of the Rose, Béziers, County of Toulouse—
Tuesday, July 21st, AD 1209

Menelaos cracked open the thick, bronze-banded door and checked the sky outside. A red sunset blazed above the two- and three-story wooden houses across the street, but the moon had not yet risen. With his Seer's Eyes, he carefully examined the dirt street left and right, uphill and down. No townsmen were visible, only some vagrant pigs. Sure that it was empty of human life, he closed and barred the door. So far, so good.

He checked all the storage rooms on the streetside ground floor of the House of the Rose for unauthorized occupation, and to ensure each stone-arched window was shuttered tightly. The overwhelming scent of roses had some competition from the litter left over from the wedding feast that hadn't yet been swept up: scattered flowers and grain, crumbs of food, dropped sweetmeats, splashes of beer and wine. He smiled at the remnants of the joyous occasion that

was the plausible excuse for this gathering of far-flung family members. He found no intruders. *Good.*

The counting room, offices and stillrooms were neat, and vacated. The kitchen, pantries and buttlery at the rear of the house were likewise deserted and spotless. Nobody was hiding in the cistern. The doors leading upstairs to the great hall were shut, but the murmuring noise from above attested to the attendance of all the kin, waiting for the great occasion that was still to come. They would discover any strangers in their midst on their own. He would not disturb them yet. Turning his Seer's eyes to the substantial courtyard in the middle of the House, he scanned the dim radiance of the auras surrounding the herbs and fruit trees and saw a brightness in one tall tree that did not belong to mere plant life.

In a moment, he crossed the space and yanked the spy off his perch using his hand or air, catching him by the back of a skinny neck. Closing his Seer's Eyes to look clearly upon the face of one about to die, he lifted the miscreant to eye-level.

He beheld a thin, brown-skinned face, and amber eyes framed by dark brows, like all the kin. It held the promise of a strong character—if he made it to the age of wisdom.

"My lord! My lord! It's me, Simon!" cried the boy, half in terror, half in vast excitement.

Menelaos held him quite still, glad he had not automatically shaken him like a terrier shakes a rat, breaking his neck. He was not an intruder at all, merely an inquisitive son of the House, trying to discover secrets he was not yet

old enough to learn. He would earn the right to those secrets soon, but not this year.

"You're lucky," Menelaos growled, hiding his relief and his shaking hands, and set the boy down, unharmed. Opening his Seer's Eyes again, he searched the courtyard for any confederates, and found none. "If Honoria had caught you, you'd be in the Underworld already, looking for a new mother."

"Yes, lord. I know, lord," babbled Simon. Then he twinkled, and gave a cheeky grin. "But I wanted to see it all! All the djinni..."

That was obvious, and understandable. But not permitted. "Back upstairs. How did you escape from Deema, anyway?"

The boy shrugged, not willing to betray his cousin.

Menelaos kept hold of him as they found the stairs in the deepening gloom and ascended. Simon wouldn't get a second chance to escape from the children's quarters tonight.

No one could be allowed to learn the secrets of the House of the Rose uninvited, and live.

So it had been for millennia. So it must always be.

* * * *

In the darkness, one by one, the nine djinni Protectors of the House descended the stone stairs leading from the living quarters to the great hall. Below, in a vast, high-ceilinged space that took up most of the house's second story, the mortal members of the House waited, more than a hundred hearts racing with excitement.

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During his fifteen centuries as a Protector, Menelaos of Pergamon had often participated in these secret ceremonies. But even so, he felt a thrill as he paused at the carved arch that marked the hall's entrance. He raised his right hand to touch the winged figures, the sculptured limestone slippery and cool against his heated fingers. Behind him, he heard quiet rustling and smelled perfume—roses, of course, but the subtle notes of sandalwood, myrrh, and jasmine also—as the other Protectors found their places.

After a moment, one more djinn came down the stairs, excitement and nerves swirling in his wake like phosphorescence in a midnight sea. It was Raymond Taillefer, nicknamed Raymond-Soleil, newly-Transformed djinn, and ready to stand for his Appointing by the mortal elders of the House of the Rose.

Would he pass tonight's tests? Menelaos had known him in many of his—*their*—past lives, and liked his current incarnation as the shy youngest son of a Parisian blacksmith.

But even after training Raymond-Soleil for the past half-year, Menelaos could not predict the Appointing's outcome with surety. Raymond-Soleil's soul was immensely old, and enriched with the experiences carried from lifetime to lifetime, but bodies—even those of the nearly-immortal djinni—were fragile and sometimes betrayed their owners.

Tonight would end either in rejoicing or tragedy.

As the djinni waited for the signal to enter the hall, Menelaos felt a familiar presence beside him, clothed in an aura that shone like cloth-of-gold.

—Your light is tarnished with fretting, my love. Don't make our poor Raymond more nervous than he already is,—came his wife's brisk mental communication. Honoria nevertheless slipped an arm around his waist, offering soundless comfort. He turned and gave her a kiss, a feather-light brushing of lips and minds.

From somewhere on the dark staircase behind them came Raymond-Soleil's anxious thought:—What if my robe falls off in the middle of the ceremony?—

There were silent chuckles from the assembled djinni. Most of them had faced a similar crisis the first time they were summoned to appear before the assembled kin of the House clad in the ritual Garment of Divine Kingship, a fourteen-foot-long layered and fringed linen shawl that was wrapped around the torso, under the right arm, over the left shoulder, and tucked under the right armpit.

—Don't worry,—Honoria reassured Raymond-Soleil.—I used my best gold fibula to pin it.—And you're a good-looking lad, so even if it does slip off—Menelaos projected a swift memory of the nude Greek athletes from his long-ago youth, gorgeous and gleaming in the hot sun, then added an equally nude and broad-shouldered Raymond-Soleil and a few ogling maidens to the mental image.... I doubt the kin will mind very much.—

Raymond-Soleil caught himself just in time from laughing out loud, the sound escaping only as a sharp puff of air.—I would probably have to run just as fast as those athletes!—he commented, wryly, changing the image to one of himself wearing his long leather blacksmith's apron to preserve his

modesty. But Menelaos's joke had done the trick: the waves of trepidation roiling from Raymond-Soleil subsided to mere ripples.

Then it was time.

—Now,—came Lady Cecilia's mental command, and Menelaos, hand-in-hand with Honoria, stepped under the archway.

As they entered the great hall, pitch-black to mortal eyes, he opened the eyes of his mind, his Seer's eyes. The hall suddenly blazed with the flame-like auras of the assembled kin, as if the Christian Pentecost had descended upon the House of the Rose. And the great winged auras of the djinni, making their stately way along the walls to the front of the hall, outshone the mortal kin of the House as the sun outshines the stars.

The tension was too much for a solitary infant. It wailed, despite maternal efforts to quiet it. As if the crying baby had been a signal to relax, there were scattered coughs and the soft sounds of people stretching and shuffling to get more comfortable where they stood.

When the djinni reached the dais at the front of the hall, Menelaos reluctantly released Honoria's hand so that they could take their accustomed places.

When all ten of the djinni had assembled on the dais, Cecilia called out in ringing tones: "Let there be light!"

Menelaos put all the strength of his aura into condensing a small sphere of air into a white-hot point, then touched the spark to an oil-soaked torch above his head. It flashed into life just as Honoria's torch, then Cecilia's, sparked and flared.

The sudden light revealed Sharibet, the First Protector of the House, standing at the front of the dais. A tiny, brown-skinned, amber-eyed djinniah, it was she who had first recruited the Apkallu to protect her House, for she was the ancestress of most of the kin gathered in this hall. Her long, rippling black hair was braided with gleaming gold ornaments, and she wore the feminine version of the Garment of Divine Kingship, the fringed linen shawl folded into a wide collar across both shoulders and hanging down to her knees over an unadorned sheath tied at the waist.

Sharibet's mortal descendants sighed appreciatively at the familiar magic and lit hand-held candles from the torches. The flames passed from celebrant to celebrant, until the whole hall glowed with light. Family musicians began to play an ancient flute melody, accompanied by drums deep enough to vibrate bones.

When the last notes of the song ended, Sharibet said in the ancient language of the House, "*Nu dumu-dumu-la!* My children!" then waited as the ecstatic response came in waves:

"*Ama!* Mother!"

"My children, it is good to meet again!" She held her hands up for silence. "We are gathered tonight to celebrate the Finding of one of the Lost Apkallu, and to appoint him anew as a Protector of the House."

Raymond-Soleil bowed, outwardly grave and dignified, but Menelaos saw that his aura was swirling with anxiety again.

Cheers and ululations resounded. Although any mortal could be Transformed into a djinn, the incarnations of the

Apkallu, the original group of twelve djinni once revered as gods, were especially esteemed as Protectors by the kin.

"My children, will you accept him?" Sharibet asked.

The crowd hushed and parted to reveal Solange, the eldest mortal of the Béziers House of the Rose. Her thin silver hair was braided with blue faience rosettes that swung and clicked as she hobbled to the fore. She was ninety years old, bent and wrinkled, but her amber eyes were still clear and alert.

"Most gracious Mother Sharibet, all of us who belong to the House, born into it or adopted, trust in your loving care, for you have rescued us from the forgetfulness of the Underworld for sixty-eight centuries." The old woman's voice shook and she paused to breathe deeply. "You ask us if we will accept a new Protector, and this is a hard thing to answer. Many times, Protectors have sacrificed themselves for us, and we honor them. Yet how shall we know that this one will prove true?"

Cecilia stepped forward to answer. "He shall answer your questions himself, but I affirm that he is one of the Apkallu, called in this life Raymond Taille-Fer, son of Raymond the Smith, of Paris. After I recognized his *melam*, his aura, he consented to join the House, and survived his Transformation. During his probation, he mastered his powers as a djinn. Having tested him and found him worthy, I, who alone Raise and Name djinni, Raised him, opening the memories of his past lives and returning them to him as your memories are returned to you. He has had many names in many lives in service to the House, but his True Name is Utu."

A hundred throats shouted, "It is good to meet again!" When the reverberations damped, it was Raymond-Soleil who next stepped forward. His eyes shone in the candlelight, and his voice rang clear. "I stand ready to answer your questions."

Solange began the inquiry. "Do you swear to protect us to the limits of your cunning and strength against any enemies?"

"As I always have, so will I always do, so long as I remember who I am." answered Raymond-Soleil.

"Do you swear that you will not rest until you have avenged any injury suffered by those of our House who were beyond the limits of your protection?"

"I swear it by my blood."

"Do you swear that you will hold all the members of the House as your children in your heart, treating us with a father's tender care, suffering your hunger to be sated with what we willingly give to you, and taking nothing more?"

Raymond-Soleil's mental comment was wry.—Yes, yes, of course I promise not to eat them.—

But Menelaos noticed that his gaze turned to the man standing next to the dais, who bore a large, functional battle-ax. For an instant, light gleamed on the blade's sharp edge.

"I will be tender, and faithful, and treat you with a father's care!" the young djinn declared. To Menelaos, he said, privately,—God's teeth! It's like I'm getting married again.—You are,—Menelaos replied solemnly.

Raymond-Soleil swallowed as Solange advanced toward him, closely trailed by a young mother with a babe in arms.

They stopped near a small table holding a thin-walled alabaster urn.

From their positions under the brightly burning torches, the djinni moved to stand on either side of Raymond-Soleil.

The young mother took the brush from the urn in one slightly unsteady hand, while the other held her snuffling son to her shoulder. She drew the brush diagonally across Raymond-Soleil's lips, leaving a slash of red ochre.

While she marked each of the djinni in turn, Solange spoke again. "As you have promised by your blood, so we mortals bind you immortals with the earth that receives us all, young and old, male and female. As you protect our lives, so shall we protect your secrets. As you serve our House, so shall we serve your needs. And as you open our memories, so shall we remember you."

"We will remember you," the djinni swore, their voices blending.

Menelaos, in unison with the others, bowed deeply to the crowd, returning their respect. The pigment on his skin was gritty in its solution of olive oil, the iron scent disturbingly like blood.

When the young mother returned the brush to the urn, Solange said with new strength, "Who knows our secret must be silent, dead, or one of us; who betrays us deserves a traitor's doom."

"Let him be forgotten!" the crowd roared.

"We accept your promises, Utu, now called Raymond-Soleil," Solange continued. "Be as faithful to us as we are to you."

Then, while the table was moved to the back of the dais, the musicians played a lilting tune that demanded much clapping.

As the music came to a close, Raymond-Soleil moved to the central spot on the dais and the other djinni took their stations to his left and right.

Raymond Soleil was left standing alone, but not for long.

Through the crowd came one of Solange's granddaughters, six months pregnant and carrying a broad-bowled lapis lazuli chalice wrapped with gold wire.

Jehanne de la Rose had been Raymond-Soleil's concubine after his Transformation, during the brief period before his fertility disappeared forever. Tonight, as befit her honored status as the mother of a djinn's child, Jehanne bore the cup of the covenant. From it rose the scent of citrus oil and other herbs.

"Beloved Mother Sharibet," Jehanne began her part. "We thank you always for your gift of life. In return for your loving kindness, and in respect of the promises given and received, we offer Raymond-Soleil the safety of our House, the power of our Names, and the service of our lives in turn. We shall remember him as he remembers us." She raised the blue stone chalice reverently, then took her place in front of Raymond-Soleil, facing the assembled family, who queued up, forming nine lines, each with a djinn at its head.

The first communicant in Menelaos's line stepped forward. "I am called Hakim abd al-Baqee, Named Ibi-Sin. Remember me!" He took Menelaos's hand and touched it to his forehead.

In turn, Menelaos scored the end of the mortal's ring finger with a sharp tooth. Only a taste of blood, an overwhelming glimpse of memories—then abd al-Baqee let his finger bleed a few drops into the cup Jehanne held. The next celebrant repeated the actions, and was replaced by the next, until all eleven kinsmen in Menelaos's line had contributed their blood.

When the last kinswoman in Sharibet's line had offered her blood, Jehanne shifted the cup into her left hand and turned to face Raymond-Soleil. She offered her right hand to him. "You know me in this lifetime as Jehanne de la Rose, but my True Name is Utusagila, 'Favored by the Sun'. My lord, remember me." She took Raymond-Soleil's hand and touched his knuckles to her forehead. Then he carried her fingers to his mouth.

Sharibet and Cecilia steadied Jehanne so she didn't drop the now-filled goblet. Menelaos braced Raymond-Soleil, staggered by his first taste of human blood. All the djinni shared the overwhelming reaction: an explosive climax both spiritual and physical as the doors to Jehanne's soul stood open.

Quick-thinking Honoria made sure Jehanne retrieved her fingers from the young djinn's mouth.

The assembled kin watched Raymond-Soleil warily. Would he master his reaction to the blood, or would it master him? The kinsman with the ax stood ready to do his unpleasant duty.

After a tense moment, Raymond-Soleil's eyelids fluttered. "My God!" He opened his eyes to look straight at Jehanne. "I will always remember you!" He accepted the cup into his

trembling grasp. "I will remember all of you," he said to the assembled House of the Rose, and drank. When he finished he held the whole cup high, rim down, to demonstrate it was empty. Waves of bliss emanated from him.

Menelaos couldn't help but smile. Raymond-Soleil had passed his test.

As Sharibet helped a shaken Jehanne to sit, Honoria took the cup from Raymond-Soleil, and guided him gently back to his place on the dais. The shadow of the ax had passed, but the ceremony was not yet over.

The musicians played a jubilant tune, ending with clashing cymbals, and then someone called out, "Let us see the crowns!"

"The crowns!" shouted the crowd.

Sharibet gestured to a small group standing at the rear of the hall. Isidore, the mortal Master of the Béziers House, and his wife Odette, removed cloth covers from the burdens they held. Trailed by their grown children and the highest-ranking visitors, they began to weave through the crowd, lifting their treasures for all to see.

Eleven of the crowns were immensely old, three tiers of curved bulls' horns surmounted by an ivory disk. These were the Crowns of Divinity, worn only by the Apkallu.

Two of the crowns were simple fillets of gold, the Crowns of Service that marked the djinni of lower rank than the Apkallu. The final crown was the Crown of the Mother of the House, a cap of polished electrum that shimmered in the candlelight as if it possessed an aura of its own.

As the crown-bearers wove their way through the crowd, Sharibet lifted her arms and began to recite the ancient story:

"My children, some of those who protect us now were once our gods. Mighty were the cities of that plain now swallowed by the sea, and mighty the Apkallu that ruled them. The Queen of Heaven was not content to rule over the first city of Eanna, but instead tried to usurp the dominion of her brothers and sisters. Her crimes were many, and when the Apkallu at last gathered in Eanna to condemn her, she shattered the mountains, flooded the cities, murdered the gods and stole their memories. The sea swept away the people of the plain and scattered their souls over the earth. This was the first destruction of our world.

"Only one goddess survived, and she sought her lost brothers and sisters, her lost people, so that she might Raise them and Name them and restore them to their rightful place. But she could not return their memories of the world before the Flood. Thus, we remember the Apkallu, thus we Forget the Cursed One, may she be eternally forgotten!"

"May she be eternally forgotten," responded the assembled kin, reaffirming the curse of exile.

"Choose your crown, Raymond-Soleil! Show us that you remember!" said Jehanne, taking up the next part of the ritual.

Raymond-Soleil paced back and forth, minutely examining the ancient Crowns of Divinity. Each crown's disk was carved with the symbol of the Apkallu to whom it belonged. Finally he stopped at the end of the line, and lifted one crown high above his head. "This is my crown, the Crown of the Sun!"

The clan shrieked and clapped. "The Sun! Lord of the Sun! Utu! It is good to meet again!"

Cecilia and Sharibet directed Raymond-Soleil down onto one knee. Menelaos felt the maelstrom of the young djinn's emotions as the horned crown touched his brow: recognition of timeless rightness; buoyant triumph at defeating death again; discomfort from the ill-fitting weight of the crown; a surge of grief similar to Menelaos's own for those Apkallu still Lost.

Raymond-Soleil rose to his feet and opened his arms exultantly. "Time alters everything save the bonds we share together. It is good to meet again!"

"It is good to meet again!" the assembled kin responded.

Basil and Leila, the Protectors of the House in Constantinople, knelt before Sharibet as she said, "Receive again your Crowns of Service to the House." When they stood, crowned with gold, cheering erupted as the family acknowledged two of their own who had been Transformed into djinni.

Then Sharibet lifted the shining electrum crown. "You are my children's children, and I will not forsake you to the end of the world. I am called Sharibet in this age, but my True Name is Ersh-erib. This is the crown of my motherhood." She set the diadem upon her night-dark hair.

"Mother! Mother! Remember us!"

As the lowest ranked of the Apkallu, Menelaos was next. He found his crown and lifted it, reciting the familiar litany: "Time alters everything save the bonds we share together. You have known me as Menelaos of Pergamon, but remember

this: my True Name is Ninshubur, and my crown is the Crown of the Tree of Truth."

He placed it on his head as the crowd shouted, "Ninshubur! The Tree of Truth! Queen of the East! We sing your praises, Ninshubur!"

Next came Cecilia's consort Horst, a blond giant who chose the Crown of the Fields. The crowd laughed and cheered. "Lord of the Fields! Giver of beer!"

Then jasmine-scented Anna claimed her Crown. "Ninharsag! Queen of the Mountains!"

Honorio chose the Crown of Earth and Water. The assembled kin hailed her: "Enki! Father Ea! Lord of Earth and Water! We sing your praises!"

Honorio's twin brother Marcus, radiating his usual complacency, claimed the Crown of Air. "Father Enlil! Lord of the Air! It is good to meet again!" cried the crowd.

Then it was Cecilia's turn, and the hall fell momentarily silent as she raised the Crown of the Underworld. Then came the murmured acknowledgment as she donned her crown: "Ereshkigal Undying! Queen of the Underworld! We sing your praises!"

Cecilia pointed to the row of bearers. Five Crowns of Divinity sat unclaimed upon their pillows. "Tonight, we rejoice at Finding one of the Apkallu. But too many still are Lost. We who wear our crowns walk the earth knowing our True Names. But the Crown of the Moon, the Crown of the Bull, the Crown of Fire, the Crown of the Shepherd, and the Crown of the Vines await their wearers. I will not rest until all the Lost are Found. May we meet again."

"May we meet again," the kin responded, still subdued.

Menelaos slipped behind the bearer of his crown as Sharibet raised her arms. Beside her stood the senior captain of the House of the Rose's merchant fleet. He bore a pillow like the others, except that his burden was still covered.

Sharibet stripped the cloth away to reveal a horned Crown of Divinity, black with millennial grime, riven into two pieces.

"This is the Shattered Crown, which once was the crown of Heaven, the crown of the Cursed One, the Destroyer. Let her be forgotten!"

"LET HER BE FORGOTTEN!" came the ugly response.

The crown accused Menelaos like an empty eye socket. In his lifetime as Ninshubur, after the Flood, Innana the Queen of Heaven had been allowed to return from her thousand-year exile. Ninshubur had served Innana, fought for her, loved her. Then she tried to destroy the world again. He had turned against Inanna, and the House had not only forgiven him his sins, but raised him to Apkallu after she was cast out.

The bearer of the Shattered Crown bowed, face averted.

Sharibet uttered the final refrain: "Whosoever finds one of the Lost Apkallu and brings him home again shall gain a Crown of Service and everlasting life. Whosoever aids the Cursed One shall share the same damnation. *Let her be forgotten.*"

The hall was completely silent until Sharibet covered the cursed crown. When she nodded, the musicians started a song with a melancholy motif.

The djinni returned their crowns, and the bearers filed out of the hall to return the sacred objects to their traveling chests.

When the song ended, Sharibet called, "It is good to meet again!"

The clan responded as one, "May we meet again!"

Menelaos relaxed. The Appointing ceremony was over—and they had all survived. As the musicians started a cheerful tune, women left and returned with large platters of lamb on beds of rice.

The djinni retired to a small room behind the dais, and proceeded to divest themselves of their ceremonial garb. There, attendants cleaned their faces of the ochre and carefully folded the Garments of Divine Kingship.

Raymond-Soleil, still bedazzled, pliantly followed directions to raise and lower his arms, and to step into a clean pair of braies. All his attention was directed inward.

Dressed again in his formal clothes, Menelaos thanked his attendant and went to join the banquet.

* * * *

In his absence, the great hall had been set up for a feast in the ancient style, with many low tables and large, colorful cushions scattered for seating. Despite the heaping trays of delicacies—tiny roasted birds, tender stewed rabbit with vegetables, grilled fish, onion tarts, stuffed olives, sugared almonds, spiced honeycakes, and marchpane novelties—few of the kin were eating, or even sitting, though many of them were drinking lightly watered wine and thick barley beer.

With the members of the House of the Rose widely dispersed throughout Europe, around the Mediterranean, North Africa, Asia Minor, and around the Black Sea, there were too many greetings to be made, too many stories to hear, too many relatives eager to see and embrace them, too many events to catch up on.

The djinni circulated as well, greeting old souls born into new bodies since their last meeting, and exchanging news with the heads of the various Houses. Menelaos caught sight of Sharibet in one corner, surrounded by visiting kinswomen, many of them presenting their babies and young children to her. Looking immensely pleased with herself, as she always did on these occasions, Sharibet dispensed blessings laced liberally with smiles and kisses for her descendents.

When he finally collapsed on a cushion at a table already occupied by the other djinni, Menelaos reached for a glass pitcher and gratefully poured himself a goblet of animal blood. As he lifted it to his lips, he felt Honoria's hand slide around his waist—and under his tunic.

Her cream-and-copper beauty was now adorned with a gown of gold-embroidered green silk and a golden hairnet beaded with pearls. Menelaos reluctantly halted her wandering hand before she scandalized those guests still sober enough to notice, but he couldn't stop himself from stealing a kiss, all sweet assurance and greedy hunger.

—God's teeth, Honoria!—Marcus said, mind-to-mind. Protector of the House in Alexandria, Honoria's twin was a taller, stockier version of his sister.—It's been nine hundred years in this life alone! Aren't you tired of him yet?—Why so

jealous, Marcé? Has Sharibet grown weary of you? Or you of her?—Honorio shot back.

Marcus had the grace to look abashed as Sharibet turned toward him, her expression closed, waiting.

Was his brother-in-law's long consortship with Sharibet finally coming to an end? Through their link, Menelaos knew that Honorio was wondering the same thing.

Marcus shuttered his mind, hastily changing the subject. "Considering the current political situation, I was wondering why you didn't move Raymond-Soleil's Appointing from Béziers." Marcus's smooth russet hair shone against his high-collared gold velvet tunic as he leaned forward, planting his elbow on a cushion. "Why has a Crusade been declared against the County of Toulouse?"

His question met a silence filled with worry. Then Honorio said, for those visiting djinni unfamiliar with local politics. "At first the northerners wanted to arrest Count Raymond because everyone believes he ordered the murder of the Papal Legate sent last year to suppress the Cathar heresy."

Marcus frowned.

Menelaos said, "In any case, Count Raymond has now sworn he's opposed to heresy, has performed public penance and has been reconciled to the Church. I believe the Crusaders, having accomplished their aim, will shortly return to their homes."

"Without booty?" Raymond-Soleil asked, skeptically. "I think that the Crusaders will find someone else to hunt for profit."

"Not us, I hope!" said Leila, Protector of Constantinople. Her delicate bones, black wiry hair and light brown skin marked her as one of Sharibet's descendants, but her eyes were unusually dark, with only streaks of amber. She refilled her goblet with spiced wine and her hands trembled.

Basil reached to help her support the flagon. He was Leila's consort and co-Protector of Constantinople, sinewy and muscular, with fair skin and a dark beard already shadowing his clean-shaven cheeks and chin. His bare arms were decorated with Thracian tribal tattoos. Like the others at the table, Basil was a djinn. But he was not Apkallu, and even after nearly a thousand years in service to the House, he seldom spoke in their company.

"No, I think the new Papal Legate needs a victory over the Cathars. Their numbers are increasing, and they don't tithe to Rome," Honoria observed.

Menelaos added, reassuringly: "Leila, the latest news had the Crusaders headed for Carcassonne, forty-five miles from here. That's why we decided not to move Raymond-Soleil's Appointing to another House. But if they come here ... Béziers is strongly fortified and garrisoned. On top of this hill, we could hold out for months—and Crusading vows only last for forty days."

"But Crusaders are so unpredictable! It's been less than five years since they sacked our city." Mind-to-mind, Leila released a flood of ugly memories: armored invaders in the streets of Constantinople, urged on by Venetians eager to see their chief economic rival fall; two deadly sieges; nine-hundred-year-old walls breached; fire and rapine; the House

burning as priceless art and books and treasures were looted...

Basil put his arm around her shoulders. "The house burned, but we kept the family safe."

"And you could bargain with the Venetians," Marcus interjected. "But heretic-hunting Crusaders..."

Leila shuddered visibly.

To lighten the moment, Honoria teased, "And there I thought you had brought your entire wardrobe along with you just to impress us provincials."

"I'll never leave anything behind again," Leila vowed.

Sharibet, just coming up to the table, leaned down to take Leila's hand. "Many times we must leave things behind. But never leave my children. Things can be replaced, but those lost to us are not always found."

* * * *

Two hours before dawn, while the celebration in the great hall was still going strong, the djinni gathered at a large window on the third story to bid Leila and Basil farewell.

"I wish you could stay longer," Honoria said, embracing the dark-haired djinniah.

"We shouldn't, not with a Crusade nearby," Leila replied. "Basil and I will prepare our ship. Our kin—and my wardrobe—can follow when the gates open."

Basil nodded. "I'm sorry. May we meet again!"

Menelaos checked the street below to be sure no one was spying on them. "All clear."

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Leila and Basil launched themselves into the air.—May we meet again!—

As the rest of the djinni returned to the feast, Menelaos took Honoria's hand.—At last! Shall we retire?—Not to rest, surely?—Her smile was wicked.

—Of course not—

A mental shout from Basil interrupted him.—Beware! There's an army at your city's gate.—

Chapter Two

"O Death the Healer, scorn thou not, I pray, To come to me: of cureless ills thou art The one physician. Pain lays not its touch Upon a corpse."—Aeschylus (525-456 BC)

—Should we return to defend the House?—Basil asked.

—No!—Menelaos replied, instantly taking command as the local Protector. Least of the Apkallu he might be, but he was now responsible for every soul in the House.—Get to your ship and anchor it where the mouth of the Orb River meets the Mediterranean. We'll evacuate as many of the family as we can before dawn, then finish after sunset.—

He turned to the group of djinni gathered around him. "Marcus, go to the walls and see what you can tell us about this army. Everyone else, organize the kin to pack the valuables."

The remaining hours of darkness were full of furious action as the djinni ferried two or more of the kin at a time to the waiting ship. But even flying as fast as they dared, they had only removed seventy before dawn lightened the sky, and they had to stop or risk being seen.

Sharibet, Basil, and Leila stayed on the ship to protect the evacuees. Weary after a night of revelry, those kinsmen still in the house watched the dawn blaze over a city besieged.

Through the increasing heat of the morning, Menelaos kept watch from the house's deep doorway. The July sun held Béziers in a gilded fist, baking roof tiles and stone walls until each breath was a foretaste of Hell.

At mid-morning, the church bells announced a town council meeting to discuss the city's options. Menelaos and Isidore, the Master of the House, left to attend at the Town Hall, so new that the pale gold stones of its walls were still unmarred by graffiti. They found the council chamber crowded with townsmen. Pushing their way through, Menelaos spotted a neighbor standing near the councilmen's benches. He took Isidore by the arm and steered him over there.

"The Crusaders have presented a list of known heretics to the Bishop!" whispered the neighbor as they came to stand next to him. "Two hundred twenty-two names!"

"Surely there are many more Cathars than that in Béziers," replied Isidore.

"The names are of the heads of families. That the rest of the family is included is understood."

Menelaos thought of the House's wise policy that its members always outwardly adopt the dominant religion wherever they settled. With the Cathar presence so strong in this region, deciding which religion to align themselves with in Béziers had not been easy.

Many here in the County of Toulouse believed in the Cathar doctrines of two coequal divine principles which struggled against each other through eternity: one evil, trapping pure souls in Satan-created matter; and one good, the immaterial savior Jesus. With an active clergy—the Goodmen—less venal and corrupt than the Catholic priests, the Cathars had gained much political power. After much debate, the elders had decided that Catholicism gave the

House of the Rose in Béziers an advantage in their business dealings outside the region. It seemed that it might also protect them.

The hubbub in the high-ceilinged council chamber stilled as the mayor pounded a staff sharply against the stones of the floor. He was a portly man, the head of a successful shipping firm, but he looked shrunken this morning, as if a sudden illness had melted the flesh from his bones.

"Fellow citizens," he began. "This morning, the town council met with Abbot Arnaud Amaury, the Papal Legate in command of this Crusade. The Abbot informed us that he wants those citizens named on his list arrested as heretics and turned over to the Crusaders for 'reconciliation' to Holy Mother Church. And their goods and properties confiscated."

"Who's on the list?" someone called out amidst a mutter of protest.

The town clerk, elderly and tonsured, unrolled a long piece of parchment. A tense hush fell as he began to read off names.

Menelaos took the opportunity to contact Marcus, mind-to-mind. His brother-in-law was currently stationed on the wall by the city gate, observing the Crusader camp that had sprung up on the plain to the east. Through Marcus's ears and mind came the sounds of horses whinnying, of men singing fighting songs to muster their enthusiasm for battle. Tents were being raised, and banners waved bravely against the cloudless sky.

The routine of an army settling in for a siege had been familiar to Menelaos since Alexander the Great had conquered

the island city of Tyre. Menelaos had been a young man then, mortal ... and on the outside of the wall.

"Isidore de la Rose," called the clerk, recalling Menelaos with a jerk from his wordless communion with Marcus.

Isidore clutched at Menelaos's arm. "But we're Catholics!"

"We're known as wealthy—and uncanny," Menelaos retorted, glad they had already started the evacuation.

The clerk finished reading the names, and the mayor spoke again. "One further thing—the Papal Legate has offered all good Catholics of this city an amnesty. If you are Catholic and your name is not on this list, you may depart—and I quote—this 'pit of heresy' with whatever you can carry, and nothing more."

Derisive laughter, given volume by nerves, greeted this proposal.

The mayor pounded his staff against the flagstones for silence. "We must vote. Who wishes to hand over our friends, our neighbors, our fellow citizens to these vile northerners?"

Silence.

Menelaos was heartened. The citizens of Béziers stood united against the invaders.

"Who thinks that our stout walls can keep out the enemy until their forty days of service are up?"

"AYE!" The assembled citizens roared as one.

* * * *

When Isidore and Menelaos returned to the House of the Rose, they found a scene of orderly but frantic activity. The mood became more strained when Isidore related the

outcome of the town meeting, but everyone returned to their tasks with increased dedication. They would be ready to quit Béziers by sunset.

Honorias, dusting her hands together and taking a break from her labors, came to Menelaos where he stood watch in the deep front doorway. She leaned her hip against his, then raised her hand to guard her eyes against the glare, the back of her hand brushing his cheek in a quick caress.

"We can protect our own ... and we have somewhere else to go," he reminded her, kissing the top of her head.

As the noon hour passed, the volume of noises from beyond the city walls increased.

—What's happening?—he bespoke Marcus, who was still watching from one of the guard towers.

—Townsmen have just gone out to sortie against the Crusaders. Very brave of them, but I wish they would close the—

A howl—like the baying of a Roman crowd at a chariot race—rose up from beyond the walls, interrupting Marcus's account. The whine of arrows and the wild pealing of church bells that followed told of fighting begun in earnest.

Marcus opened his mind, and in a moment all the djinni saw what Marcus saw: dusty streets and ramparts crowded with citizens gawking at the army. A thousand-handed monster battering through the half-open gate. Townsmen jumping down from the walls, shoving through the press of their fellows, trying to run away. The first wave of Crusaders pushing into the city, killing as they ran...

"They've breached the gates!" Menelaos shouted for the benefit of the kin.

Marcus left the tower and ran back toward the house and family.—Those banner-bearing fools forgot to secure the gates behind them! They charged out, shot an arrow or two, hit a camp follower—and the common soldiers went mad!—Not the knights?—Honorias asked urgently.

—No! They're still sitting on their arses! But it won't be long until they realize the foot soldiers have found a way in.—

Everyone gathered in the ground-level storerooms. There, Menelaos summarized what Marcus had told him, adding: "We'll defend the house with a *glamour*. They won't attack us if they can't remember that we're here. If they get through, take sanctuary in the nearest church. Leave the heavy goods. Take only your assigned bundles."

The members of the House, mortal and djinni alike, knew exactly what to do. They had all done it many times before. Menelaos had their title documents, legal contracts, and special dispensations in a wallet under his clothing. Cecilia and Honorias stowed coins in pouches under their skirts. The senior kinswomen bore the most valuable household goods. Anna made sure the young maids stayed calm. The children had been the first to be evacuated. Cecilia's consort Horst, Raymond-Soleil, and the remaining men each took a pack crammed with vials of precious perfume essence. That left one pack for Marcus when he returned.

While the preparations were being made, Honorias rushed upstairs to the rooms she shared with Menelaos. When she reappeared, she was wearing her sword, belted around a

plain gown with a shortened hem. Menelaos felt a pang as he watched her descend the stairs and enter the storeroom with bowed head, clutching an armful of her precious books.

She knelt to wrap the volumes in oiled cloth, her face as sad as if she handled the burial shroud of a beloved friend. He did not intrude on her thoughts. He didn't need to. In their long years of marriage it was as if they had grown a single heart in two bodies. He felt as sorrowful as she to see their peaceful years in this prosperous, liberal city ending in fire and slaughter. He knelt beside her, helping her tie the package with stout cord.

When that small task was completed, he helped her to her feet, then buckled on his own sword. Then they stood, hand-in-hand, just inside the entrance to the House.

Now there was nothing more to do but wait. Wait for any word from the lookouts in the upstairs windows, wait for Marcus, wait for the invaders to show up in the street.

—I'm almost home,—Marcus reported, his mental voice steady though he must be panting by now from his race across the city.

Honorias kissed Menelaos.—Have I told you, of late, how much I love you, dearest husband?—

As rapid footsteps approached, she opened the door, and Marcus shot through it. He sagged against the wall, gasping, then dashed the sweat from his face and accepted a cup of water from the pregnant Jehanne.

"What is she still doing here?" Marcus demanded when he could speak again. "I thought we evacuated all the mothers!"

"She wouldn't leave me." Raymond-Soleil came up and offered Marcus a towel.

"Fool girl," Marcus grumbled. "It's not an army out there, it's a mob," he told the family members waiting for his news. "They're killing everyone ... women, children ... Gods, I hope we can hold out until sunset!"

A warning whistle sounded from the third-story lookout.

As arranged, the djinni took up their stations at the entrances to the house. Using their powers, they cast a *glamour* of forgetfulness. No mortal who came near the House would remember where he intended to go, or what he came for.

But the *glamour* could not block the sounds of carnage in the street outside—shouting, screaming, swords cleaving flesh—or the smell of freshly spilled blood, and the acrid whiff of smoke.

One of the upstairs lookouts raced down the stairs. "They set fire to the house next door! And it's blowing this way!"

"Damn!" Menelaos swore. "If it reaches us, fight the fire for as long as you can. We need more time."

"Shall we form a shield of air?" Raymond-Soleil asked.

"It's no proof against fire," Marcus shuddered with a memory he did not share. "Just the opposite."

Anna, ruthlessly practical, said,—Let's fly away now!—And abandon Jehanne and the rest who remain?—Raymond-Soleil objected.—What of your oaths, Anna?—

"We should go to the Cathedral," Honoria said. "It's more defensible than the Church of the Madeleine if the Crusaders break sanctuary."

"They will," Raymond-Soleil predicted. "They did at Mainz, against Jews. Even the bishop's house wasn't safe." He shared a brief flash of memories from a lifetime two centuries ago, when he had tried—and failed—to protect one of the Houses of the Rose on the Rhine River.

"But how do we get all of us through these streets?" Menelaos asked. Even with the other djinni present, they were still outnumbered by the invaders.

"We should cast a glamour to make ourselves inconspicuous—if not completely invisible," Cecilia suggested. "It will take a great deal of power, but we have no choice."

"Let's go! The roof is burning," Honoria said.

A moment later, the upstairs watchers tumbled down the stairs, choking and coughing.

Honoria rapidly communicated the new plan to the family, concluding. "...and we must be completely silent as we walk, or the illusion will be broken!"

Cautiously they opened the door to a world gone mad. Armsmen and camp followers dashed by, festooned with jewelry, silks, and furs despite the infernal heat. In a spray around the front door of the house across the way, their neighbors—the whole family, from grandmother to the youngest grandchild—lay dead, cut to pieces. Drifts of dried lavender buds covered them, blowing from broken bales inside their storeroom.

The djinni formed a cordon around the kin, while Honoria counted heads. Seven djinni and thirty-six mortals present. "Go!"

They started uphill toward the bulk of St. Nazaire cathedral, a tight, purposeful knot in the smoky, stove-hot chaos. However, even the djinni's preternatural power could not keep them completely invisible in the crooked little street.

"Hoi! More heretics!" bellowed a crossbowman leaning out the upstairs window of a nearby house.

Menelaos heard the cracks and thrumming whistles of launched crossbow bolts and he turned, desperately spreading a protective shield of air over the family as far as his aura would reach. Sunlight made his eyes burn, and he couldn't see exactly where the bolts were coming from.

And then he felt one, punching through his unprotected forehead.

There was no pain, but he couldn't blink. He couldn't lift his arm to test the damage. He couldn't see his aura. He couldn't feel anything anymore.

The houses tilted around him and the sun-bright sky, oddly divided, filled his vision.

Honorina shrieked. Dread filled him. What would happen to his family now? Then all his thoughts vanished like smoke in the shimmering air.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Saturday, 15th of the Moon Safar, 647 AH, (May 29, AD 1249)—Forty years later

Menelaos's heart thumped hard in remembrance of terror.

—Can you feel it?—Sharibet's breath tickled his throat and ran cool into his damp hair. She rode him urgently, then lowered her mouth to tease at the wounds her teeth had

made in his skin as she joined with him, flesh to flesh, blood to blood.

Menelaos moved his hips. Through their bond, he felt a sensation like delicious lightning flashing along *her* nerves.

—Good, good, feel it.—Like a red-hot drill, her power forced open the way to his memories of that last terrible afternoon in Béziers:

He comes back to himself gradually. He can hear, but he still can't feel anything, or move. Someone has closed his eyes, Each breath brings him the stink of fear, fire, and death. They're indoors again. A weaver's house? He can smell wool.

"—secure the shutters and Anna, go find a blanket so we can move him more easily." Honoria's voice is strained.

"He has an arrow in his head!" Anna's voice sounds close to his ear. "It's—"—Obscene, unnatural.—She tries to censor her thought, but Menelaos, unable to shut her thoughts from his, concurs.

"Get that blanket, girl!" Cecilia snaps at one of the maids. Deema scurries.

—*Lady!—Menelaos strains to reach Cecilia.—Leave me. Get the others to safety.—The effort cleaves his head with pain.*

"We don't desert our own," Cecilia says.

"My love," Honoria says. "We're going to lift you now."

—No! Don't—But they ignore him. One of the djinni grabs his legs and another his shoulders. Darkness explodes.

"Can you feel it? I know you can," Sharibet encouraged him.

But the terror and the pain of that last moment of consciousness had already evaporated, as if he were a cracked amphora, leaving behind only the dregs of a pounding headache like a hangover.

Sharibet touched his mind again, and his ardor withered in a white-hot flash of pain, as it always did.

She withdrew instantly, and the agony receded. He became aware of the chill in her shadowed chamber and how it turned the sweat of their exertion clammy between them.

He released a shuddering breath and tried vainly to recall his arousal. Needing the physical intimacy with him to exert her power, Sharibet stroked him with clever fingers, urging him to respond, but to no avail. Eventually, she rolled off him and tucked herself close along his side. Her breasts were soft warm spots against his skin. "Poor Menelaos. I distracted you."

He had long since stopped trying to edge away from her. He lay utterly still.

"You did feel it?"

"You know I did," he admitted, sighing. This was futile, and had been futile the last thousand times they had tried it. How many more times must he humiliate himself before she acknowledged defeat? "It's gone again, as if it never happened to me."

"But they're *your* memories!" she said. "Why can't you..." She pushed him away, and he rose from the pillowed divan.

At her dressing table, he toweled himself dry with a linen sheet, hoping to wipe away her scent although he could not expunge the record of her presence in his mind.

The houses tilt around him and the sun-bright sky, oddly divided in half, fills his vision.

His heart beat calmly now. The memories of that day had become as flat and unreal as faded frescoes.

He dropped the towel to the patterned tile floor, and picked up a wax-capped pottery jug from among her cosmetics and perfume bottles. Breaking the seal released ghosts of citrus and iron. He poured preserved sheep's blood into two delicate glass goblets from Murano—gifts from Cecilia during his long convalescence—and brought one to Sharibet.

She drank thirstily, restoring the strength she had expended on his behalf. When the glass was empty, she rolled the stem between her fingers, her amber gaze fixed on the whirling surface as if into an oracle.

"After all these years, why do you still fight me?"

He downed his own portion, wondering how to answer. In the forty years since Béziers, she had inflicted every remedy learned in millennia of medical experience, hoping to heal the injuries that had stripped him of all his powers and faculties.

And he had healed. He could speak now, and walk. He could remember nearly sixteen hundred years of his present lifetime, and more than four millennia of previous lives. He had the use of some of his powers. "It is not my intention to fight you, Sharibet. But—"

"But you have made it into a habit." She grimaced and handed him her empty goblet.

He set both filmed glasses on a tray by the door, his hand steady as she watched him. What would she try next?

Sharibet sat up, put her feet wide apart, and patted the divan between her thighs. "Come here. Sit down."

He obeyed, but sat on the tiled floor, facing away from her. The wooden frame of the divan cut into his lower back. She began to comb his hair with her fingers.

"Checking for lice?" he asked, dryly.

"Hmmm." She pinched his scalp, then brought her pressed-together thumb and forefinger close to his right eye. "Aha!"

He shuddered with disgust.

She laughed, opening her fingers to show them empty, and swiftly kissed his ear. "You felt that!"

He would have broken away from her, but her legs wrapped around his chest and her hands splayed against his pectorals. She held him hard against the divan until he stopped struggling. Then she parted his hair down the center of his head. "I can't get used to it." She combed her fingers along the line of the old injury, singing a carpet-weaver's rhythmic tune. "Black, white, black, white, black, white..."

He leaned his head back against her and wished she would stop playing with his hair, damaged as the rest of him.

"It was a blessing that you survived."

"No. Cecilia should have let me die. Crippled, impotent, blind—what use am I to the House now?" The arrow that had shattered his skull, cut his connection to his memories, and made the mind-to-mind, aura-to-aura intimacy of djinni lovemaking unbearably painful, had also stolen his Seer's Eyes.

How could he carry out the most important duty of a Protector—finding the lost souls of the House—when he could no longer see the auras surrounding every living creature?

After a mortal lifetime of healing, he was still ruined. It would have been kinder to send him to the Underworld, so that he might be Found again, then Raised and Named to restore his memories and abilities to a new, undamaged body.

The only remedy left...

She made his head shake 'no.' "She loves you, Menelaos. As I do. And you know you survived because of your willfulness. Stop fighting me!" Without warning, she brought her mouth to a spot behind his ear and bit through his skin with her sharp front teeth, sucking hard to raise the blood, initiating the next round of memory restoration. "Stop fighting me!"

"I'm not fighting!" he responded. But he wanted to throw her out of his mind, toss her onto the floor, and stamp on her like a giant spider to break her hold on him.

"Of course you aren't." She poised, ready to open his memories again.

He felt them waiting for him, gathered by her power. And suddenly, he was afraid. "Let's stop now," he pleaded.

"If we did that, you'll never remember what happened."

"Maybe I don't want to know!" *Maybe I already do.*

His pain stabbed both of them. She let him go. Her kiss left a patch of dwindling coolness on the already-healing bite. She pressed her cheek against his hair. "I understand. Honoria and I were friends, and Marcus—Marcus and I—"

He flailed, submerged in her memories: intertwined limbs, fevered endearments, caresses mirrored and felt as one...

Coldly he closed the link between them and strove for distance. "Do what you must, then. I don't care."

She withdrew to the other side of the divan, veiling her face behind an opulent fall of dark rippling hair. "Leave me. Come back when you're ready."—Come back when I'm ready.—

He winced, stood, nodded politely, and departed.

After a bath he retired to his rooms. He looked at the dawn breaking through his latticed windows, and decided he would walk to the bazaar, and for a few hours exchange Sharibet's unchanging house for the unpredictable mortal world, where at least things happened now, not hundreds of years ago.

* * * *

But the sights, smells, and bustle of the marketplace were only a temporary respite. When Menelaos returned to Dar al-Warda in the early afternoon, Sharibet awaited him in her room, bathed, hair braided, dressed in her costliest robe in preparation for what lay ahead.

Menelaos removed his robes, folding them neatly. Then he knelt on the divan and bowed his head.

She raised his forearm to her mouth so that she might drink and open the connection between them, drawing him down to the cushions and into her body and mind.

The present dissolved in an onslaught of images and sensations nearly a half-century old as she began extricating the last set of his memories from the prison of his injury.

* * * *

Is this the Underworld, this sense of floating, bodiless, in eternal darkness? But why is it so noisy? And why does it smell like smoke?

He wakes to the stench of it, coughing. Instantly the dizzying feeling of motion stops. Is a hand touching his face?

—Beloved, can you hear me?—Honorias asks.—Stop coughing!—

—Honorias! Kill me now. Don't let the House be harmed because of me!—As he starts to convulse, bands of air close around his chest, stopping the helpless spasms. A wet cloth covers his face. She knows exactly how long to hold him still before she lets him breathe again.

—We're near the Church of the Madeleine.—Through Honorias's eyes and a haze of pain he sees a gang of men-at-arms being directed by a mounted knight. They are crucifying Father Andre to the church doors, while men of the parish stand at the windows and fight futilely to defend the packed church.

Anna says in horror, "They're killing Catholics!"

Honorias projects swift memories: the Goths, centuries ago, massacring the city of Milan to punish its citizens for their rebellion.—Who will dare to harbor heretics after this?—

They resume their creeping, silent ascent towards the cathedral. He is cold, so cold ... The world vanishes in a blizzard of black snowflakes.

He wakes again inside the stuffy gloom of St. Nazaire. The thick-columned nave is packed with refugees from the

massacre outside. There are empty places in his soul. He reaches out weakly—and senses only four other djinni.

Where is Raymond-Soleil? And—oh, gods—Honorio?

Cecilia, her soul frozen with grief, says:—All the mortal family made it safely to this sanctuary.—As if that would ease his anguish.

Marcus is outwardly silent, but his mind shrieks as he experiences his twin sister's death, over and over.

All too soon, the invaders batter down the thick oaken doors at the front of the church and push into the jammed, cacophonous cathedral. Like mowers in a field, the men-at-arms cut down the close-packed bodies. Corpses crumple like stalks of wheat under scythes, and the stink of violent death rises like the screams echoing from the stone vaults. The citizens of Béziers shove and trample each other to escape. But the fortified Romanesque church has no other exits, and the small arched windows are too high overhead for mortals to reach.

Cecilia bends protectively over Menelaos, making a supreme effort to cloak him in invisibility. Her glamour cannot stretch to hide the other members of the family.

The remaining djinni fight. Their strength to cast a glamour has dwindled. They kill many of the attackers, using both swords and their powers, but they cannot kill them all. One by one, they are cut down. Through the bond that joins them all, the bond he cannot break, Menelaos experiences each of his fellow Protector's deaths as an agonizing flash of soul escaping flesh, burning through his aura like missiles of Greek fire.

Although they too fight bravely, the mortals of the House of the Rose are slaughtered alongside their friends and neighbors.

The youngest maid tries to hide behind an altar, but she is pulled out. She screams for a long time while armsmen take turns raping her. Then she, too, is silenced.

Cecilia trembles violently in the niche behind a statue of the Virgin, holding Menelaos in her arms. Individual armsmen who venture too close to her simply fall dead. Her glamour of invisibility never falters, even when the soldiers loot bodies, drink the altar wine, and steal the silver candlesticks.

Menelaos does not receive the coup-de-grâce he craves. He remains helpless but aware as minutes drag by like centuries.

—It's twilight, Menelaos.—Cecilia's mental voice startles him out of a horrid torpor.—We'll leave soon.—

Abruptly a voice echoes through the church. "Burn it. Burn it all."

"But, my lord—"

"Obey, damn you! This whole nest of heretics must be put to the torch."

"Yes, my lord."

The knight stalks away, his gilded spurs ringing against the bloodstained cathedral pavement, and the armsmen begin to heap looted furniture and tapestries against the doors and the carved wooden rood screens, splashing the scarred and splintered oak with lamp oil. They use the flames from the vigil lamps to kindle a blaze, and black smoke quickly fills the defiled space.

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by Michaela August

Concealed by the smoke, Cecilia flies up to the clerestory windows, and in an explosion of glass, escapes into the darkening sky.—My beloved Apkallu brothers and sisters,— she mourns, rising high above the burning city, following the smoke to safety. Below her, red sparks rise toward the new bright stars, flames reflected in the circling river. And every spark flickering into ash is a soul set free.—Lost again.—Her tears fall on Menelaos's face like burning rain.

She shifts his weight in her arms, jarring the crossbow bolt still embedded in his forehead, and night swallows him.

* * * *

Menelaos awakens in a ship's cabin smelling of herbs and roses. Cecilia and a mortal physician are at his bedside, and he senses Sharibet, Basil and Leila nearby.

"He lives now, Lady Cecilia," the doctor, abd al-Baqee, says in the Arabic of the Cairo House. "But, in my experience, the extraction of such a bolt often causes greater damage than the penetration. For the sons of man, that is. Djinni like yourselves..." He bows. "Rarely seek the aid of a physician."

"He is awake now," Cecilia says, a vast sadness in her words. "Menelaos, do you consent?"

—Remove it.—Even if the treatment fails, he knows that death is not the end.

—If you pass through the Gates of the Underworld, I promise I shall find you again. I swear it, by the blood which binds us!—Aloud, she says: "He consents, physician. Perform the surgery."

*Pain like a thunderbolt splits his head, and then ...
Nothing.*

* * * *

Menelaos rose from Sharibet's bed and stood by her dressing table. Still linked, he shared her turmoil of reawakened grief for the deaths of her kin. Even though by now their ancient souls had been born again into new bodies, many were still missing.

Sharibet's grief was a torrent, eroding his sense of himself-as-Menelaos. Deliberately, he broke the connection between them. All his memories had now been returned to him. He was as healed as he would ever be.

"Sharibet." He interrupted her weeping. "Let me return to my duties as a Protector of the House. I've been idle too long. Let me prove whether I can still be of use."

She wiped her eyes, but her glance was shrewd though the shining remnants of tears. "There are goods in Syria that have been waiting in a warehouse because of this new Crusade by the Frankish king. Will you go and bring them here safely?"

"At your command, Lady." He told himself that he had wanted this, but he had not really expected her to acquiesce so readily. *Soon I will know, one way or the other, whether I am fit. And if I am not ... There is one last remedy.*

Chapter Three

"...the Saracens seeing the multitude of the Christians who were landing ... departed, taking their women and children and carrying off everything movable. They fled from the other side of the city by little gates which they had made long before. Some escaped by land, others by sea, abandoning their city filled with supplies of all kinds ..."—*From a letter written by Guy, a knight of the household of the viscount of Melun, on the surrender of Damietta, June 6, 1249*

Damietta, Egypt Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist Sunday, August 29th, AD 1249

Shadows gather in the corners of the high-ceilinged room. The sun presses against the closed shutters, scattering needles of hot light over the blue-tiled floor.

She reclines on a low bed of cushions, a breeze brushing the bare skin of her back and shoulders. Rose perfume thickens the air until each breath is like a swallow of honey. All around the bed, translucent muslin curtains billow like mist.

He sits next to her, as naked as she, bent over the lute in his lap. She can't see his face.

"What will you play for me?" She reaches to trace a henna-tipped finger down his nape, where his dark hair curls a little.

He shivers and arches his neck. A run of notes sounds, sweet and light as a bird's laughter. His quick smile glimmers, then he puts his lute aside. "Now that you're awake, I can think of a better diversion than music."

"And what might that be, my lord?" She feigns innocence, but desire beats in her blood.

He pounces on her, laughing joyfully, pushing her back against the cushions until they lie skin to skin, one flesh, one heart, one mind...

Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne woke with a shudder, the dream already fading. *Not again!* he appealed silently to God. He had been having these disturbing dreams for the last four years, ever since his voice had broken.

He closed his eyes tight, willing away the image of the man, whose face he could never quite remember when he woke. Whom he yearned for.

Why was he always a woman in his dreams? That was *wrong*.

The Prime bell clanged from a nearby converted mosque, echoing from the flat-roofed buildings that overhung the narrow street. Michel rose from his hard bed in the squalid little room and pulled open pierced wooden shutters. He took deep breaths of cool, damp air, inhaling the silty scent of the Nile that flowed past Damietta, mingled with the more homely scents of baking bread and horse dung from the street below.

The whitewashed walls of the house across the alley glowed pale under the light of a fat gibbous moon, and a few bright stars still shone in the sliver of predawn sky visible between the houses. The street ran straight to the nearby walls. Looking down its length, Michel could see the tops of the date palms planted outside the city, their fronds spread against the sky like wings. They rustled in the faint breeze

and he grinned as the last vestiges of the dream melted away.

Even if this were the last moment of coolness that he would feel all day, he was still here. In Damietta.

Not in the back-of-beyond hills of his father's Ardennes estate. Not in everyday Ypres, with its gabled houses and churches. Not even in colorful Cyprus.

He was here, in Egypt, and it was just as exotic as the tales had promised. No matter what else might happen, he stood in the land of Pharaoh and Moses and Alexander.

As the monks began chanting Lauds, Michel stepped away from the window, stretched, and took another deep breath. This time, the smells were mundane: the old-cheese whiff of unwashed hosen, the stale reek of a brimming chamberpot, and the stench of sour wine emanating from Roland's open mouth.

Time to discover what his cousin had managed to arrange on his mysterious errand last night.

Roland d'Agincourt still slumbered deeply, curled into a tight ball on his pallet. Only close-cropped hair, as golden as Michel's own, stuck up over the edge of threadbare linen sheets.

Michel shook him.

Roland groaned. "God's Nails, Michou, have you no pity for a wounded man?"

"Oh, yes. I have pity for all the brave knights, their bodies torn limb from limb, their bones crushed, their blood boiled in their martyrdom for the True Faith—"

Eyes still closed, Roland groped along the floor, found something, and threw it at Michel.

Not surprisingly, the slipper missed its target.

Michel laughed, and picked up an earthenware jug from the shelf. "But as for you, cousin, I have no pity. Your wounds were self-inflicted with the fruit of the vine." He sloshed tepid water onto Roland's head. "Look at you, still slug-a-bed when there are noble deeds to be done and Jerusalem to be rescued!"

"We're not in Jerusalem. We're in bloody Damietta," spat Roland, surging up and shaking drops of water from his hair.

"And likely to remain here forever, until the King's brother arrives." Michel set down the jug and settled cross-legged onto the edge of Roland's pallet. "I never thought a Crusade would prove so uneventful."

"Or so expensive." Roland rubbed the wetness from his unshaven face. "But we'll have a chance to prove ourselves to a generous liege lord today."

"We will? That's wonderful!" Michel jumped up and pounded Roland on the back. "Who is this lord? What will we have to do? And exactly how generous is he?"

"Enough! You'll find out later."

"But—Later when? But, Roland—"

"Michou, what did you promise?" Roland growled.

"No questions before breakfast. I beg your pardon!" Michel clamped his teeth together and practiced silence while Roland lit a rushlight, and hunted for his tunic through the heaps of clothing scattered on the floor. Michel's mind raced while they washed their faces, combed their hair, and dressed. Roland

had sounded worried. True, they were nearly penniless, but something else was eating at him. Michel wished he knew what.

His heart rose when Roland directed him to open the two heavy packs leaning against the wall. Carefully they unrolled each piece of armor from its protective leather wrapping. After donning padded rust-stained gambesons, they took turns lacing each other into fitted mail hauberks and braies with chausses for their feet. They tucked the attached mail mitts into their sleeves, shrugged into surcotes embroidered with their devices, and belted on their swords and gilded spurs.

Through it all, Michel kept his promise, though he ached to ask why they needed armor. The Crusade had been stalled for months because of the Nile flood. What was different today? Would there be a tournament? With a melee? Was Roland hoping to win some prize money? God knew they needed it.

When they had answered the call to save Jerusalem from the infidel almost a year ago, Count William of Flanders had paid for their passage to Egypt, but nothing else. They had hoped for some income from the sacking of Damietta, but the inhabitants of the town had fled after the briefest of battles, taking with them most of their valuables.

They had tried begging from Roland's older brother Robert, who served as a knight in King Louis of France's household. He had gotten them lodgings in the town, near where the Queen and her household were staying, but Roland had been annoyed to find that instead of being able to favorably impress a great lord who might accept their oaths of fealty,

they were isolated from the King and the rest of the army, who were camped outside the walls. Michel and Roland were now consorting mostly with footsoldiers and servants, with only an occasional glimpse of the Queen and her ladies.

The last time they had gone to importune Roland's brother, Michel had learned some fascinating new oaths, but Robert hadn't given them a penny.

They buckled on their swords, gathered up shields, and left the room. Still wondering where they were going, Michel followed Roland down the narrow stairs. The sky was paling to silver-gray now. The first trickles of perspiration formed between Michel's shoulder blades as they emerged into the main street. How hot would it get today?

Despite the early hour, a crowd of servants and camp followers jostled one another before the shop where an enterprising soldier had taken over a Saracen bakery. The fragrance of fresh bread set Michel's stomach growling.

Roland shoved through the press of customers, who resisted making way for him—until they saw his sword and armor. He used one of their remaining silver deniers to pay for several small loaves. He wrapped all but two in a sheet of oiled parchment.

Travel rations! Michel guessed.

The bread was peasant fare, brown and chewy, but it was still warm as he bit into it. As he winced at the occasional bit of gravel baked into the dough, Roland began negotiating with a young woman standing near the bakery. She had a baby on one hip and the lead line of a milch goat wound around her grimy wrist. Blushing, she offered Roland a crude

earthenware cup of milk. He gave her one of his honey-glazed smiles in return.

Rolling his eyes at his cousin's inevitable flirtation, Michel looked away, and saw that a nearby bench was covered with looted items for sale. He recognized the seller as a servant of the viscount de Melun.

Despite his best intentions, Michel was drawn to look at the displayed hoard. There were long-spouted vessels of brass, necklaces and bracelets strung with turquoise and carnelian beads, a crescent-bladed dagger, and a book whose leather cover was stamped with a pattern of gilt vines. He picked it up and flipped through it, marveling at the brightly-colored miniatures, as fine as anything in a Christian Book of Hours.

"Only ten sous, Sir Knight," the servant said. "It's a real book. Got pictures and all."

Michel hastily dropped it back on the bench and put his hands behind his back. Ten sous was a full week's pay for a lord's vassal. Which he wasn't.

"It's written in the Saracen script," he said. "I couldn't read it, anyway." *But if I owned this book, perhaps someone could teach me...*

The seller blinked. "How can you tell, sir? All those squiggles look the same to me. Never fancied being a cleric, myself." He gave Michel an offensively familiar wink. "Eight sous? You'll get a remembrance of this Crusade for a song."

"Why would I buy someone else's spoils when we haven't even started fighting yet?" Michel told himself that he shouldn't covet a book he couldn't read. He despised having

to pinch every penny until it cried mercy. Although not wealthy, his family was renowned for their good looks, their courage in battle and for their estate in the Ardennes hill country, which produced some of the finest warhorses in Christendom.

He and Roland had started off on this Crusade with two of his father's horses each, destriers trained for battle and smooth-gaited riding palfreys, along with equipment and a small sum for provisions and lodgings. But Michel's palfrey had perished during the voyage to Egypt and over the last year his funds had disappeared coin by coin.

"You drive a hard bargain, Sir Knight." My lord de Melun's servant was still hopeful. "Six sous? Look at all the gold leaf."

Michel's destrier was eating thirty-six sous worth of hay and grain per quarter. He and Roland had counted themselves fortunate when Roland had charmed the Templar Sergeant-Brother Gauthier, one of the Marshall's men, into allowing their horses to be stabled with the Templars' mounts. But right now Michel didn't know where tomorrow's breakfast would come from, much less this quarter's stabling fees.

Feigning a loss of interest, Michel tore himself away from the seductive book and strode away. The seller called after him, but Michel shut his ears and made his way to his cousin.

Roland was still flirting, playfully grabbing for the giggling girl's hand as if to kiss it.

Michel glanced ostentatiously at the sky. "Don't we have an appointment?"

"Of course." Roland made a gallant bow and wiped a rim of goat's milk from his golden-stubbled upper lip. "It's over this way," he said cheerfully.

As they exited the square and began walking down another narrow street, Roland handed Michel the lumpy package of bread, then tied a string of blue faience beads around his neck and tucked them inside his hauberk.

Stung, Michel thought of the beautiful book he had so virtuously resisted purchasing. "Why did you buy that?"

"She said the beads would protect me against evil."

"And it had nothing to do with her being pretty?"

"No!" Roland sputtered. "It was simple Christian charity. She was so thin. And her poor little baby..."

It was unusual for Roland to be so discomfited. Michel couldn't resist prodding. "Everyone knows you can't say 'no' to a pretty face. You could have stayed in Flanders if you hadn't gone sniffing after Mathilde."

"I loved your sister with my whole heart," Roland said with wounded dignity.

"Her husband didn't like it."

"He's just a merchant. What does he know of chivalry—or courtly love?" Roland snapped.

"Didn't he threaten to have you gelded to match your palfrey?" Michel knew he had scored when he saw the flush in his cousin's fair cheeks.

"At least I'm not trying to make friends with every Saracen that crosses our path," Roland retorted. "And if you start praying to brass idols, I swear I'll abandon you to your fate!"

"But Muslims don't pray to brass—" Michel stopped at Roland's smirk. "Besides, what about the Queen's handmaid, Helene? I thought you and she—?"

Roland heaved an exaggerated sigh. "She only favors handsome knights with money."

Michel snickered. "Then your cause is doomed, even if we acquire riches today." Nimble he ducked Roland's half-hearted cuff. "Speaking of which ... now that we've eaten, tell me where we're going." He hefted the wrapped bread by way of emphasis.

Roland gave him a guarded look. "On a raid."

Not a tournament? Michel sorted through his mixed feelings. "I thought the King forbade—but where will we go? Who else is coming? Who's leading?"

"Baron Amalric de Sens," Roland said, answering the last question but refusing to meet Michel's eyes.

Michel made a face. The Baron de Sens was known as a doughty fighter, but there were ugly rumors about his too-close friendship with an English knight. "Are you certain we ought to ... I mean, if de Sens is leading the raid, won't Sir Oswald of Geddington be there too?" At Roland's raised eyebrow, Michel blurted. "I've heard that Sir Oswald—"

"Michou, if we're lucky, this raid will convince my lord de Sens to take us on as replacements for Sir Philippe and Sir Gaston, may God rest their souls." Roland crossed himself as he mentioned two knights recently dead of a bloody flux.

"But what will Robert say? We'll never hear the end of it."

"Isn't any liege better than no liege?" countered Roland.

"But—" Michel set his jaw. Roland was right, of course. They needed a liege. But that did not lessen his discomfort. Vassal to a suspected sodomite ... Michel had a disconcerting flash of caressing the back of a dark-haired man's neck, and squeezed his eyes shut. *No*.

Roland continued in his most persuasive tone. "Of course I'd never force you to do something against your conscience, but if Lord de Sens doesn't accept our oath of fealty..."

"We could join the Templars," Michel suggested, half-serious.

"What! Give up women?" Roland exclaimed, punching Michel on his armored shoulder. "It's no wonder they're so eager to die in battle!" He laughed, then turned serious again. "Cousin, I promised Mathilde I'd take care of you. But without a liege..."

Michel understood. As boys, fostered together in the household of their uncle, Roland had protected him from beatings and worse. At eighteen—well, *nearly* eighteen—Michel was a man now, but Roland was still trying to protect him.

Swallowing his misgivings, Michel forced a smile. "Then let us go and convince my lord de Sens that we will be loyal as dogs in his hall and as fierce as lions in his battles."

Roland clapped him on the shoulder again and they continued walking.

* * * *

They arrived at the Baron de Sens' house, formerly the residence of a wealthy Saracen merchant, just as the first

rays of the sun burned over the horizon. Admitted by a sleepy-eyed servant, they were ushered into a spacious reception room containing a tiled fountain, and given a goblet of wine.

It was sour, tasting like the leather bag in which it had been stored, but Michel gulped it. As he wiped his mouth and hoped for a refill, he drank in the details of the room's exotic furnishings.

High shelves displayed a profusion of pottery vessels, some enameled and gilded. The floor, instead of being flagstones scattered with rushes and herbs, was clean tile. There were no benches or tables or chairs, only a set of wide, low cushions against three walls, and a shelf over intricate supporting arches against the opposite wall, holding several items he could not identify.

When a small, dark-skinned servant refilled his cup, Michel pointed to a mysterious X-shaped object made of filigreed wood inlaid with ivory and lapis. "What is that?"

The servant looked startled. "Sir Michel, that is a stand used to hold the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims."

"Thank you," Michel said, restraining himself from asking further questions. What, exactly, did the Saracens believe? Could all of them read and write? What did the writing mean? How were you supposed to read writing that was all hooks and arcs?

"Last night's wine was better," Roland commented, breaking off just as a group of men entered the room. They bowed, and courtesies were exchanged all around. Michel

retained only the vaguest impressions of the four knights accompanying the Baron.

As for Amalric de Sens, he was tall and lean, with dark hair and a high-bridged nose that had once been thoroughly broken. His companion, the notorious Sir Oswald, seemed a manly enough fellow. Perhaps the gossips had been mistaken. Or perhaps they blamed him unfairly for his girlish complexion and his hair, so pale blond it was almost silver.

Oswald caught Michel's eye and smiled at him. Michel nodded back courteously. Oswald's grin broadened—he was a handsome fellow—and he winked.

Michel was uncomfortably reminded of the way Roland had smiled at the wench selling milk. He felt his cheeks grow hot and he found somewhere else to look, not wanting to give insult but not wanting to play Oswald's game, either.

De Sens and Sir Oswald were attended by their two freckle-faced squires, brothers named Nicolas and Joscelin. Michel had encountered the two young men several times during the journey to Egypt, and did not like them.

Only a year or two younger than Michel, and from a family with larger estates than Michel's family, they failed to give Michel the same respect they gave the other knights, and their insolence, falling just short of the outright insult that might have justified a beating, rankled.

De Sens cleared his throat loudly, and everyone gave him their attention. "Gentle knights, I thank you for attending me this morning. I have discovered that a rich prize is making its way from Port Said to Alexandria: a Saracen trading caravan, loaded with treasure."

Amid the cheers, Michel asked, "My lord, how is this caravan guarded?"

"By a few unarmored Saracens," de Sens answered.

Michel would have asked more, but behind the Baron's back, Roland frowned, and then de Sens unrolled a sheet of parchment and bade them all to come near as he pointed out details on a crudely-drawn map of the Nile Delta.

"The road runs here. We shall ride south along the shore of Lake Manzala. Tonight we will camp here." His scarred forefinger traced a path along the lakeshore. "The caravan is expected to cross by boat, disembarking here in the next three or four days, so we will await them *here*." His finger moved to a point further south on the map, then he straightened up. "We'll ride out after Mass. Meet at the Cairo Gate as soon as you saddle your horses. Bring enough food and drink for three nights. Don't be tardy, or we'll leave without you."

Sir Oswald winked again.

Michel hastily swallowed the last of his wine and followed the others.

* * * *

The papyrus reeds lining the narrow, muddy track rattled softly in the hot wind of late afternoon, as Roland rode in single file behind his cousin and the other knights. He wiped his sweaty forehead, telling himself, *It's just the heat*.

But his heart pounded and his fingers, clenched too-tightly around his palfrey's reins, began to cramp. His war-horse followed, its lead tied to the back of the palfrey's saddle.

Ahead, a long-beaked bird broke from the cover of the reeds and flapped across the path.

"Did you see that, Roland?" Michel called over his shoulder. In the absence of a riding horse, he was forced to ride his destrier, with its bone-jarring gait. "I think it was an ibis! Just like the paintings in the—"

The rest of his words were lost in the jingling of harness as his palfrey, too well-trained to shy, threw back his head and snorted.

Roland frowned in irritation. Michel had just let that bird go, when it might have made tasty eating, roasted over tonight's mid-journey campfire. He had probably forgotten the real purpose of this expedition—finding favor with my lord de Sens.

If only Roland had known that his brother Robert would be accompanying the King, he would never have asked Michel to take the cross with him. At the time, he had thought only of how lonely he would be, so far from home and family ... and Mathilde...

But he was heartily tired of worrying about stabling fees or where their next meal was coming from. A liege, even Amalric de Sens with his questionable reputation, would ensure that Roland need only concern himself with his honor, his horse, and his prowess at arms.

Such as it was.

He shifted uncomfortably in the saddle as his thigh twinged. The tournament wound had been too high for the barber-chirurgeon to amputate his leg, thank all the saints. And thank God that Michel's older sister had been visiting

their aunt, Lady Alys of Scheldehuis. Mathilde's nursing had saved Roland's life when the wound became inflamed. She had ministered to him with cool cloths, warm poultices, and, at the last, hot kisses.

God's Nails, he missed her! But even if he did return home someday, he would never be allowed to see her alone, never touch her again. And he could never acknowledge—Roland sighed, and glumly turned his attention to the green-scummed pools of water interspersing the reeds.

A short time later, de Sens called a halt to water the horses. Roland dismounted and led his horses towards the slick, muddy bank. He kept a sharp eye on the lake's surface, watching for crocodiles.

Michel and his destrier were intermixed with Joscelin and Nicolas, the Baron's and Sir Oswald's squires, so Roland waited alone for the palfrey to finish his noisy drinking. After a few moments, the knight on his left extended a glazed jug.

"Care for some ale?" asked Sir Jean de Pézenas.

"My thanks." Roland drank gratefully. As he wiped his mouth, he studied the other knight. Sir Jean was a strong but battered veteran, definitely the odd man out in this small company.

Roland had no illusions about why he and Michel had been permitted to join de Sens on this raid. The baron liked his vassals skilled, dependent—and good-looking.

Desperate to secure his future, Roland had endured the baron's maladroitness flirting and Sir Oswald's jealous glares last night with gritted teeth and an opaque naiveté guaranteed to elude all but the most determined advances without giving

offense. Our Lady knew he had gained enough experience dodging unwanted advances while a fresh-faced page in a castle filled with lusty fighting men!

"So, what d'ye think, Sir Roland?" Sir Jean's langue d'oïl had the sing-song cadence of southern France.

"About my lord de Sens?"

"D'ye think he truly means to add to his household?"

Two places vacant in my lord de Sens' meinie, and six lordless knights eager to prove themselves. Besides himself, Michel, and Sir Jean, there were Hugues le Bon, a black-haired Breton with a pretty rosy-cheeked face; Gui de Tancarville, a red bull of a man; and Bernard d' Uxelles, handsome with a fastidious manner and brilliant white smile.

Roland noticed again that Sir Jean's front teeth were broken, likely the result of a direct blow to the mouth. Roland ran his tongue surreptitiously over his own as-yet-perfect teeth. "I hope he will," he replied, diplomatically.

No need to be unpleasant to Sir Jean—especially when it did not seem likely that de Sens would accept fealty from such an ugly face. Then again, Sir Jean's skill at arms might counterbalance his lack of looks. "I expect it will depend on how the raid goes." At the thought of facing armed men, the scar on Roland's leg twinged again.

Sir Jean shrugged. He raised the ale jug to his own mouth, swallowed, then said, "If my lord don't take me on, I guess I'll be joining the Templars." He spat. "I won't like spending the rest of my life away from women, I'll tell you. Always fancied having a wife and children, but what well-born lady

would marry a landless knight?" He stopped abruptly and rubbed his mouth.

Roland firmly suppressed any sympathy. "You can always hope for a saddlebag of Saracen gold," he offered, trying to cheer himself, too.

"That I can!" Sir Jean gave a broken-toothed grin as de Sens called to remount.

As Roland settled himself back in his saddle, he wondered how strong a fighter the girl-faced Breton was, and whether Michel, yet untested in battle, would do well. Sir Gui was so big he ought to be slow. Sir Bernard ... might be tough competition.

Too much to worry about. He took a deep breath and remounted.

His cousin was still standing on the riverbank, gawking at something in the greenish-brown waters.

"Don't be a laggard!" Roland shouted, touching spurs to his horse.

"What—? Oh." Michel closed his mouth as the others disappeared around a bend in the road. He leaped into his saddle and the Ardennais destrier broke into a deliberate, ground-shaking trot.

Roland waved impatiently at Michel, forcing his fingers to unclench from the reins. After all, how hard could unarmored caravan guards fight?

* * * *

"Damnation!" de Sens whispered. "They've already landed. We'll have to attack now or lose the chance to surprise them."

Through a break in the twelve-foot high reeds, Michel stared at a cluster of mud-brick hovels. Three large, flat-bottomed boats had been pulled up on the muddy bank of the lake, which was glistening with churned-up footprints of man and beast.

A score of men wearing pale red turbans and loose flowing robes sat on their heels, preparing their noontime meal in the scanty shade provided by a few red-fruited date palms. A few of the villagers—primarily rag-clad women and naked children—hovered around the travelers, proffering baskets of fruit and round, flat loaves of bread.

Mules, their tails swishing away flies, were tethered to stakes between the houses and the shore. Their burdens lay nearby. The scene was framed by papyrus on both sides with the green water of the lake fading into misty distance.

"Don't just stand there, Sir Michel!" Sir Oswald growled, making Michel jump. "Arm yourself!"

Embarrassed at being caught gawking again, Michel pulled up his mail coif, tied the strings of his steel cap, and slipped his hands into his armored mitts. One more check of weapons and girth strap, and he mounted, ready for action.

Roland had handed the reins of his palfrey to a sullen-faced Nicolas, and was scrambling to mount his destrier, his expression hidden by his helm.

Michel took a good grip on his sword hilt while he waited for the signal to charge.

Waiting left him with too much time to think. Michel's confessor, back home, had warned that Michel's questions

were a sin against God's perfect creation. But he couldn't help wanting to know. Like now—

What made his heart hammer? He wasn't a coward, was he? My lord de Sens, Sir Oswald, and the other knights seemed composed as they silently spread out into a ragged line, yet the tang of fresh sweat was strong in the humid air. Perhaps they, too, felt fear but didn't show it.

But why should he be afraid?

Did he fear for his life? He trusted in the Church's promise of a heavenly reward for a blameless life. Or mostly blameless, he had to admit. And anyway, didn't dying on Crusade ensure admission to Heaven?

Then did he fear for his safety? Back home, he had ridden patrols against bandits and hostile neighbors. His armor, his martial skills, and the superb training of his horse were proof against most opponents. It would take the greater skill of a similarly armed knight to injure or cripple him. He did not think that these lightly-armed and unmounted caravan guards could harm him, except through ill-luck or inattention on his part.

So what did he fear?

Over the hum of insects and the songs of birds, a loud spate of conversation broke out amongst the caravaners. Michel tried not to hear the unmistakable cadences of habitual teasing. They were completely unaware of their peril.

The sword in his hand stubbornly dragged toward the earth. A strange realization gripped Michel: his fear was not for himself, but for his enemies.

Then de Sens gave the signal, and the knights charged, bellowing their battle cries. As his destrier pounded toward the village, Michel caught a fleeting glimpse of shocked faces just before the Saracens turned and ran.

Some of them headed for the mules, trying to protect their goods. Some of them ran into the maze of ruined houses. The village women, dragging or carrying children, screamed and stumbled into the dubious safety of the papyrus swamp surrounding the village.

One man stood his ground, defending a laden mule, a staff his only weapon. Michel saw Sir Oswald's arm rise and sweep down, slicing the Saracen's arm through at the shoulder.

Michel's destrier balked when the guard sprawled in the dirt, spraying pulses of blood two yards out. The mule brayed and stumbled against its tether. The destrier pawed the ground and snorted, harness and bit chiming.

Michel stared at the exposed ruin of bone and cartilage as the red fountain ran dry. The sight made his stomach lurch.

Sir Oswald went after the next guard, who was armed only with a dagger. This man ducked under the slashing attack and ran, howling, straight for Michel.

Now Michel's sword was an extension of his will as it floated skyward, and plunged with sickening force toward his opponent. A final twist and the flat of the blade slapped against the Saracen's head, felling him. The dagger went flying and the man crumpled, his temple bloody.

Heart knocking, dizzy, Michel forced himself to follow Oswald and look around for other enemies.

Most of the Saracens who remained were being rounded up and taken prisoner. Sir Bernard and Hugues le Bon rode through the village, keeping the penned-up caravaners from escaping. Sir Jean, Sir Gui, and de Sens had dismounted to slash open the packs, and Roland escorted the squires, who were towing skittish palfreys down the path. So quickly, the whole fight was over.

Then an armored figure on a white mare appeared from the papyrus reeds to the west of the village. Harsh sunlight glinted from his short-sleeved hauberk, worn over a long-sleeved blue tunic. A Persian-style mail scarf descended from a round helmet over his turban, veiling his features. He wore no mail hose or greaves, only loose trousers tucked into high leather boots. He bore a light lance, a straight sword, and a round shield barren of any device.

The Saracen knight drew up short, cursing, then he couched his lance and kicked his mare into a gallop, straight at Hugues le Bon, closest to him.

Sir Hugues lifted his sword, shouted his battle cry, "Saint-Foy!" and clapped his heels against his horse's side.

Sir Hugues turned aside the lance with his shield before it skewered him, then used his sword to slice off the steel lance-head, but the Saracen knight was amazingly strong. He swung the lance shaft sideways, toppling Sir Hugues from his horse as they passed each other. The Breton's neck broke with a horrid crack as he hit the ground.

"For God and St. George!" Oswald shouted, spurring his war-horse.

The Saracen knight, broken lance rock-steady, raced toward him. Oswald, like Hugues, made ready to employ his shield at the perfect moment to displace the still-dangerous point of the lance, but this time the Saracen knight thrust through the unprotected flank of Oswald's mount.

Both horses recoiled at the impact. The Saracen freed his lance and the mortally wounded destrier screamed as it fell, almost trapping Sir Oswald beneath its massive body. Oswald leapt from his high saddle, but one foot caught in his stirrup and he tottered, off-balance. The destrier thrashed, groaned, and died. The lithe Arab mare pirouetted, and a thrown dagger flashed through the eyeslit in Oswald's helm. Sir Oswald cried out and seized the knife protruding from his face. Blood gushed from his mouth, and he sank to the ground.

Lord de Sens gave a despairing cry. "Oswald!"

The Saracen knight guided his horse around to face the remaining Crusaders. Voices called to him in Arabic from the ruined houses, and he called back, giving orders. The caravaners started trickling from their hiding places and scurrying into the marsh. Sir Bernard dashed after them, killing one, but the rest escaped.

Then the knight turned toward Michel, his attention alone a near-lethal blow. Michel's sense of time slowed, as if he moved in a dream. Here at last was his test of courage.

Michel spurred his mount toward the Saracen. At the last possible moment he swerved, so that mare and destrier passed on their off-sides. He kept his sword point low, to the left across his body.

But although Michel anticipated the slashing strike that came overhand toward his shoulder, he was not prepared for its power. It took a supreme effort to deflect the other's blade and still the blow ripped open Michel's mail sleeve and the quilted gambeson underneath. Air burned his upper arm as he completed his own swing at the outside range of his reach.

The weak blow to the knight's unarmored leg caused great damage. Flesh parted, leaving a bloody slash in the trousered thigh, and a matching score down the mare's side.

Michel whirled his great horse as the mare shrieked and reared. The Saracen knight's injured leg slipped out of its stirrup and he plunged to earth. The mare galloped past Michel into the papyrus marsh.

He spurred forward for the kill but, in the instant before Michel's sword connected, the Saracen knight rolled to his feet despite his injury. Then—without moving—he somehow *shoved* Michel from his horse.

Michel fell, sprawling backwards. Breath was knocked out of him and the world went black in a rush.

Awareness returned in small pieces. Ears ringing. Lying on hard ground. Movement seemed impossible. It was an effort to blink. A muffled, familiar voice asked a curt question.

Above him, a blurred figure swam into focus. Gray eyes narrowed coldly over a veil of interlocked metal rings; the shock of the glance tightened Michel's belly and groin.

Fear woke with the pressure of an unforgiving sharpness against his bare throat, exposed by the gap between hauberk and mail coif.

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

The Saracen knight spoke in langue d'oïl, and the sound of his deep voice shivered in Michel's soul. There was something about it that he couldn't quite remember, something important...

"I will not ask again, Sir Knight. Do you yield?"

Chapter Four

"Watch a man in times of ... adversity to discover what kind of man he is; for then at last words of truth are drawn from the depths of his heart, and the mask is torn off ... "—
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, ca. 55 BC

Near Lake Manzala, Egypt—20th of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH (Monday, August 30th, AD 1249)

Menelaos supported his numb leg with a brace of air as he awaited the young knight's surrender. Wounded as he was, he needed a hostage. He only hoped that his knowledge of northern Frankish custom was still applicable after nearly half a century.

If he could negotiate, he might save his life, suddenly precious as it was. He needed to at least live long enough to fulfill his duty as Protector of the House, and avenge the mule-drivers and caravan guards slaughtered by these armored bandits.

And he might save the rest of Sharibet's kin. Her goods were already forfeit, and all because he had been so slow to react! Had the years spent as a helpless cripple broken and reforged him into a sword made of inferior metal? The old Menelaos would never have been so careless as to allow himself and those under his care to be ambushed by barbarians.

How in Hades had these Franks found them at this isolated point, far from the official *entrepôts* of El Manzala or El Aziza? He scowled at the youth sprawled at his feet.

His prisoner's dark blue eyes were still dazed after the fall from his horse. "Sir Knight," he said, in *langue d'oïl* heavily flavored with Flemish. "I yield to you."

"I accept," Menelaos said. "Get up."

The young knight rose to one knee with a groan. He fumbled for his sword and offered it, amber-set hilt first, with elaborate courtesy. "Sir, I am Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, son of Girard de La Roche-en-Ardenne. I render you my destrier and my arms as ransom."

Menelaos took possession of Sir Michel's sword. He thrust it into the ground and leaned upon it as the jingle of mail and heavy hoof beats announced the approach of the remaining knights. Then he raised his own sword and returned it to a point below Sir Michel's ear as his comrades halted a short distance away. The young man's eyes, the color of deep water, never left Menelaos's face.

"What d'ye want?" shouted one of the knights in the *langue d'oc* of southern France. His shield was painted with an azure dolphin.

"I wish to strike a bargain, Messire," Menelaos replied in the same tongue, relieved that he would be able to communicate more easily. "You have our beasts of burden and our goods. Let my men go without further bloodshed. As for me, my liege will pay a generous ransom for my safe return."

The dolphin knight translated Menelaos's offer for his companions.

"You'll get no mercy from us!" shouted a knight with a silver tower on his red shield and an accent direct from the Parisian court.

Instantly, the others raised their voices in protest.

"My lord, you promised us gold—"

"We found only cloth and a few boxes of spices—"

"Nothing worth risking our lives for!"

"Be silent! All of you!" snarled the lord. Met by resentful obedience, he addressed the dolphin knight. "Sir Jean, you may speak."

"M'lord de Sens, don't refuse so hastily. You promised us a caravan of gold and jewels." With a huff of disgust, Sir Jean unfurled a length of striped cotton cloth.

A slender knight whose shield bore a chalice added, "My lord, his ransom will gain us something, at least. His half-armor isn't worth much—and his horse ran away."

"My lady will pay a hundred gold bezants for my ransom," Menelaos interjected.

"Your lady?" de Sens jeered.

"The Lady Sharibet al-Warda of Alexandria. She is the rose of the House of the Rose, and her thorns are sharp indeed."

"House of the Rose!" Sir Jean crossed himself and spat. "Holy Mary pray for us! M'lord—" He leaned over and whispered urgently to de Sens. Menelaos overheard: "Rose ... why didn't you tell us?" and "Take ... offer ... won't ... another..."

Lord de Sens gave in ungracefully. "Very well. Half the ransom to be mine. Divide the remainder evenly amongst yourselves, with a half-share to each of the squires."

"What about the ransom I owe him?" Sir Michel asked.

"It is superseded," de Sens pronounced. "Do you all agree to these terms?"

After all assented, Menelaos let his sword point fall from Sir Michel's throat. He dropped the weapon and would have released the sword he leaned upon as well, but his numb leg threatened to buckle.

Quickly the young knight scrambled to his feet and grasped Menelaos' elbow, steadying him. "Since you have yielded to us, Sir Knight, I give you my word that you will be honorably treated and released unharmed when your lady pays your ransom."

Menelaos smiled grimly at de Sens' angry snort, but he let the youth support him as he limped toward shade.

Sir Michel helped lower him to the ground. "How should we name you, Sir Knight?"

"You may call me *domine*," Menelaos replied with conscious irony, wondering how much Latin they had. He found out as the chalice knight dismounted, retrieved both swords, and came near.

"Let us bind your wound, Sir Dominic," he said loudly, adding in an undertone, "And yours, too, Michou. Are you all right?"

"Oh! Yes, I'm fine," Sir Michel said with an air of abstraction as the other laid down the two bloodied swords. Both young men removed their mail coifs and shook out nearly identical heads of golden hair.

Menelaos felt the shock of recognition reverberate through him like the tolling of an invisible bell, shivering his bones

with an ache as sweet as music. Just so had Honoria and Marcus shared a likeness of physical mannerism...

Unthinking, Menelaos tried to open the eyes of his mind to see whether either of the young men wore the winged auras of the Lost, but pain reminded him instantly of his blindness. Suppressing a groan, he clenched his fingers into the dirt in an agony of frustration. *Honoria!*

Menelaos knew he must find the opportunity to taste of the young men's blood. Without his Seer's Eyes, it was the only way he might look for the past-life memories caught in the meshes of their souls like the pearls in Honoria's hairnet. And if there were two of the Lost here, how many others might there be?

The dead might be reborn anywhere, but sometimes they clustered together with those held beloved in life after life.

Meanwhile the chalice knight—Sir Roland—was still fussing over Sir Michel, although his gaze flickered sideways, as if irresistibly drawn to Menelaos's face. "He cut through your mail, Michou."

"Mmmm," said Michel absently. A frown drew together golden brows, pale against a sunburned face of remarkable beauty. "It's just a bruise, Roland."

Menelaos felt hope stir. Could this youth be one of his lost djinn companions? Was Honoria's soul clothed in this knight's flesh?

"Michou, stop gawking!" Roland said sharply, and Menelaos was amused to see Michel blush and suddenly occupy himself with removing his mail mitts, as flustered as any maiden.

Despite his reprimand, Roland took the opportunity to give Menelaos the same assessing stare that Marcus had once wielded, and Menelaos felt again the deep shock of recognition. But before he could speak, Michel came over and knelt at Menelaos's side.

"The Saracen knight's leg needs tending," he said to Roland, who must surely be a kinsman. "Can you fetch me some cloth for a bandage?"

Sir Roland fetched the length of Syrian cotton from where Sir Jean had dropped it and the two of them efficiently stripped Menelaos to his long undershirt. Their doctoring was well-meant but almost unbearably clumsy. Menelaos bit back a groan, and patiently endured the treatment until Sir Michel finished knotting the makeshift bandage around a wound which had already stopped bleeding.

Menelaos leaned back against crumbling bricks, trying to conceal his weakness, putting all his energies into healing his leg, trying to ignore the mixed emotions stirred up by the presence of the two young knights: sorrow, fear, hope, happiness, and desire.

He had thought his heart to be permanently numb in the aftermath of Béziers, and found the rediscovery of feeling was not, after all, entirely welcome.

Honor ... Menelaos knew he could not be certain without the test of blood, but hope proved impossible to deny.

He forced himself to pay attention to his captors as they began to examine his helmet and mail, now their prizes of battle.

Whistling appreciatively, Sir Roland cleaned and sheathed Menelaos' sword. "Damascus steel—very fine! And there's lapis lazuli in the hilt."

Sir Michel was industriously wiping down his own sword. His task complete, he picked up Menelaos' short-sleeved mail corselet. "Sir Dominic," he said with considerable interest, "Why did you not arm yourself with a full hauberk?"

"I hardly expected to be set upon by Frankish brigands so far removed from Damietta," Menelaos answered in stumbling *langue d'oïl*. Another intriguing wave of color rose in Sir Michel's fair skin like a telltale flag.

"At least you've got a liege to pay your ransom," Sir Roland interjected with cheerful impertinence. "You're lucky."

Lucky? With his leg on fire, unable to walk or even stand unaided, having lost Sharibet's shipment and several kinsmen, it seemed to Menelaos as if fortune and skill both had abandoned him. He had been a poor Protector, only his superhuman reflexes saving him from his many mistakes. He might remember centuries of training as a warrior, but those lessons no longer resonated in his bones and flesh. He was as much a novice as these fresh-faced boys.

In the midst of his self-recrimination, the young knights clambered hastily to their feet as the Lord de Sens rode up.

"Why are his hands not bound?" de Sens demanded.

"Well, but he's given his parole—" Sir Roland began.

"A Saracen?" de Sens said haughtily. "Bind him!"

"But, my lord—" Sir Michel was silenced by Sir Roland's hasty elbow.

"Yes, my lord," said Sir Roland. He whispered a useless apology to Menelaos even as he wrapped Menelaos's wrists with leftover cloth and tied a hard knot.

De Sens stared blindly toward the squires, who wept loudly over the body of the English knight Menelaos had killed. Abruptly, the baron dismounted.

Menelaos, sitting on the ground with his hands bound behind his back, disliked the ravaged expression on de Sens' lean face. He knew that mien from his own mirror.

He knew what was coming, but he could see no way avert it without using his power, and to use it visibly was strictly forbidden. The fist of air he had sent against Sir Michel earlier had nearly broken the Law, but he had been astounded that the boy had gotten through his guard—

Memory ruptured as a vicious kick landed in his gut, exploding breath from his lungs. Another kick, square in his ribs, cracked one or more of them. He sprawled helplessly, coughing and gagging, his vision dissolving into dark speckles.

"That's for Oswald," cried de Sens. His next blow reopened the sword cut in Menelaos's thigh.

"My lord!" Sir Michel protested, but Sir Roland hissed him into silence as de Sens continued his assault.

Menelaos bit back a moan. After only the briefest freedom from Sharibet's relentless tutelage, he was going to die, face down in the dirt, kicked to death by a barbarian! Once again, he had failed in his duty as Protector ... and once again, he could not even protect himself.

He should not have surrendered. He should have avenged the fallen members of the House of the Rose on the spot, and taken as many of the Franks with him as possible.

He snarled, tasting dust. If I live through this, I will send you all to Hades for your crimes.

Menelaos heard a sword scrape from its sheath, and the kicking stopped.

Menelaos braced himself to deflect the barbarian's sword with a shield of air, the Law be damned. All those years of Cecilia's nursing, Sharibet's efforts to reclaim his memories, and his own painful efforts to walk again, talk again, and to wield weapons with some vestige of his former skill and strength—was it all in vain?

To his vast surprise, he heard Michel say, "That's enough, my lord." Mailed feet with golden spurs stepped between Menelaos and de Sens. There was a naked sword in Michel's white-knuckled fist.

"You dare to draw against *me*?" de Sens shouted.

"I gave my word that Sir Dominic would be honorably treated." Sir Michel's tone was respectful, but there was steel in it.

"Out of my way, puppy," de Sens sneered.

"O Blessed Virgin, please don't let him ruin it for us," Sir Roland muttered as he came to stand at Sir Michel's side. "Um. My lord, remember Sir Dominic's ransom. *If* we return him to his lady unharmed."

"Truly, I grieve that your ... friend was killed," Sir Michel added. "Sir Oswald was a brave knight, but the fight was fair.

I can't let you harm the prisoner. It's a matter of my honor now, you see."

"And I support my cousin's honor," Roland added quickly.

De Sens' half laugh ended in a choked cough. "Very well. I was looking for loyal men to serve me. You have made your loyalties plain. Once we return to Damietta I expect you to trouble me no more." He turned on his spurred heel and stalked off.

"God's Nails." Sir Roland said with weary disappointment. "I wish you would *think* before opening your mouth, Michou."

"I did, Roland. We'll get sixteen bezants between us from the ransom. That's more than enough for the stable bill. And I couldn't let him—"

A gentle hand touched Menelaos' shoulder. "Sir Dominic?" Michel asked anxiously. "Can you sit up?"

He did, and regretted it as pain returned like a spear thrust into his side. De Sens would pay.

"I am truly sorry for this." Sir Michel knelt beside Menelaos and brushed dirt from his brow and beard. Menelaos fought the temptation to close his eyes at the gentle touch, so strange yet so familiar. "Lord de Sens and Sir Oswald were, ah, as close as brothers."

Menelaos did not reply as Sir Michel tied another strip of looted cotton cloth around his bleeding thigh. He clenched his teeth while the young knight wrapped his ribs as well.

"Come on," Sir Roland said impatiently as Sir Michel tied the end. "Or there won't be anything left for us."

The others were tearing open bales of cloth, finding the small treasures tucked inside: pouches of peppercorns and

cloves, glass vials filled with grains of frankincense and myrrh, lapis jewelry, a beautifully worked silver tray and pitcher.

"Sir Dominic, we need to pick up some, ah, prizes, but we'll be halfway back to Damietta before supper," Sir Michel said, still apologetic.

Oh no, you won't. His powers were considerably weakened thanks to his injuries, but he had the will to weave a *glamour* of misdirection. *None of you will ever see Damietta again.*

* * * *

For Michel, the rest of the afternoon passed in a weird haze. He half-recognized landmarks and then promptly forgot them as they plodded through the heat and the reeds with their prizes and prisoner. The knights' horses and the captured mules, two now carrying sad, cloth-shrouded burdens, stumbled as the sun lowered in the sky, sometimes in his eyes, and sometimes behind him.

Dizzy, he swayed against the high cantle of his saddle as de Sens led them past a humble village with a view of the lake. He could almost swear they had passed this site before ... The realization slipped neatly off the hook of his memory and disappeared into murky depths with a silvery flash.

He blinked, and when his eyes opened he was riding along a path so narrow that his knees brushed papyrus stalks.

Then the horse in front of him entered an open space.

Tall palm trees cast fingers of shadow across the remains of a large, squat building, flat top mostly gone. The entrance to its courtyard, defined only by a low, crumbling wall, was

framed by weathered pillars the color of sand. A stream, meandering from the papyrus stand toward the lake, had entirely cut through the walls of one corner, creating a grassy verge.

De Sens reined his palfrey into the courtyard. "We'll stop here until the morrow!"

The thirsty horses aimed for the stream, and Michel's destrier milled in with the others. Rousing as if from a nap, he saw his cousin nearby and maneuvered close. He had something he wanted to say...

At some point he found himself standing on the ground, piling up the horses' tack, with one hand on Roland's arm, and a whole thought uppermost in his mind. "Roland, we're lost."

His cousin wiped sweat from his sun-reddened brow, then started to untie various items from his palfrey's equipment. "How can you tell? Everything looks the same in this place—flat and muddy. It's just like Flanders, only hotter. With palm trees."

Michel pointed. The sun was within a handspan of the horizon. "Well, if that's west, then Damietta ought to be in that—ah—" He stood, blinking hard, unable to remember if Damietta had been north or east. *Think! The sun rises in the east, sets in the West ... the Nile flows north ...* "North!" he said triumphantly.

With an odd expression Roland asked, "Why do you care?"

"Why—" Michel began to retort, then paused, unable to remember. *Why was north so important? Because ... because...*

His destrier shifted his weight against the reins in his hand and stamped one huge hoof as Lord de Sens' squire Joscelin strode past them with a sniff. "Don't expect us to unload your share of the booty, Sir Michel. Nicolas and I aren't *your* squires."

Michel had been on the threshold of recapturing his elusive thought, but Joscelin's insolence sent it spinning out of reach again. "Something's wrong."

"Well if it is," Roland replied, rubbing his palfrey down with handfuls of grass, "then it's my lord de Sens' responsibility to set it right. Not yours. Michou, can you please start paying attention? Or do I have to do all this work myself?"

Michel plucked a handful of grass and started working over the off-side of Roland's horse, brushing away crusts of dried sweat as the gelding nibbled his hair. "But don't you think it's important that we know what, what ... By Saint Michel's wings, I wish I could remember the word for where it is we want to go. Can you remember it, Roland?"

There was no response from his cousin, but a muffled grunt came from the Saracen prisoner as Sir Gui shoved him off one of the mules. Sir Dominic, still bound, landed on his side and lay there, breathing harshly. Sir Gui made no effort to help him sit up or stand, but stood laughing, hands on his mailed hips.

Michel looked at Dominic involuntarily, and flinched from the intensity of those quickly hooded eyes.

He shivered, knowing he had just forgotten something important. *But what?*

* * * *

The last beams of sunlight gilded the interior of the roofless shrine. When new, the walls had been adorned by a colorful parade of stately, animal-headed gods receiving offerings and returning blessings to the faithful. Time had faded and blistered the paint, but the battered columns of hieroglyphs carved into the walls were still mostly legible. At least Menelaos had something to read to distance himself from pain while his captors set up their camp and cooked a supper of thriftily-saved horsemeat.

Hail to you, a god and son of a god. Hail to you, a bull and the son of a bull. Hail to you, Horus, Begotten by Osiris, Birthed by Isis...

Centuries before, he had learned the elegant writing of the Egyptians in Sharibet's blood. More recently, she had fed him the memory of that learning in the same way. Her overshadowing presence tainted everything he knew.

He had wondered whether the memories Sharibet revealed to him were real, or only her endlessly fruitful invention, and had wanted to test his memory against reality. Finding the shrine near their landing point had been the first test. The buildings, ruined now, had been where he remembered. He had been reading these faded walls when the uproar of the Crusader's ambush had startled him from his study.

He was finished testing. His salvaged memory, unlike his skill at arms, had proved reliable. Everything inside the shrine was just as he expected, including the next bit of text. He frowned at the large gap marring the invocation:

*...to you, goddess of night. Divine sky-goddess Nut,
Through you the sun is reborn every morning...*

Birth, and rebirth...

He had been reborn after Béziers, only gradually regaining his ability to move, to walk, to talk. The earliest of his own proper memories, owing nothing to Sharibet's meddling, were of Cecilia, a divine mother delivering him from the brink of death, nursing him with her sweet blood.

Unwilling to admit failure, and too much a part of his memories to relive them again, Cecilia had sent him to Egypt. There, the dismembered pieces of his former self had been gathered up and reassembled by Sharibet, his ruthless Isis. All but one important part...

His restless maundering was interrupted as his former hostage appeared, holding some rags and a waterskin. Divested of his armor, Sir Michel was a beautiful, clean-limbed youth with a thoughtful expression that set him apart from his comrades.

"Sir Dominic?" He spoke quietly, as if to awaken Menelaos.

The impulse to correct the erroneous name rose, then subsided. *Dominic? Why not?* It was as good a name as any. Menelaos had been weak, vulnerable. Let his broken name be buried in the dust and spoken no more. "Yes."

"I was wondering ... have we perhaps met before?" Michel studied the cracked flagstones of the temple floor with abashed intensity.

Dominic's chest tightened with excitement. "It is possible," he answered cautiously, forcing down hope. "I am widely traveled. Tell me, Sir Michel, from whence do you come?"

"The Ardennes Mountains," Michel answered. "I come from an ancient lineage, kin to most of the noble families in Flanders, Lorraine, Champagne, and Franconia. I fostered with Roland near Ypres in Flanders, at the estate of my uncle, the famous tournament champion Sir Jan van Scheldehuis."

Dominic shook his head, and saw Michel's instant disappointment. "Alas, I have not traveled so far north. And Sir Roland—is he your kinsman? You bear each other a certain resemblance."

"My cousin," Michel said. He dropped to his knees next to Dominic. Tilting his head a little—*just like Honoria*—he continued to study Menelaos. "It's passing strange. You are a Saracen and yet I feel I know you."

Dominic cleared his throat, conscious that they were wandering into dangerous territory.

Michel blinked and seemed to recall himself. He sat back on his heels. "I thought I might offer you something to drink, since the others seem to have forgotten the courtesies due a noble prisoner." He unfastened the waterskin, and held it to Dominic's lips.

"Thank you, Sir Michel." Dominic was thirsty, but not just for water.

Nevertheless, he swallowed the cool stream, thinking what a pleasure it would be to taste Michel's blood. He wondered whether he dared, and decided it was too dangerous before darkness fell. Not only had he to finish healing and regain his strength, but the other knights were still awake, as attested by the noisy jests about sour beer and well-spiced horsemeat coming from the courtyard.

Sir Michel hefted the waterskin. "Would you also care for a bath?"

"That would be courtesy, indeed," Dominic said, bemused, before recalling that it was Frankish custom for pages and squires to act as body servants to their superiors.

"I apologize for the fact that I cannot unbind you," Sir Michel said, wetting his rag with water from the skin. "My lord de Sens has forbidden it." The young knight bent close and washed Dominic's face and neck with a gentle touch, then raised up his shirt.

It was a relief to be rid of dried blood and sweat and dust. Dominic closed his eyes and gave himself up to the coolness and the firm hands moving across his torso, around the bandages. The rag moved lower, and long-dormant erotic interest woke from its sleep. For a moment Dominic dared to hope for more, but alas, the young man's hands were briskly impersonal.

At his disappointed sigh, Michel immediately ceased scrubbing. "Did I hurt you? Your ribs?"

"Are slightly higher. No. You didn't hurt me." Dominic gave a dry chuckle. Time for a strategic distraction. "You fought well this afternoon, Sir Michel. That last stroke was particularly well done. It has been some years since I have seen anyone wield a sword with such skill." He hoped his flattery wasn't too obvious.

"Truly?" Michel's face lit with a smile of angelic radiance. The final ray of sunset gleamed in the youth's hair, then winked out like a spent ember as the sun disappeared.

The icy wall around Dominic's heart cracked and melted away. *Honoriam*, he thought. *It must be.*

But how cruel the Fate that had blinded him, so that he could not be certain! "Oh, no."

Michel's smile vanished. He dropped the used rag to the worn floor stones and jumped up. "I knew it! I saw how easily you defeated Sir Hugues and Sir Oswald—why did you spare me?"

Dominic raised an eyebrow at the young man's vehemence. "Sir Michel, just now I answered my own thought, not your question. This afternoon, I found you a formidable, if inexperienced, opponent. You wounded me, which few men could do. I could have killed you, yes. But your comrades outnumbered me. Why should I therefore have wasted your life?"

Michel stood, half facing away, not believing him.

Time for another distraction. "I did wound you."

The young knight clutched his arm. "It's nothing."

"Nothing? You must be careful. The marsh air breeds inflammation."

"No!" Michel's tone barely masked panic. "The surgeon would amputate it, and what would I do with only one arm?"

Dominic suppressed a smile. "You must have seen Frankish doctors at work."

"They almost killed Roland, before my sister kicked them out of our aunt's house. I won't—"

"Arab physicians are much less ... severe. I myself have some small knowledge of the *arte medicus*. And many of my patients lived. Will you accept my help?"

Michel hesitated. "That is a generous offer," he said, cautiously. "But—it seems unusual that a warrior would know—"

"In the House of the Rose we are taught many things," Dominic replied, and saw interest spark as Michel came closer. *Good.* "Such as how to make an infallible poultice for wounds."

Another pause, while Dominic exerted his will, giving Michel a subtle push in a direction he already wanted to go.

"Real Saracen physick?" Michel said, with longing.

"Older than that." Dominic smiled. "The people who built this shrine knew of this poultice."

Michel's face tilted up as he sought the paintings, now hidden by the shadows. "What is it made of?"

"Return with wine, a bowl or cup, a handful of the grains of myrrh that were in the glass flasks, and a clean bandage."

Michel considered. Finally he said, "I have third watch. I will bring the items then."

"Very good." It was nearly dark now. Dominic decided to risk tasting Michel's blood. He *had* to know whether the young knight was Apkallu. He focused on bringing Michel nearer—

"Supper's ready, Sir Michel!" De Sens's squire appeared at the broken entrance.

Dominic let out a frustrated breath. *Almost!*

"Coming," Michel replied. "I'll bring you back some food, Sir Dominic."

The squire said disdainfully, "My lord says we're short on supplies. No food for the prisoner."

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by Michaela August

"That's outrageous, Joscelin! And dishonorable." Sir Michel said angrily. "Don't worry, Sir Dominic. I'll share my portion with you."

"Please yourself, Sir Michel." The squire stomped away.

Michel was fumbling for the waterskin and the wet rag.

"By your foot," Dominic directed.

"Oh." Michel picked up the items.

"I look forward to seeing you later tonight," Dominic said, after a moment or two.

"Yes. Yes, so do I," Michel said gravely, then departed.

Dominic leaned his head against the rough wall. Soon, he would have his chance. Soon, he would know.

Chapter Five

Lead us not into temptation—*The Lord's Prayer*

Near Lake Manzala, Egypt, 21st of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH (Monday, August 30th, AD 1249)

Roland sat in the dark shrine, sullenly throwing pebbles out into the night. Having drawn first watch gave him time to relive all the day's mistakes.

I support my cousin's honor. Had he actually said that to de Sens?

He rested his forehead in his palm with a groan. God's Nails, he was as foolish as his mooncalf cousin!

Sixteen bezants wouldn't last long once they returned to Damietta. And was it two bezants to the livre, or two livres to the bezant? He wished he could remember. If only he had a liege, he wouldn't need to know.

You have made your loyalties plain.

Curled in a corner of the tumbledown building, the prisoner was invisible in the deep shadows. Nevertheless, his silent presence burned like a cold flame. The more Roland tried to ignore him, the more Sir Dominic's presence seared into his awareness.

Roland threw some more stones, hearing them clack against the opposite wall, then the quiet became worrisome. Sir Dominic hadn't moved, hadn't made a sound for what seemed like hours. A horrible suspicion struck Roland: was the Saracen dead, all his ransom lost? Roland turned to check.

The prisoner's eyes shone like a cat's eyes, reflecting the campfire outside. Roland's panic ebbed. *Good. He was alive.*

"Are you well, Sir Roland?" The prisoner's voice made sweat bead all over Roland's body.

"Yes." *Just breathless.* What *was* it about Sir Dominic? The prisoner was securely tied, but Roland's heart still raced.

Sir Dominic's presence felt like the moment of watchful stillness at the start of a melee, when you were poised to begin the race towards your opponents and all the while feeling more alive than you ever did outside the lists.

Michou had noticed it too, Roland thought. His cousin had stared at Sir Dominic like a lovesick swain, but truth to tell, Roland felt that same fascination, and it disturbed him mightily. He shifted on his block of stone and groped for another pebble to fling into the darkness.

"May I have a drink?" Sir Dominic's request was pitched low, as not to disturb the other knights. It raised shivers along Roland's spine.

Roland scrabbled in the dirt, located his waterskin, and levered himself up. He took small steps, hand outstretched, brushing fingertips along the half-ruined wall to guide him.

Halfway there, he realized that he was afraid to touch Sir Dominic again. But bound as the prisoner was, Roland would have to guide the waterskin to Dominic's lips. He stopped.

"Take two steps forward, one to your right." Dominic's voice said, from nearby.

Roland didn't move. "How do you know?"

"I see well in the dark." The response was quiet but Roland felt it along his skin, raising the hairs on his arms and neck.

Sir Dominic's low chuckle mocked him, and at the same time reminded him of something he couldn't remember, try as he might ... At some point he realized he had taken an involuntary step toward the prisoner. He heard the other knight's laughter catch.

"You're not really a Saracen, are you?" Roland said, moved by a strange impulse.

"No. I'm Greek."

"Yet you serve a Saracen—and a woman." Roland meant to sound contemptuous, but even he could hear his yearning.

"I serve the House of the Rose. But Lady Sharibet is wise, and beautiful—"

"And pays well?" Roland cursed silently. He was always chiding Michel for speaking out of turn.

"Her coin is beyond mortal price. And the House of the Rose takes care of its own."

"Get thee behind me, Satan," Roland whispered, unsure whether his words were directed at Sir Dominic, or himself.

A white glimmer of smile flashed. "I'm still thirsty."

One step forward, one to his right. Roland knelt at the prisoner's side, and untied the mouth of the waterskin. Hesitantly, he extended it.

* * * *

Dominic was acutely aware of the faint warmth of Roland's hand as it approached his face, the smell of damp leather from the waterskin, and his own surging hope. He reached out with his power and, as tenderly as closing the eyes of a sleepy child, he entranced the young knight.

Roland froze in the act of tilting the waterskin to Dominic's mouth.

Dominic leaned forward, and used the edge of a razor-sharp tooth to make a tiny cut on the inside of Roland's wrist, just below the callused base of his thumb. It was an innocuous location, where any man used to handling tack and armor might cut himself and scarcely notice the tiny wound.

The blood welled quickly, dark against Roland's pale skin, its scent nearly indistinguishable from the metallic scent of Roland's armor.

Dominic's breath caught. He would test them all. And those who were not the Lost of the djinn or the House would die.

Just before he bent his head and touched his mouth to Roland's wrist, Dominic found himself fervently hoping that Amalric de Sens would not prove one of the Lost.

Then the first taste of Roland's blood sent an explosion of memories through Dominic's awareness.

He passed swiftly through Roland's present life: currying horses in tandem with Michel, his cousin's golden head scarcely showing over the destrier's gray flank. The noise and violence of a tourney, sun glittering off polished armor and the bright flash of painted shields ... ceiling beams painted with red roses, a soft bed, and a leg immobilized by stiff bandages. Mathilde of the warm mouth and sweet hands, her skin as fair and translucent as alabaster ... Michel grinning at him from the railing of a ship...

Dominic went back further: a Roman villa with terracotta roof tiles and olive trees. Mother—tall, red-haired, wearing a

blue gown ... Fire. Chaos. Running through the fields, dragging his sister Honoria by the hand while the sound of horses comes up behind them ... the House of the Rose, and Sharibet greeting him and Honoria with honeyed figs and kisses ... Menelaos and Honoria, standing at the marble-columned doorway of the House of the Rose in Constantinople...

Dominic raised his head, dizzy with triumph. Now he would not be forced to return to Sharibet empty-handed, after all. What were a few lost bales of cloth next to this?

He raised his mouth from Roland's wrist, and pressed a swift kiss of welcome against the young man's mouth. "Ave, Marcus! It is good to meet again."

Then Dominic leaned back, and released his spell.

* * * *

Sir Dominic said, "Thank you," with sardonic courtesy, and Roland roused, startled, as if from a trance.

Had he actually dozed off in the brief interval it took Dominic to satisfy his thirst? Water splashed them both as Roland pulled quickly away.

He moved a little further away, glad of the wall against his back. His hands shook as he retied the water skin and he cursed himself for acting like a startled virgin.

The stars shone through the broken roof overhead as he leaned his head back against rough stone. When would his watch be over?

"Do you dream, sometimes?" The quiet voice startled him. He almost missed the next questions for the blood thundering

in his ears. "Do you ever dream of a red-haired sister you never had? Or that you can fly?"

Roland made an unintended sound of assent, then bit his lip.

"Did these strange dreams start before or after you were wounded unto death?"

"How did you know about that?" Roland demanded.

"Sir Michel told me. He distrusts physicians on your account, and I cannot blame him, for I, too, have been close to death and at their mercy."

Roland didn't want to discuss any part of that time at Scheldehuis. His wound, Mathilde—sometimes it seemed that death's hand still had a hold on him. But—"Michel cannot have told you my dreams!" Roland whispered, harshly. "I haven't spoken of them to anyone."

"No. But I remember."

Roland felt as if an earthquake rumbled through his interior landscape, sending all the familiar landmarks topsy-turvy. "Remember what?"

"You."

Roland tried to laugh, but his throat was dry. "Indeed? I think I should remember if we had met before!"

"How much do you remember of your dreams?" Sir Dominic had a seducer's voice. He might be the Devil reading his inmost desires.

Roland shuddered. For his soul's sake, he should not answer.

After a while, Sir Dominic said in a normal tone, as if nothing untoward had happened: "You and Sir Michel have

treated me most courteously, even at a cost to yourselves. I owe you a debt of honor."

Curiosity won out over caution. "You owe us nothing," Roland lied politely, hoping with every fiber of his being for a generous gift of gold.

"I disagree. I could not help but overhear earlier that you were seeking a liege lord."

Roland was balanced on the knife-edge of desire and caution. He found himself wanting to trust the Saracen knight, yet ... "My lord de Sens—" he began.

"—is very angry with you." Sir Dominic gave a short laugh. "You would be wasted on de Sens, Sir Roland, were he wise enough to see your worth."

Roland gave an unhappy sigh.

"When this is over, and my ransom paid, I invite you and Sir Michel to come serve my lady Sharibet, and be lords of the House of the Rose."

"A lord?" Roland tried for incredulity as a voice in his head eagerly chanted *yes yes yes*.

"A rich and powerful lord," Sir Dominic answered. "The House of the Rose seeks more Protectors, and my lady Sharibet is beautiful and generous. You will want for nothing."

A thousand thoughts raced through Roland's mind. Uppermost were his earlier words to Michel: *Any liege is better than no liege*.

Even a Saracen? Even if it meant he would be apostate for breaking his Crusading oath?

Sixteen bezants and three silver deniers stood between them and utter penury. *If* de Sens kept his word and paid out shares to a pair of landless knights who had roused his ire.

"That is a very generous offer, Sir Dominic." Roland's hands were trembling as he uncorked the waterskin and took a deep swig of the flat, leathery water. He felt curiously light.

"Will you accept it?"

A deep shiver moved through Roland. He wiped his mouth and stared, wide-eyed, at the dark shape of his prisoner. Could he really do it?

"Y-yes. Yes. I will." He took a deep breath, and felt an inexplicable sense of joy and relief.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside, and the light from Gui de Tancarville's crude papyrus-reed torch leapt over the ruined walls.

"We must speak again, Sir Roland," Sir Dominic said neutrally, but a smile flickered in the corners of his mouth.

"Off you go, Sir Roland. My turn now." said Sir Gui. He spat at Sir Dominic's feet, watching to see if he would flinch. When he didn't, the large knight said, "I say we cut his balls off and send 'em to that Saracen bitch. Getting her paramour back in pieces will make her pay up quick."

"I will remember your courtesy, Sir Gui." Sir Dominic's flat gray stare, like the uncanny attention of a half-submerged crocodile, never wavered from the knight's face.

Roland watched, fascinated, as Sir Gui clutched at his sword hilt, sudden sweat gleaming on his forehead.

"She might not want him back if he's damaged," Roland cautioned.

"Don't worry!" Sir Gui clapped Roland on the shoulder with a forced guffaw. "I won't do anything to him that will lessen the ransom."

"Call out if you need anything," Roland said, quietly, to Sir Dominic.

Gui overheard, but thought it directed at him. "What?" he scoffed. "You think you could handle something that I couldn't, Sir Roland?"

Behind Gui, Sir Dominic inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Then Roland went to his bedroll and stretched out next to Michel's curled form, but sleep did not come for a long time.

* * * *

By the end of Sir Gui's watch, Dominic's healing was nearly complete.

The large knight woke from his blank-eyed trance at Michel's arrival. When he pushed up off his haunches he staggered, then swatted Michel's outstretched hands away.

"Sir Gui, are you unwell?"

Looking pale and shaky, Gui de Tancarville rubbed at a cut on his hand, and spat. "Me? I'm fine, just a little tired. I can think of better pastimes than watching over an infidel all night. I wish you joy of him." He puffed out his chest and stalked away without glancing back.

"Whither courtesy?" said Michel under his breath.

Dominic shifted his weight, suppressing a smile. A tenth part of Sir Gui's blood had been courtesy enough, restoring

Dominic's strength and confidence, and confirming Gui's lack of importance.

"God give you good evening, Sir Dominic." Michel knelt to feed the small fire that Gui, less comfortable in the dark than Roland, had kindled with dry reeds and the remnants of his torch.

"And you, Sir Michel. Did you bring what I directed?" He lowered his eyes, checking himself from further betrayal of his eagerness. Purposefully, he kept his right cheek in shadow.

Michel showed Dominic the two glass flasks he had brought, one brimming with wine dark as blood, and the other half-filled with gravel-sized grains of myrrh, amber-colored and fragrant.

He said resolutely, "Sir Dominic, I entreat you if the knowledge will endanger my immortal soul, say nothing." Michel crossed himself and kissed his thumb to seal the prayer.

Taken aback by such earnest nonsense, Dominic temporized. "The Greeks used wine and myrrh, as did the Egyptians, and the people of Shinar before them. If they practiced magic, I never heard that the efficacy of the salves was increased by it."

"My sister's herbal book recommends garlic as a poultice."

"And did your sister's recipes endanger your soul?"

Michel ducked his head as if embarrassed. He collapsed into a cross-legged position. "Well, no, but—"

"But?" Dominic teased.

Michel blushed and put down the two flasks. "My arm burns like fire. Please teach me the remedy."

Dominic settled himself as comfortably as he could with bound hands. "Put the grains of myrrh in the wine, and agitate the mixture gently ... Yes. Like that." The tiny lumps of resin dissolved, leaving the wine foaming and cloudy.

"Now, wet your wound with the solution."

Michel rolled up his loose shirt sleeve, revealing a pale, well-muscled arm. He poured the wine over a rag, and began to dab at the oozing cut. "Ai! This stings!"

"That is the sign by which you know the salve is working. Thoroughly wash the whole area, then soak the cloth and fasten it on." Now was the perfect opportunity. "Come closer, and let me see."

As he had with Roland, Dominic used the gentlest touch of his power upon Michel's mind.

Bespelled, the young knight stood unmoving as Dominic pressed his lips against the freshly-cleaned wound, tasting sour wine and the resinous fragrance of myrrh, and underneath it all, the blood that would prove ... or disprove ... Michel's True Name.

The images came like sunlight fracturing on the waves of the sea: ... a large black horse trotting around and around at the end of a long lead while an older blond man—Father—gives directions ... hiding with Roland and Robert in a hayloft, eating stolen cherry pies ... the first sight of Cyprus, the houses like white boxes on the arid hillsides around the harbor ... a gilt-stamped copy of Aristotle in Arabic—"It's written in the Saracen script. I couldn't read it, anyway."

Then, the memories that Dominic sought: Menelaos, naked on a divan, his head bent over his 'oud. "Will you play for me?" ... The garden at the House of the Rose in Napoli, planted with citron trees and lavender, and a thick-trunked grapevine shading half the courtyard ... Marcus, copper hair shining in the noonday sun, flinging back a blue-dyed mantle with a grin. "Hurry up, Honoria, you're always late!" Menelaos crumpling under a single crossbow bolt that stays obscenely stuck in his head ... standing at the doors of St. Nazaire cathedral, sword in her hand and Raymond-Soleil at her side...

"Honoria," Dominic whispered, raising his head. "Ave, Honoria, my flame. It is good to meet again!" Then, as he had with Roland, Dominic gave Michel a kiss of welcome.

Michel's lips were firm, and warm, and a little chapped. Dominic closed his eyes and let his kiss linger. His Honoria, returned in the body of this beautiful youth!

The young knight sighed, and to Dominic's astonishment, returned the kiss with languid intensity. With a movement as slow and graceful as if they had both been underwater, Michel's hand rose to touch Dominic's hair in a brief caress.

"Menelaos..." It was a dreamer's murmur, barely louder than a breeze rustling stands of papyrus.

Dominic pulled back with a gasp, and found he was weeping. All those years with Sharibet, and there had never been this much joy, this much pain...

Conscious of passing time, he cursed his bound hands and dashed away his tears on his sleeves.

Then, his emotions under control, he regretfully lifted the entrancement.

"My sister's poultice doesn't sting." Michel said, drowsily, picking up the conversation where he had left off. He yawned. "I beg your pardon ... middle of the night..."

Dominic smiled, a little shyly, Michel's kiss still warm against his mouth. He heard himself babbling, "If your sister's herbal book is based on the work of Hippocrates, then her medicament is a cold and moist remedy for a hot dry wound and is meant to raise laudable pus. If it follows Galen, then it prescribes theriac as an antidote and recommends bloodletting to balance the humors."

Michel sat up, suddenly alert again. "When Roland was wounded, the surgeon bled him every day to bring down his fever. Mathilde didn't like it, so her book is probably from Hippo—Hippocra—"

"Hippocrates of Cos."

"Hippocrates of Cos," Michel repeated the name as if memorizing it. "And the other was?"

"Galen of Pergamon."

Michel's eyes were bright in the firelight. "Your salve is wet, but not cold." He resumed dabbing gamely at his cut. "How does it heal if it doesn't balance my humors?"

Honorio had been just the same, filled with endless questions. It hurt to realize that Michel asked his questions because his journey through the Underworld had stripped him of Honorio's centuries of knowledge...

"I'm sorry. Have I asked something I ought not?"

"No, no." Dominic blinked, holding back tears though his vision blurred. "Ask me anything. You remind me of a student—a friend—I once had. She died many years ago." And had now returned to him from the Underworld.

"May God rest her soul, Sir Dominic, and keep you, and comfort you."

Dominic turned away from Michel's sympathy and his simple faith, tempted most direly to steal another kiss. He did his best to speak in a normal voice. "Arab physicians would prefer that I test your urine to diagnose inflammation, and cauterize your wound."

"I complained too soon," Michel said, with an exaggerated expression of dismay as he soaked a length of cloth with the wine mixture and wound it around his biceps. "You don't plan to...?"

"No." Dominic's lips quirked. "This is the entire treatment. Repeat it twice daily until all trace of redness disappears. As to how it works, no one knows for certain, but I believe, as Marcus Terentius Varro theorized in the century before Christ's birth, that diseases are caused by swamp air, which bears animalcules too small to see."

Michel wrinkled his nose. "Well, this smells much better than my sister's garlic ointment. And I can drink the wine that remains." He grinned, and raised the flask in a mock toast.

"A most useful resin, myrrh," Dominic agreed. Inside he warmed to the brilliance of that smile. "So you can read?"

"Yes, and write in langue d'oil," said Michel proudly.

"I thought only Frankish priests and noblewomen were literate."

"I wanted to learn Latin, although there wasn't any time, not with sword training, armor to polish, and stalls to muck out," Michel said. He paused in his efforts to tie his bandage, and looked with longing at the nearest wall, covered by hieroglyphs. "I wish I knew how to read that."

"I could teach you."

Michel raised a dubious eyebrow and tied off the end of the wine-dyed bandage with his teeth. "I've been told that no one remembers the meaning of the picture-writing. Not even the Copts, who have lived here in Egypt since Our Lord was born."

"Not everything that men say is forgotten has been lost forever. Shall I read it for you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"It is a lamentation of mortality." Dominic read aloud the lines in the old language of Khem, then translated:

"Old age is come upon me, Age has arrived. Feebleness is come upon me, and feebleness is renewed. I sleep in discomfort each night. My eyes are dim and my ears are deaf. My strength perishes, thus perishes my heart. My mouth is become silent, and I cannot speak. My heart is finished, not even remembering yesterday. My bones have been in sickness a long time, and Good has turned to Evil."

"That was wonderful," Michel said. "But it's not written left to right, is it? I saw your head move up and down."

"Indeed. The people of Khem—as Egypt was known in those days—wrote right-to-left, left-to-right, or even vertically, such as this text." Dominic pointed with his chin.

"How do you know which direction to read it, then?"

"The depicted god, person, or animal looks to the beginning of his or her text. Here you see the goddess of Truth, wearing a crown of feathers. She is looking to the right, and the text of her invocation also faces right. Do you see the hawks and the seated figure with the beard?"

Michel squinted in the uncertain light of the fire. "Yes. And the man with the head of a bird. Who is that?"

Dominic smiled. How he had missed his Honoria! "That is Thoth, the god of scholars. Now, can you tell me which of the text belongs to him?"

"There—the, um, fourth line to the left of his head."

"Very good." Dominic said. "And do you see that oval, in the next panel, enclosing nine characters?"

Michel nodded and Dominic began to explain the cartouche. "These symbols represent the sounds which make up a royal name. I shall pronounce them individually, and you may tell me whose name it is. The first, represented by the vulture, is—" Dominic made a noise in the back of his throat. "The next, the crouching lion, is 'l'. The sign below, the basket, is 'k'. The folded cloth sounds like 'sh', and there a reed leaf, 'i.' The water sign is pronounced 'n', the hand, 'd', the mouth, 'r', and the crossbar of a door, 's'. Now whose name is it?"

A moment to put the sounds together, and awe replaced Michel's guarded look. "Alexandros ... Alexander?"

"Indeed." Dominic wished he could be the object of such rapt homage.

"Alexander the Great? Then he was a real person! Was he truly a mighty knight? Did he really fly in a basket drawn by

griffins? And descend into the depths of the sea? And meet people with their heads in the middle of their stomachs?"

Dominic shook his head, bemused. "I see you've heard the *Chanson d'Alexandre*."

"Then it's not true?" Michel's face fell. "But—his name is carved on the wall. *Some* part of his story must be true."

"Alexander was as real as you or I. He was a mighty king of Macedon, a small mountain kingdom north of Greece. He conquered Persia, Egypt, and all the lands along the Silk Road as far as Hind." In Menelaos' memories, Alexander was a short young man with divine charisma. "He was thought to be descended from a god. After his death this shrine was dedicated to him as the incarnation of Horus, the hawk of the sun."

"Why did the tale-tellers lie about him?"

"Men who long for wonders are never satisfied by tales of exceptional ability."

"You speak as if there is no magic." Michel sounded disappointed.

"Oh, no. Magic is as real as Alexander, and as misrepresented."

Michel sat back against the wall and began rearranging the flasks and scraps of cloth at his feet.

Damn! "What is it?" he asked, but he already knew. He had moved too fast, though it was difficult not to, in the little time that remained before the next knight came to guard him.

"You *are* a sorcerer, aren't you?" Michel muttered. "Sir Jean said so, but I didn't want to believe him." He crossed himself and began a *Confiteor*.

There was a tightness around Dominic's chest. To be rejected now! He felt himself falling from a high mountaintop, without wings, without the power of flight. "No!"

"Then how is it that you know so much? How is it that you make me feel as if I've always known you?"

Though Dominic wanted, with all his heart, to answer Michel's questions, he could not reveal the secrets of the House of the Rose before Michel agreed to come join them, and take up his rightful place as a djinn.

Yet Michel could not make an informed decision without the knowledge. It was an eternal dilemma.

"I am not a sorcerer," Dominic said. "It is true I have abilities beyond those of most men, but any man who can read already has such. You do, yourself. Are you a sorcerer?"

Michel twitched but said nothing.

"I cannot tell why you feel as you do—" the need to tread so carefully upon the path of truth made him dizzy—"but I know so much because I desire to know. I study. I inquire." *I read the memories of those whose blood I drink.* "And I think you share this desire to know."

"Not if it casts me into eternal damnation," Michel whispered.

"How can you know your soul's fate until the moment of death is upon you? In a year, perhaps less, you could read these hieroglyphs as easily as you might read a psalm."

"No..."

"But you could," insisted Dominic. "I offer you a place in the House of the Rose, as one of its liege lords, protector to its people. You would be encouraged to learn all that you could, all that interested you."

"What of the lady you serve? The 'rose of the House of the Rose'?"

"I am not her servant," Dominic said. "I am the Protector of the House, and free to—"

"I am not free," Michel said, wearily. "I am vowed to the Crusade."

"You could—"

"Desert? Deserters and apostates are excommunicated." He looked up with a shadow of his former smile. "So you see, even if I wanted to..." He sighed. "And then there is my cousin Roland."

"The House has need of several Protectors," Dominic said, unwilling to reveal Roland's agreement until Roland and Michel had had the chance to discuss his offer privately. Perhaps Roland could convince young Michel where Dominic could not. "I could arrange an introduction, and if my lady finds Sir Roland pleasing..."

"Vassal to a Saracen merchant," Michel said, shaking his head. "His brother Robert would never forgive him, even if Roland wasn't excommunicated. No. I thank you, but no." There was genuine regret in Michel's voice.

Dominic considered coercing the young knight, but quickly realized that it would avail nothing. The House would accept no one unconsenting. Regret was bitter as myrrh-laced wine.

He couldn't let Michel go without making one last effort to sway his loyalties.

Dominic turned his face slightly toward the firelight, exposing the purple swelling on his cheek, and waited for discovery. As he expected, Michel was quick to notice.

"Sir Dominic! What happened to you?" Without waiting for a reply, he said, shoulders slumping. "Sir Gui. Of course. But he had no right! I gave my word! You're *my* prisoner!"

Dominic murmured, "The others—de Sens, in particular—want me dead. I sense it is a matter of blood feud."

Michel leaned his forehead against his knees. "You're right. Sir Oswald was—well, de Sens is—"

"They won't release me after I'm ransomed." Dominic sweetened his trap with the irresistible bait of truth.

"I won't let them kill you." Michel set his jaw.

"How can you stop them?" Dominic asked. He leaned closer, the fire an intimate bubble of light in the darkness surrounding them. "It would only take a moment: a dagger slipped between my ribs, across my throat ... De Sens may kill you, too. He is mad for his revenge. I have known men like him before." *And I know what it is to want vengeance.*

"But what can I do?" Michel sounded very young, more boy than man.

"You could release me." *There.* The suggestion splashed into a warm ocean of possibility. Dominic surreptitiously tested his bonds. He didn't actually need the young knight's aid. But if Michel chose to help...

Michel recoiled. "I can't!"

Dominic bowed his head, his heart aching. "Then promise me that you will grant my corpse honorable burial. And write to my lady at the House of the Rose in Alexandria. Tell her how I died."

There was a long silence as Michel stared down at the floor, chewing his lower lip. Dominic watched with ancient patience, restraining his power, but not his hope.

Finally Michel drew his knife. "I cannot permit them to kill you, Sir Dominic."

Dominic felt the touch of metal against the inside of his wrists with all the joy of a lover receiving a first, tentative kiss. As his bonds loosened he said, "Wait," before Michel could saw through the remaining fibers. "If I escape now, you will be blamed. Leave the rest."

Michel slid his dagger back into its scabbard and sat down close to the dying fire, as if he were suddenly cold.

"Sir Bernard's watch will start shortly. There's the moon now."

Indeed its edge, showing over the top of the crumbling wall, washed everything beyond the fire's glow with thin silver.

"I owe you a great debt." Dominic tasted happiness as he contemplated the companionship Michel would provide, in time. He *must* consent to rejoin the House, someday. "I will repay you."

"No need for that!"

"There's every need. I have promised it to you, and I keep my promises. I hope that you will reconsider my offer to

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

become Protector of the House, but whatever you decide, you shall want for nothing while you live."

"Sir Dominic, do not speak of it." But Michel's denials were weak and unconvincing. He stopped speaking at the sound of Sir Bernard's approaching footsteps.

Dominic made a final, quiet vow of his own. Honoria, my lost one, I will bring you home.

Chapter Six

"Believe me, a thousand friends suffice thee not; In a single enemy thou hast more than enough."—Ali Ben Abi Taleb (d 660)

Near Lake Manzala, Egypt—Tuesday, August 31st, AD 1249 (21st of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH)

Michel woke abruptly out of a dream of animal-headed gods chanting to the accompaniment of a long-necked lute.

Overhead the grayish-white dawn had swallowed all but the brightest stars. He stretched, and something lumpy changed shape under his cheek. When he fingered it, he felt soft leather and heard the unmistakable jingle of coins.

Yawning, he raised himself on his elbow, rubbed sleep from his eyes and peered at the pouch that had been tucked under his head as he slept. It was surprisingly heavy. He sat up, wondering where Roland had found the extra booty.

"Michel!" Roland called from the entrance to the shrine.

He shoved the pouch down the front of his gambeson and rolled to his feet, shrugging his mail into place. As the coolness of the night dissipated and he started to sweat, he thought longingly of winter mornings in Flanders, all the ponds frozen over, and skating with sharpened beef shinbones strapped to his feet.

He trudged over to join Roland, blinking sleep from his eyes and rolling a stiff neck. When he was near enough to speak without shouting, he said, "Good morrow, cousin. Where did you find the—?"

"Bernard d'Uxelles is dead!" Roland interrupted.

"Dead?" Michel repeated, stupidly. His stomach contracted in dread, suddenly as heavy as the bag concealed in his gambeson. Memories of what he had done the night before began trickling into his awareness. God save him! Had he really cut Sir Dominic's bonds?

He followed Roland into the ruined shrine, where de Sens and the two squires knelt over a body. The stench of death was diminished in the roofless space, but already the first flies were gathering. Sir Bernard's once-immaculate surcote was spotted with dried brown stains, yet there was little blood on the sandy floor. Even stranger, Bernard's waxy features wore no trace of his violent demise.

The only relic of Sir Dominic's presence was a frayed length of rope. *They will kill me*, Dominic had said. He had not said what he would do to the knights who had captured and mistreated him.

Michel swallowed and crossed himself. "Sir Dominic?" he whispered to Roland.

"Sir Gui took him, damn his treacherous soul!" de Sens growled. On their knees beside him Nicolas and Joscelin prayed fervently, all arrogance washed away.

"Guess one-fifth of the ransom wasn't enough for him, the greedy pig," said Sir Jean in disgust. He was leaning against the far wall, digging at the carved hieroglyphs with the point of his dagger.

Michel felt a stab of guilt as he caught sight of the goddess of Truth, crowned with feathers, on the wall above Sir Jean's head.

"Sir Gui took Sir Bernard's sword and shield, and four horses are missing, my lord," Roland reported. He glanced at Sir Bernard's body and crossed himself as Michel had. "God rest his soul."

"God damn Bernard for a weakling! Do you see any signs of a fight here?" de Sens demanded furiously. "He *let* himself be killed."

"But Sir Bernard wouldn't have expected Sir Gui to—"

"*Silence!*" de Sens shouted, just as Roland gave Michel a hard kick. Even the squires stopped praying. "I want de Tancarville—and our prisoner—found!"

"Yes, my lord." Roland bowed. "We'll saddle the horses." He put his hand on Michel's elbow and dragged him by force out of the shrine.

"Can you believe it?" Roland said, heatedly, once they were outside. "Sir Gui stealing our prisoner—our ransom!"

But if that were the case, then—"Roland, where did you get all those coins?"

Roland shot him a startled look. "What coins?" he asked in Flemish, which none of the others understood.

Michel's queasiness intensified. He replied, also in Flemish, "In the pouch you left for me this morning."

"Pouch?" Roland was frowning now. When Michel opened his mouth, Roland hushed him with a quick gesture. "No—not here." He jerked his chin in the direction of the grassy patch by the stream. "Over there."

Maneuvering himself between the horses and the low wall, as far as possible from the door of the shrine, Roland lifted

his saddle and threw it over his palfrey's back. "Now, what's this all about?"

Michel kicked uneasily at the grass underfoot and extracted the pouch from its hiding place. It landed in Roland's outstretched palm with a weighty clink.

Roland quickly untied it, and retrieved a coin. The first rays of the rising sun sparked yellow fire from the profile of a Byzantine emperor. "Holy Virgin," he breathed. "How many are there?"

"I don't know," Michel answered, his heart knocking. "I didn't have a chance to count them. They were just ... there when I woke."

"I wouldn't question such luck, cuz!" Grinning, Roland thrust the pouch at Michel. "Quick—you're better at counting than I am. Are we rich?"

Michel opened the mouth of the pouch as wide as it would go. He counted, moving coins aside with his finger, then stopped, and slowly re-counted as a cold prickling moved down his spine. There were a hundred gold bezants...

The exact amount of Sir Dominic's agreed-upon ransom. Michel gulped and looked up. "Roland, I don't think we should—"

Roland's sharp hiss silenced him instantly. "Put that away, Michou. We don't want the others to find out. You can tell me later—and I have some news for you as well."

It was easier to obey than explain as Joscelin and Nicolas stumbled out of the shrine and grabbed a saddle blanket to shroud Sir Bernard's body.

* * * *

While the knights broke their fast on leftover chunks of charred horsemeat and stale bread washed down with sparing sips of ale, the two squires strapped the body onto one of the mules. Two others were already loaded with yesterday's casualties.

They mounted a few minutes later, as the red-gold sun glared down at them from a flat blue sky.

"Look! Hoofprints," de Sens barked, pointing, as they left the shrine's courtyard. "We can catch de Tancarville and recover our prisoner!"

Michel saw that the platter-sized semicircles of destrier hooves mixed in with the smaller curves of palfreys and mules. How could de Sens discern Sir Gui's tracks in such a jumble?

He said as much to Roland, and received an eloquent shrug in reply.

"What else can he say?" Roland pulled his palfrey around to follow de Sens. His destrier, tied to the palfrey's harness, trailed obediently.

Michel wished he had Sir Bernard's palfrey to ride, instead of facing another day of his own destrier's bone-jarring gait. Then his thoughts became mired in a thick syrup of heat and humidity. He could barely raise his head to see the tall, swaying reeds on either side of the track they pursued. Much easier just to let his chin droop as the horses' shadows rippled over the much-trodden earth.

* * * *

"Look!" shouted Joscelin.

Michel roused from his dreamy contemplation, not sure how much time had passed. There was a ruined building in a broad courtyard to the right, and something about its crumbling walls tugged at Michel's memory. If it weren't so hot, he might be able to think clearly...

"That's Sir Gui's horse!" Roland exclaimed.

Michel saw a destrier coming toward them through a thick stand of reeds, nervously dragging something on the ground behind it.

As one, they rode forward to meet it. When it emerged from the reeds they saw that the war-horse was dragging a body like a grotesque sledge. Someone had bound Sir Gui's feet to one stirrup with cord. Light glinted intermittently from the mail on the upper half of the body, but it was nude from the waist down. The groin and thighs of the large corpse were a mess of torn flesh caked with dried blood.

Gui's destrier whinnied at the sight of the other horses, and it began to trot towards them, starting a little at each bump of its unwieldy burden. The horse's coat was dark with sweat, and foam dripped from the silver-studded bridle.

Out of the corner of his eye, Michel saw Roland cross himself. He swallowed bile when he saw that Gui's cock and balls had been hacked off.

De Sens barked an order and the two squires dismounted. Nicolas caught Sir Gui's horse, and the beast stood still, shivering. Joscelin darted around, and with frequent glances at the destrier's steel-shod hooves, drew his dagger to cut the cord binding Sir Gui's feet. As the corpse's naked legs flopped

to the ground, the destrier tried to rear, nearly toppling Nicolas, but the squire hung on to the horse's bridle and eventually calmed the great beast.

"Remove his coif," de Sens said harshly.

Joscelin knelt by the corpse and did as his lord bade him.

Sir Gui de Tancarville had not died easily. His open eyes stared above the bloody gag that bound his mouth and bulging cheeks. Hesitantly, Joscelin used his dagger to cut away the gag. The cloth fell away, revealing Gui's bloodless lips stretched around his dismembered genitals.

In the silence that followed, Michel clearly heard Joscelin's horrified, "Oh," before the squire turned aside, vomiting helplessly.

* * * *

Later that afternoon, the smell coming from the bundled corpses on the mules announced that the Egyptian sun had done its work.

"We'll bury them here," de Sens said, indicating their latest stopping place, a grass-covered courtyard before a ruined building.

"But m'lord, it's not hallowed ground," Sir Jean objected.

"We'll come back for Oswal—for them all later," de Sens said with a grimace. "Or do you want to ride back to Damietta with that stink?"

Using the single spade that the squires had packed, it took a long time to dig a grave large enough to hold four bodies. Joscelin and Nicolas took turns, but the hole was barely waist-deep when the spade struck a layer of paving stones.

"That's it, then," Joscelin said, wiping blistered hands on his surcote. "We can't dig any further."

The knights left the scanty shade of the building and approached the bundles, now shimmering with an iridescent blanket of flies. They carried the shrouded bodies over to the shallow pit, and swung them in to land with undignified thumps.

While the two squires piled the excavated dirt back into the hole, Michel rejoined Roland in the shade. He wiped away the sweat stinging his eyes and drank from his waterskin.

"Let us pray for them," ordered de Sens, dirty fingers pinching the crooked bridge of his nose.

Michel knelt and bowed his head, but his thoughts were profane. As the others prayed, his memory of the previous night's events returned in small flashes. There had been a poultice, and wine, and hieroglyphs. Questions had been asked and answered, though Michel could not remember what they had discussed. But then—he had slashed through Sir Dominic's bindings, hadn't he? He wished he could be sure, but it was so hard to remember.

Had Dominic escaped and killed Sir Bernard and Sir Gui? Or had Sir Gui actually killed Sir Bernard and taken Sir Dominic? But then who had killed Sir Gui?

Had he really let Sir Dominic escape? Why would he do that?

Michel's mind plodded round and round, like a mule tied to a grindstone. What had he done? Why couldn't he remember? And why was this place so familiar?

His musings were interrupted by a guttural scream.

Michel leapt to his feet and drew his sword in one smooth motion. The others did the same, but when they looked, there was nothing. They were alone in the courtyard.

"It must have been an animal," de Sens declared.

Michel couldn't shake the feeling there was something still wrong, but it was Roland who asked: "Where did Sir Jean go?"

* * * *

Dominic held his struggling captive tightly as he prepared to test Sir Jean.

Just a few yards away from the narrow road, they were completely hidden by the dense stands of papyrus, invisible even if his spell of confusion failed.

Dominic's leg and broken ribs were now fully healed, and he felt stronger and more alive than he had in decades. The laws of the House forbade the drinking of human blood by the djinni except when sanctioned by their duties as Protectors of the House. But he was far away from House, now, and intoxicated by vengeance.

Closing his eyes in anticipation, Dominic lowered his head to taste the blood trickling from a small cut in the dirty skin just above the neck of Sir Jean's hauberk.

Unlike the retribution he had owed Sir Gui for his vicious threat, Dominic had no particular enmity towards Sir Jean, who had not injured any of the kin directly. If the knight was not one of the Lost, then his death would be swift and painless.

Sir Jean's memories exploded through their newly-formed bond: fighting at the side of a knight wearing gilded mail. An arrow penetrates the knight's armor, and he falls from his saddle. Jean, still mounted, prays, "Please God, let my lord live!"

But his prayer is not answered. And in the aftermath of battle, he has no liege to ransom him from the army of Amaury de Montfort, no one to save him from the flaying questions of the Inquisitors.

"I recant my heresy! I confess my sins!" he whimpers through broken teeth, repeating hollow words of a false faith.

Dominic was surprised. He had not expected a Crusader to have been a Cathar. That religion had been ruthlessly suppressed after the Crusade that had destroyed Béziers. Intrigued, he swallowed another mouthful, and probed deeper into Sir Jean's consciousness...

Hunger. Painful, permanent hunger, so deep it is beyond crying over. He sucks vainly at raw knuckles, wishing his real parents would find him, and bring him to his true home. He dreams of this home, where food is plentiful, and people never shout, and the scent of roses fills the air...

Surprised, Dominic mistimed a swallow of blood and choked. Coughing and gasping while Jean tried wildly to get away, he hung on while he brought himself and his captive under control.

It wasn't unheard-of to find the Lost of the House clustered together. But to find three at once!

His composure recovered, Dominic ruthlessly pulled Jean back into his embrace:

"Remember me!" The attackers batter down the thick oaken doors at the front of the church and push into the jammed, cacophonous cathedral. Like mowers in a field, the men-at-arms cut down the close-packed people. A gore-stained sword cleaves through her chest. Her last conscious prayer is, Remember me! I am Named Utusagila!

And earlier...

The eyes in the oval bronze mirror sparkle like sun-caught amber. The face is strange and familiar at the same time, one she has called her own for fourteen years.

Honorias, her copper hair hidden by a veil and wimple, stoops to give her a kiss of welcome, saying "I have Raised her up, and Name this woman, whom you know as Jehanne, daughter of Athir, of the line of Atrahasis, Utusagila-who-once-was. Favored by the Sun, you are remembered, and returned to the House of the Rose. We rejoice that you are Found. It is good to meet again!"

Dominic reeled and withdrew, though he kept firm hold of Sir Jean, who still battled for his current life.

"I remember you," Dominic whispered into Sir Jean's ear. "One of our Lost, you are now Found. You are of the House of the Rose, if you wish to return. I am the Opener of the Way. Will you let me in?"

"What do you mean, you remember me? What kind of fiend are you?" Sir Jean's voice was hoarse. "Let me go and fight me man-to-man!"

"I remember you. I remember your True Name. I know why you dream of roses and a girl's face in a bronze mirror," Dominic murmured gently. "Do you wish to remember, too?"

"How do you know—" Sir Jean's struggles ceased. "Are you the Devil of the Earth? I renou—"

"Don't!" Dominic warned. "I can only Name you if you consent. Let not the Mother of the House weep because of your refusal."

"My mother is dead."

"Your heart's mother lives. Your true home is near. Let me open the way to your memory. If you still want to fight me, afterward, then we shall fight."

"I make no pact with you. I will not sell my soul!"

"You were always so stubborn." Dominic rested his cheek against Jean's mail-coifed ear. "I do not want your soul. Shall I open the way, or not?"

Jean tried to twist free, but Dominic's hold pinned him so he could hardly move.

Dominic sighed. "It is in your hands to choose forgetfulness, or to choose memory. I remember you—we were friends, once. If you do not choose to be Raised and Named, then ... may we meet again." His right hand rose and gripped Sir Jean's chin in preparation for breaking his neck.

"No! Wait!" Sir Jean cried. "I want to remember! Whatever you want! Don't—don't—"

But his next words were choked off as Dominic reached out with his mind and tore the veil from Jean's memories.

A tumbling flood of sensations, images, and knowledge battered Sir Jean, who groaned like a man at the height of climax.

Not daring to dip too deeply, Dominic rode the crests of those memories, catching glimpses of lives and deaths. He

muffled the noises coming out of Sir Jean's mouth, for fear the other knights would hear and come to investigate. His powers of concealment were not infallible.

Jean's struggles subsided into a series of gulping gasps and head-to-toe tremors. Dominic turned him gently in his embrace, so that they stood face-to-face.

"Hail, Utusagila. It is good to meet again," he said, and gave the knight the traditional kiss of welcome.

Jean sagged, and began to weep. Dominic helped the knight down to the mat of crushed reeds. There, surrounded by the sharp green scent of broken papyrus, Jean covered his face with shaking hands. But as fast as he wiped tears away, more flowed.

"I remember being a woman," he said shakily. "I remember everything." He stared, bewildered, at the cracked leather palm of his mail mitt. With trembling fingers he tried to pull it off.

Dominic went to one knee beside him, and efficiently tugged the mitt away. He held Jean's callused hand between his own. "I have no mirror with me to show you the face you wear now, but I have Raised you, and I remember your True Name, Utusagila, Favored by the Sun."

Jean gripped Dominic's hand. He bent to touch his forehead to the back of the hand he held so tightly, then he sat up. "My lord—Menelaos?" The question was full of as much doubt as recognition. "Do you yet live?" Hesitantly, a knotted finger traced the vanished scar on Dominic's forehead.

Schooling himself not to pull away, Dominic nodded.

"And my lord Raymond-Soleil? Lady Honoria? I saw them fall in B-Béziers, before I—before I—" Jean shuddered. "Are they Found yet?"

"Raymond-Soleil is still Lost. The two young Flemish knights with whom you traveled are Honoria and Marcus. One of them has consented to rejoin the House, and I hope to convince the other."

"That is wonderful news, my lord!" Joy broke like the sun through clouds in Jean's tear-ravaged face.

"Get up, now. Our kin camp nearby, and will rejoice, as I do, to see you again."

With help, Jean struggled to his feet. Dominic moved him along a barely visible trail through the papyrus reeds, sometimes supporting Jean. After they had walked a little ways, Jean spoke. "Our ... kin. We, the knights with Baron Bugger—that is, my lord de Sens—attacked them. Killed them."

"You killed none," Dominic reminded him.

Jean relaxed, and they walked on further, until he said wonderingly in the langue d'oc of his birth, "My whole life seems like a miserable dream." His mouth widened into a triumphant smile, and he continued in exultant Arabic: "I live again! I'm going home! And I will *never* have to join the Templars! My lord, you have my undying thanks."

Dominic grinned with him.

* * * *

"By God's wounds, I'm going to kill that filthy Saracen!" de Sens swore as they stopped to let their mounts and pack

mules drink at a small stream. They had been riding for hours through the marsh, fruitlessly searching for their former prisoner and the missing Sir Jean.

Michel heard a faint chuckle. Hairs rising on his arms and the back of his neck, he half-drew his sword and scrutinized the reeds surrounding them. He saw nothing, and the sound did not repeat. Perhaps he had imagined it.

Crossing himself, Michel remounted his weary destrier, and joined the others. Could he really have been such a fool as to betray his companions so they would all be killed by sorcery?

His mount shuffled down the muddy track in the wake of the others, and Michel's thoughts slowed. Yet he noticed everyone was unusually silent. Even Roland forsook his usual cheerful jests.

Michel bowed his head, and began to pray a set of Paternosters in penance. After a while, the holy Latin phrases soothed his troubled mind. Little by little he realized that the more he focused on the words of the prayer, the more aware he became of his surroundings.

The track they were following through the papyrus was thoroughly churned by hoofprints. This was not the road to Damietta. They had never left the path that led by the ruined temple, and had been meandering in an immense circle.

His surmise was confirmed when they passed the roofless shrine again. This time, Michel remembered it, remembered all that had transpired within its cursed walls. There had been a bizarre conversation by firelight, and a half-remembered dream of bearded lips brushing his...

Michel stopped in the middle of his prayer, cold despite the sticky heat. "Roland, we camped here last night!"

Roland looked at him vaguely. "No, we didn't. We camped—uh, we were..." His voice trailed off, and all expression smoothed out of his face.

Fog drifted into Michel's mind, obscuring his earlier conclusions and the reasoning behind them. He concentrated fiercely. *Pater noster qui es in coelis ...* "It's a spell. We're being ensorcelled."

"Don't be an ass, Michel." Roland sounded almost normal. "We're just trying to find Sir Jean in this swampy hell-hole." He gazed around at the reeds. "I hope we find him soon. My sword is rusting in its scabbard." He smiled absently.

Michel studied his cousin's vacant blue eyes, alarm bells tolling distantly in his mind.

"Something's happening to us," Michel insisted. But already he couldn't remember why he should say so. It was so hard to think...

"Don't stop now!" de Sens ordered over his shoulder. He turned in his saddle, his face dangerously suffused and sweating. "Will you let that Saracen bastard get away?" He spurred down the well-trodden path, almost out of sight in the reeds in just a moment, his squires on his heels.

Roland kneed his palfrey into a reluctant trot, and Michel drew up the rear, trying to remember why he had stopped at all.

* * * *

The sun was descending when they found shelter for the night in the courtyard of an ancient, ruined temple. Michel remembered very little of the previous hours. As he dismounted, his throat parched, he heard de Sens shouting.

"Nicolas! Joscelin!"

Blinking, Michel surveyed the courtyard and saw neither the squires nor their palfreys.

"Nicolas! Joscelin!"

Michel's thoughts were sticky as cobwebs.

Who had disappeared? Oh—the squires.

Michel could not recall when he had last seen them. He had a murky recollection that he had been trying to tell Roland something important about this shrine ... but what?

He exhaled sharply with frustration, took hold of his destrier's bridle and led him to a patch of well-cropped grass in a corner of the courtyard. Fresh dung was evidence that other horses had been here recently.

Roland joined him, palfrey and big destrier in tow.

Then de Sens shouted. Michel whirled and sprinted toward the sound, Roland only a pace behind him.

The Baron was staring, white-eyed, at a mound of recently displaced earth in the center of the courtyard. On it, Sir Jean's dolphin-embroidered surcote was neatly laid out like an effigy. Reddish-brown stains marked where blood had flowed from the neck.

De Sens moved like an old man as he crossed himself.

"Lord have mercy on us. We have to find that Saracen and kill him before he kills us all." He half-drew his sword, then paused and looked down at his weapon, as if he had forgotten

what he wanted to do with it. He let it slide back into the scabbard, pushed back his mail coif, scratched at his dark, close-cropped hair and wandered away.

Michel crossed himself too, and knelt to pray for poor Sir Jean. As he finished the first Paternoster, and began a second, the things he had forgotten during the long day returned, and the knowledge left him chilled and shaken. Of the brave party of ten who had set off from Damietta, only three were left.

Michel glanced sideways. Roland knelt beside him, his lips moving. Had the holy power of prayer freed him, also?

"Roland?" Michel ventured. "Roland, do you remember? We spent last night here."

"What are you talking about, cuz?" Roland's voice was slow and a little slurred.

"Do you remember the pouch of coins I showed you? Or digging these graves here yesterday?"

Roland frowned. "Are you sun-sick?"

"No!" Michel said, already losing track of his thoughts. Quickly he said another Paternoster to keep the malignant spell at bay. "We captured a Saracen knight, a powerful sorcerer. He escaped and—" Michel swallowed hard. "He killed them all."

"Killed who?" Roland's puzzled gaze slid away from Sir Jean's bloody surcote.

"Bernard, Gui, Jean, Nicolas, Joscelin—they're all dead! Roland, we have to leave this accursed place now, else we'll be riding around in circles again tomorrow, just waiting for that sorcerer to pick us off!"

"Run? I never took you for a coward," Roland said coldly.

How dare Roland give him the ultimate insult! Michel's hand closed around his sword hilt. He would kill him for this—no, he would not. He must forgive anything Roland said or did under the influence of this cursed magic. Michel said another prayer under his breath. "Cousin, we're ensorcelled."

"Sorcery?" Roland laughed in disbelief. "Where did you acquire this maggot?"

Michel resisted the mist of forgetfulness rising in his mind. "Sir Dominic tempted me with—well, it doesn't matter. Then he left me his ransom because I helped him escape. Now he's killing everyone! Roland!"

"Um..." Roland rubbed his face, as if just awakening from sleep. "I'm sorry, Michou. What were you saying?"

"Nothing." Michel rose from his knees. He kicked morosely at a stone. Walking from the pathetic mound, and from his cousin, he prayed ... *sed libera nos a malo*. But he despaired of being delivered from evil. Roland couldn't help him; he couldn't even help himself.

He was on his own. "Per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen."

For lack of any better plan, and because it needed doing, he set about caring for his destrier, stripping off saddle and pad, and rubbing the big stallion down. Automatically, he began whispering another Paternoster: "*Pater noster qui es in caelis ...*" Dried lather streaked the usually glossy iron gray coat. The poor beast was so tired he hardly twitched as Michel groomed him.

"Sanctificetur nomen tuum."

He looped a hobble around the thick feathering of hair above the huge hooves and slid the silver-chased bridle down over his nose.

"Adveniat regnum tuum." How do I save Roland and the others?

The bridle was badly in need of cleaning.

"Fiat voluntas tua..." I am the only one who can resist the enchantment.

The water from the stream was cool. Tiny fish fled from his fingers as he rinsed the half-chewed grass from the bit. "*Sicut in caelo.*" Therefore, I am the only one who can go for help.

I have to go, or we'll all die. Quickly he gathered up his saddle and gear from where he had dumped them, re-saddled his mount, and stripped off the hobble. " ... *et in terra.*"

He had to pinch the stallion's ear before he could slide the bridle back onto a violently shaking head. "Sorry, fellow." He patted the sturdy neck before he mounted.

"Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie." We have a long way to go tonight.

Michel expected either de Sens or Roland to notice as he spurred the destrier into a stumbling trot and jumped over the low courtyard wall. But nothing disturbed the twilight silence.

"Et dimitte nobis debita nostra." Forgive me, Roland.

As he set his mount on the path north to Damietta the only sounds he heard were the songs of birds and the beat of his destrier's hooves.

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

"Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris, et ne nos inducas in tentationem." Let me find the way back to Damietta.

"...sed libera nos a malo." Deliver me from evil, O God.
Deliver me.

Chapter Seven

"Anaxagoras said to a man who was grieving because he was dying in a foreign land, 'The descent to Hades is the same from every place.'"—*The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD)

"Michel?" Roland strode to the low boundary wall of crumbling stone and squinted through the gloom.

Nothing on the path.

To his right, the sky flamed orange. Above him, it darkened to indigo. Clouds of bats swirled over the marsh as ragged lines of waterfowl flew to their roosts. Roland turned back to the courtyard, unease crawling along his spine.

"Michel!" he shouted.

The faint scent of smoke reminded Roland that they would be spending another hungry night here in the middle of nowhere. He rubbed his forehead as he tried to recall who 'they' were. There was himself, there was the Baron, and there was ... oh, of course. Michel.

Where was Michel? Roland strained to remember. Only flashes came to him: Michel, his head bowed in prayer. Michel, urgently telling Roland something ... important. But what?

"Michel!" he called, but not even echoes answered.

He walked to the grass patch where the horses were grazing and counted. There were his palfrey and destrier, and the Baron's destrier. Where was Michel's horse? And shouldn't there be pack-mules, too?

What had Michel told him? Roland strained at the memory like a beggar reaching out to tug on a rich merchant's gown.

A shadow in the corner of the courtyard came to life and Roland nearly swallowed his suddenly pounding heart. But it was only the Baron's brown palfrey, shaking out its mane, and settling in to sleep on three legs.

What had he expected?

The image of their former captive came back to Roland with perfect clarity. White-blazed dark hair, intense gray eyes, an elusive sense of familiarity...

Dizzy, frightened, and breathless all at once, Roland was unable to move. What was he doing?

He was looking for someone. Who was he looking for? Why was he standing out here with the horses? Roland carried his gear back to the tiny fire that served neither to heat nor to cook their non-existent food.

The Baron was poking at the flames with a reed whose tip smoldered dull red. He did not look up as Roland seated himself opposite. A moment later, Roland yawned and said, "God's Nails, but I'm tired!"

De Sens merely shrugged.

Roland unrolled his blankets, fighting to keep his eyes open long enough to unbelt his sword and unbuckle his spurs. He lay down, pillowing his head against his saddle, and let sleep claim him.

* * * *

After an eternity of repeating Paternosters under his breath, Michel finally guided his mount onto the broad path to

Damietta that ran along the bank of Lake Manzala. In the dark the expanse of black water reflected the faint silver of starlight broken by the reeds and the bodies of sleeping ducks.

"Per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen."

He rode on, and didn't start another prayer. After a dozen strides, and no fog in his mind, he relaxed.

Until this moment, he had feared he could not escape the sorcerer's malign influence.

Michel husked one last Paternoster as thanks, and encouraged his exhausted mount onward.

* * * *

Well after midnight, Dominic finally tore himself away from the House of the Rose's exuberant welcome celebration at their temporary camp on the lakeshore. It was not every day that one of the Lost returned, and Sir Jean had been welcomed with food and drink and many embraces.

But before they had finished relating the family's major events since Utusagila had last been Raised and Named, Dominic found himself impatient to return to the remaining knights and complete his campaign of vengeance.

He had saved Amalric de Sens for last. Afterward, Dominic would bring Roland and Michel home to the House of the Rose. But first de Sens would drink the dregs from a cup of despair.

Dominic flew along the lakeshore, then hovered in the air above Alexander's broken shrine.

In the east rose a gibbous moon, mottled gold from some distant sandstorm. Its light was not kind to Amalric de Sens. The Baron, keeping watch over a pitiful fire, looked as if he had wallowed in a grave. The skin under his eyes was pouched and his face, where not covered by mud and a week-old beard, had developed new lines, like fractures in desert earth. He scratched at a tic in a muscle over his cheekbone.

Only one bedroll shared the fireside. Snuffling a little, its inhabitant rolled over and drew a blanket over blond hair.

Dominic had no time to wonder which cousin was here, and where the other might be, for de Sens jerked to his feet and stood over the sleeper. "Wake up, damn you! Or I'll give you to that fiend." He kicked, hard.

The blond sleeper shuddered, but did not wake. The touch of Dominic's power saw to that.

It was time. Dominic made a sound of anticipation, low in his throat.

Drawing his sword, the Baron snarled, "Where are you, you devil?"

"Here." Dominic landed softly by the fire.

"Holy Trinity!" Whatever else he might be, de Sens was not a coward. He shifted his stance and his grip on his hilt. "Meet me in a fair fight—if you can!"

"Yes, let us fight 'fair,'" Dominic agreed, sending a fist of air smashing into the Baron's ribs, in the same place de Sens had kicked him.

The baron gave a grunt of pain as bones cracked and the air was forced out of his lungs. He bared his teeth. "Damn

you!" he cried, charging Dominic, swinging his sword in a low arc.

Easily sidestepping the attack, Dominic slapped de Sens's hand. The sword flew and embedded itself in the soft earth several feet away. Dominic slipped his hand under de Sens's arm, stepped behind him and grabbed for his neck, imprisoning the extended arm. He did the same to the Baron's left arm, immobilizing de Sens in his embrace.

The Baron's struggles were useless. Dominic waited until de Sens' cursing gave way to snarls of rage.

"Do you have any last words, my lord de Sens?" Dominic's power called forth the truth.

"Why? Why did you have to kill him?"

"Him?" Dominic encouraged quietly.

"Oswald. My Oswald." De Sens flailed like a line-caught fish even after it was obvious that he could not dislodge Dominic's hold on him. At length he gasped, "If you were God or the Devil himself I would kill you for taking him from me! He was mine! Mine alone to keep, or to discard! You had no right to kill him!"

"He attacked me," Dominic said. "Fool, you tried to steal from the House of the Rose, and you killed men under my protection."

The next part promised to be unpleasant, and Dominic almost yielded to the temptation simply to break the wretch's neck. But duty dictated that he test de Sens's blood before deciding the baron's fate.

Dominic's teeth tore through gritty skin and he drank spurting blood as fast as he could swallow.

De Sens cried out, "Sir Roland! To me! To me!" but his hoarse shouts failed to break Roland's *glamour*-assisted sleep.

Then the blood bond formed and Dominic began to see de Sens's memories: A procession passes through his town, shining in the summer sunlight: pages, squires, knights, nobles, and the King with his young Queen, all bearing pilgrim's scrip and staff, all wearing mantles with crosses worked on each shoulder. The King, with his lean face and golden diadem, pauses before Amalric. "Take the Cross with us to atone for your sins, my lord de Sens."

Sins, yes, in plenty ... Oswald's youthful glance meets his, bold across a tourney field, full of promises deeper than friendship ... rough groping in the dark, pain and pleasure inextricably mixed...

Dominic encompassed all of de Sens' lives, with their paltry conquests and secrets, and was relieved to see that de Sens's soul was neither of the House nor of the Apkallu.

When the dying man was beyond resistance from loss of blood, Dominic asked, "How did you find our caravan?"

Dominic saw the answer in de Sens's blood: An amber-eyed Saracen, waiting in the shadow of Damietta's wall, bows and says in fluent langue d'oïl, "My lord, I have information which might be of interest to you."

Nazir al Warda, Dominic thought in savage recognition. One of Sharibet's most trusted agents in Egypt.

With his knife he slit de Sens' throat, to disguise the marks that his teeth had made, and let the remainder of de Sens' blood pour out into the sandy dirt of the courtyard.

As a last breath wheezed and bubbled out of de Sens's throat, Dominic cursed the departing soul for having harmed the kin of the House: "Your heart, heavy with sin, let the demons of the underworld devour. Let your heart be forgotten. Your name, defiled with sin, let it be erased from the Book of Life. Let your name be forgotten. Your spirit, steeped in sin, let your spirit be forgotten unto the seventh generation. *Be forgotten!*" The spirit of Amalric de Sens would bear Dominic's curse for seven journeys through the Underworld, never to be Raised and Named, even if he were fortunate enough to be born into the House of the Rose.

Dominic let the corpse fall. He sank to his knees in a fury of revulsion, grabbing for grass and earth. He scrubbed away any traces of blood that might remain on his lips.

Sharibet had sent this noble ruffian and his pretty entourage as a test for him.

Would she think he had succeeded, or failed?

* * * *

Roland dreamed of shouting and the scrape of steel drawn from scabbard, but it had nothing to do with him. He rested safe and warm, dreaming of beautiful Saracen maidens with amber eyes and firm, small breasts...

Then his dream shifted. Now he flew through the night air, swooping through the cool air as silently as an owl. But even as he dreamed, Roland wondered why his whole weight hung from a point on his ribcage. Pain—or perhaps an unheard command—yanked him into consciousness. He opened his

eyes and saw his blanket fluttering down past his feet. Far down.

He was rising into the sky! Like a rabbit snatched from a field by an eagle, held so tightly he could barely breathe.

The blanket landed on the little fire, whose dull red glow winked out momentarily, then flared up to reveal my lord de Sens's sprawled, mutilated body.

Roland screwed his eyes shut, hoping this was just a nightmare. But the wind continued rushing past his skin, and all the midnight sounds of the marsh, chirring insects and frogs and startled birds, came from far below.

He gulped and cracked open one eye. In the moonlight the waters of Lake Manzala glittered beneath his feet, rippling like the surface of a mill-pond. He squirmed, dizzy, and clutched the arm that held him.

"It's a long way down, and you haven't yet regained your powers." Sir Dominic's tone was mildly amused, as if there were nothing unusual about hanging unsupported in the air.

The muzziness that had slowed Roland's thoughts for the past days vanished and everything became perfectly, painfully clear. *Oh, God.* Michel's mad story about Sir Dominic must be true.

"Holy Virgin and all the saints, protect me!"

"They can't hear you." Sir Dominic sighed. "There are no gods."

All hope fled. The sorcerer was insane, as well as inhuman. He was going to die. Roland choked back screams until his throat ached.

"Stop struggling. I mean you no harm, Sir Roland. You are safe with me." Sir Dominic loosened his grip a little, as if to demonstrate.

"Please," whispered Roland as hot piss ran down his leg, dripping off his toes, falling toward the silver-dappled waters. "I—I'll do anything you want. Just don't ... don't drop me." The sharp stench of shame filled his nose as his damp feet paddled empty air.

"Anything?" The arm tightened fractionally. "Tell me then. Where is Michel?"

"I don't know!" Roland regretted honesty at once.

"How ... unfortunate," Sir Dominic drawled, relaxing his hold.

The lake gaped below Roland like a hungry mouth. In a blind panic, he clawed frantically at Sir Dominic's shoulders, trying to climb him like a tree branch. He found no purchase, leaving trails of blood and the best part of his fingertips embedded in the rough metal surface of the sorcerer's hauberk.

"Stop squirming!" Dominic commanded as Roland began to slip from his grasp. His right hand caught the back of Roland's surcote, but with a groan, the worn linen tore.

Roland's bloody fingertips slipped and he tumbled, shrieking, through the emptiness.

He was still screaming when a brutal blow slammed into him and a burning band tightened around his ribs. He coughed for breath and the pressure relented. The wind's rush died to silence.

The demon had caught him. The glittering lake lay placid, far beneath his swinging feet, and drew no closer. Roland moaned, and felt something very like love for his captor.

"I apologize for that—it's difficult to carry another while flying," Sir Dominic said, his chest heaving with exertion. "It's a pity you don't know where Michel has gone. Did you notice when he left?"

Roland shook his head, but a strange feeling came over him and he said exactly what was on his mind. "I looked for him about sunset, but he was gone."

"Damn. He'll be halfway back to Damietta by now. Well, he can't leave Egypt without my hearing of it. I will find him. With your help or not."

The strange pressure was still there behind his forehead, so Roland added, "He said he freed you, and that you paid him your ransom, and then you killed everyone. Are you going to kill me, too?"

"No." The sorcerer chuckled and the strange feeling stopped, like a door shutting on a lighted room. "I will keep my word to you, Sir Roland. You will be a lord in the House of the Rose."

It appeared that he wasn't going to be killed, after all. But Roland devoutly wished he had thought before rashly accepting Dominic's invitation.

Even as his fear-numbed mind struggled to grasp the prospect of ruling over beings who could cast spells and fly, Roland noticed that they were making steady progress through the air. The wind blew tears from his cheeks and chilled his damp thighs. Below, the only visible marker in the

vast blackness was a tiny orange spot of light. In moments it grew and took shape, becoming a bonfire in a clearing.

As they descended, Roland clenched his eyes shut. When he felt blessed ground under him again, his knees gave way and he kissed the earth, praising God and all the saints for preserving his life.

He opened his eyes to a blaze of light encircled by a wall of papyrus reeds. The scents of spices mingled with the delicious odor of roasting meat.

Sir Dominic called out in Arabic and a reply came from beyond the fire. A Saracen stepped forward, said something, and bowed respectfully in greeting.

Dominic pulled Roland to his feet, keeping a grip on his arm, support and restraint in equal measure. The Saracen led them forward. Mules and horses were tethered next to neatly stacked bales and bundles. Nearly a score of men in robes and turbans sat cross-legged, drinking something out of a leather bottle that they passed around with a great deal of merriment.

Roland recognized the caravan the knights had attacked two days previously, and he wondered what treatment he could expect from them, Sir Dominic's promises notwithstanding.

Astonishment replaced apprehension as Roland caught sight of a robed and turbaned man who looked exactly like the missing Sir Jean de Pézenas. But it couldn't be, not joking in Arabic as if he were a Saracen born!

Then the man caught Roland's gaze upon him. He gave a tipsy broken-toothed grin, waved, and called out in langue

d'oïl: "Sir Roland! Or should I say—my lord Marcus! Welcome back!"

Marcus? Roland gaped at him, then caught sight of two prisoners sprawled on the ground on the other side of the fire. They were the squires Nicolas and Joscelin—gagged and chained like slaves, but still alive!

Sir Dominic said something to the assembled Saracens, giving Roland's shoulder a hearty shake in emphasis. The turbaned men leaped up, laughing and shouting. Out of the corner of his eye, Roland caught the gleam of Dominic's teeth against his dark beard.

The sorcerer ruffled Roland's hair, and a chorus of greetings rose amid friendly smiles. One of the older men approached them, arms held wide. "Enlil! Enlil!" Clearly, he wanted to embrace Roland.

Roland took an abortive step away. Or tried to. Restrained by Dominic's grip, he settled for a panicked glare.

The old Saracen looked crestfallen, but Sir Jean called out, "What did you expect? He doesn't remember yet." He added something in Arabic that made the older man smile apologetically at Roland, then back away.

Roland wondered desperately what was going on. He had expected animosity from those he had attacked a few days ago.

Sir Dominic broke the uneasy moment with curt orders.

One of the men scrambled to his feet and began digging around the piled bundles. In a moment he found a worn leather case and carried it to Sir Dominic.

When the sorcerer opened the case, Roland froze at the shining metal instruments revealed within. Braided metal hilts held ominously shaped knives. One implement was very like a barber-chirurgeon's saw. His privates shriveled as he recalled what had happened so hideously to Sir Gui.

Sir Dominic looked at him sidelong as he withdrew a small round flask from the case. Another Saracen hastened to offer a steaming cup, into which the sorcerer poured a palmful of dark granules. He swirled the hot liquid then handed it to Roland. "Drink," he commanded. "It's a sleeping potion."

Roland's hand shook so badly, the liquid slopped over his fingers, scalding them. If he drank, would he awaken a whole man?

Sir Dominic read his terrified glance in the direction of the chirurgeon's knives. "It's harmless, meant only to keep you from making trouble until we reach our destination. No harm will come to you before I present you to Lady Sharibet. And I assure you she has no use for a eunuch."

God be thanked! Roland thought. *He's really going to bring me to the House of the Rose?* He drank the potion off, grimacing at its bitterness, and the night soon faded like another dream.

* * * *

Michel alternately walked and cantered through the sultry darkness, pushing his worn-out stallion as hard as he dared. The journey out of Damietta, at an easy pace to leave the horses fresh enough to fight, had taken a day and a half. He hoped he could cover the distance back to the city by mid-

morning, if God was with him and his destrier did not pull up lame or fall dead.

He passed cultivated fields and darkened villages, evading guard dogs at a heavy gallop. Taking frequent rests to allow his horse mouthfuls of grass and water, Michel had ample leisure to reflect on his part in the disastrous raid. How could he have been so foolish as to believe Dominic's promises? Was it sorcery?

But if he had been ensorcelled, why had Sir Dominic paid him?

Michel cast his mind to the events of the previous night. A poultice of wine and myrrh, a lesson in the picture-writing of the old Egyptians.. "It would only take a moment: a dagger slipped between my ribs, across my throat ... De Sens may kill you, too." And something else ... Something important that he couldn't quite remember.

He pushed against an invisible barrier in his mind, and something gave. Suddenly, he remembered Dominic kissing his wound, his mouth, whispering urgent words of love...

Michel felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach. His gorge rose, and he leaned to one side, vomiting bile and sour water.

He had been kissed by the sorcerer as a man might kiss a maid. And Michel had enjoyed it, had wanted more. He wiped convulsively at his mouth. "No. Please God, no."

But once recovered, the memory was not easily banished: Dominic's warm mouth, the steady pressure of his fingers against Michel's skin, pulling him closer, the response in Michel's groin...

And then there were his dreams ... Michel began to shake. He was an unnatural sinner, just like de Sens.

He tried to deny it, casting his mind resolutely to the memory of the girls he had swived: a willing servant back home, and a skilled, green-eyed courtesan during their winter layover in Cyprus. Perhaps it had been too much to expect for a few coins, but Michel had felt, afterwards, as if something were missing. As if their union should have been deeper, or more intimate, somehow ... a joining of minds and bodies, as Dominic's kiss had promised.

Michel groaned, and his horse's ears flicked sharply at the sound. God and the Virgin help him, but he had been seduced, body and mind, by the Devil.

Now, he had to save Roland ... and his own soul.

* * * *

By moonrise, his mount was stumbling with fatigue and he was ready to throw himself under its hooves to end his own misery. He paused to let the destrier drink.

Michel leaned against the saddle, pillowing his head in the crook of his elbow, but he couldn't escape from his thoughts. They pursued him like a cloud of wasps, tormenting him. He wished, futilely, that he had never allowed Dominic to doctor his wound. To kiss him. To convince Michel to cut his bonds.

Sir Bernard had died because of Michel's weakness. So had Sir Gui. And Sir Jean. Now only Roland and de Sens remained.

Michel had to save Roland.

He couldn't stop now. He forced himself to push away from his horse and climb back in the saddle.

They had to keep going until they reached Damietta.

* * * *

By dawn, he had dismounted and was dragging the big war-horse by the reins, the both of them ready to fall down but for Michel's will.

The blinding sun had risen well above the horizon by the time the walls of Damietta came into view. Michel felt a dull, disbelieving relief. He had made it.

Michel and his horse staggered slowly to the south gate of the city.

"Cousin Michel! And where's my scamp of a brother?" came a shout from above as Robert d'Agincourt leaned over the rampart.

Like all of Michel's kinsmen, Robert was tall, handsome, and fair. A skillful warrior, his appointment as one of the King's household knights had not been an unexpected honor. Roland had stewed with envy for weeks.

Michel raised his face to reply but only a croak emerged.

"Ho, Sir Robert, is that your cousin—or his sister?" joked the other knight on guard. The men-at-arms guffawed.

Reflexively, Michel rubbed his face. Was his shame visible for all to see?

"Catch!" Robert tossed something.

Michel's destrier snorted and sidestepped. Lifting his hands to catch a half-filled waterskin, Michel trod on the reins as he fumbled with the cork. Then he tipped back his head and let

liquid pour down his parched throat. It was wine, liberally mixed with water—tepid, sour, and entirely wonderful.

By the time Michel had drunk his fill, Robert had descended through the gate.

Michel handed the wineskin back to him. "Thank you."

"Accepting the fair maiden's favor?" one of the men-at-arms shouted down.

Michel cringed inwardly. His face heated and he clenched his jaw, trying to get a grip on himself. It was just the usual chaffing. They didn't know.

But he was still relieved when Robert ignored the jibe. "What news? Why are you here alone? We expected you all to return by sundown yesterday. Are the rest traveling at a snail's pace, weighed down with booty?"

Michel had thought to raise a general alarm at the gates as soon as he arrived, but this was better. Robert would know what to do. "Roland's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble? And what's the matter with you, Michou? Are you hurt?"

"Just tired." Michel's legs had turned to blancmange now that he had reached his destination. "I rode all night. I need some food and someone who'll lend me or—" he suddenly recalled his pouch of gold coins, "—sell me a fresh horse."

Robert frowned, looking worried, then hailed his comrade. "I'll be back soon."

"Haven't seen a Saracen in weeks," the other replied with obnoxious cheer. "Likely they won't storm the city while you're dallying with Sir Golden-fair."

"Bastard," Robert retorted genially as Michel found the strength to direct a glare upwards. As he led the way under the stone arch of the gate, Robert asked, "Now, what's going on? Did de Sens try to—?"

"No! No, it's worse than that. The others are all dead. Except for Roland and my lord de Sens."

"Dead! Mother of God! Were you attacked by Saracens? How many? Tell me!"

Where to start his story? "Roland got us invited to go along on a raid—"

"With de Sens and Sir Oswald?" At Michel's hesitant nod, Robert winced, then spat. "Why didn't you pups have the sense to stay away from someone like Baron Bugger?"

"Um, I—I—" Michel stammered. Forcibly he steadied his voice. "Roland said even de Sens would be better than no liege!"

"Roland!" Robert swore and muttered, "The blind leading the halt!" Then his tone became grim. "So, then what happened?"

"The raid itself went well. We surprised a caravan, but then a Saracen knight appeared..." As they walked slowly back to Michel and Roland's lodgings, Michel continued to tell Robert what had happened, editing out all references to sorcery and his own unnatural attraction to Sir Dominic.

He paused only to buy a meat pie and a draught of ale in the marketplace (borrowing a denier from Robert when the vendor refused to change a gold bezant). Michel finished his account between mouthfuls of food. "...then I rode back here, by the grace of God. If I can get another horse, and we leave

right away, we could be there after Nones, or at the latest by Vespers." Every muscle in Michel's body screamed at the idea of spending another nine or ten hours in the saddle, but he ignored them. "We have to go now!"

"You're right, cuz, but I cannot leave my post without permission," Robert said. "Go clean up. We're going to seek audience with my lord the King."

While Robert returned Michel's haggard destrier to the care of the Templar grooms, Michel staggered up to his noisome room to wash the filth from his face and hands, shave, change his shirt, and try to sponge the worst of the stains from his surcote. He couldn't help but compare his preparations for his forthcoming meeting with the King to the last time he and Roland had been there together, making ready for their mysterious errand.

Please God, let Roland be safe in Thy hands.... libera nos a malo...

He waited impatiently for Robert to return, then followed his cousin outside the city, across the bridge of boats to the island encampment where most of the army lay.

The King had placed his pregnant Queen Marguerite and her attendants in the Sultan's former residence, and his barons in the finest houses within Damietta. He had pitched his own scarlet pavilion in the midst of his army, sharing their hardships: the heat; the biting flies; and the stealthy Bedouins who stole into the camp by night to behead the unwary.

The King's large oval tent was divided into several chambers by painted hangings of vermilion samite. It was

stuffy and gloomy despite the outer flaps raised to capture the breezes coming off the Nile.

As was the custom, all those who wished to petition the King were allowed inside. There, they were required to stand quietly until the King and his brothers, the Comte d'Artois and the Comte d'Anjou, had finished a simple meal of bread and roast duck.

Michel imitated Robert's courtly bow as best he could and endeavored not to gape openly as he studied Louis of France.

The King sat on a plain wooden chair under a cloth of estate embroidered with fleur-de-lys. In contrast to his attendants with their gorgeous clothing, Louis wore an undyed surcote and a plain black mantle whose only decoration was a red crusader's cross.

Michel tried to stop himself from yawning as servants cleared away the silver-gilt dishes, took up the snowy linen tablecloth, and carried away the table. The King asked, in a quite ordinary voice, "Has anyone here a suit to make unto me?"

Robert and a number of others stepped forward.

The King nodded at them all impartially. "Keep silence, and you shall be dealt with in order." Louis turned slightly to address the nobleman standing behind him. "My lord de Villette, dispatch me the first suit!"

Lord Geoffrey de Villette, the King's longtime companion, cast his eye around the tent and summoned the highest-ranking petitioner first.

Michel calculated how long until they might have to wait for their turn, and resigned himself to standing on his sore

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

legs. His eyelids began to droop.

Chapter Eight

"Rule 163. And if it happens by chance that any Christian acts foolishly, and any Turk attacks him in order to kill him, and he is in peril of death, and anyone who is in that area wishes to leave his squadron to help him, and his conscience tells him that he can assist him, he may do so without permission, and then return to his squadron quietly and in silence."—*The Rule of the Templars*

Damietta, Egypt—Feast of St. Giles, Wednesday,
September 1st, AD 1249

Michel started awake to the sound of angry voices. For a moment he thought he was still in the ruined temple, and de Sens was bellowing, but then his sight cleared.

Robert, Comte d'Artois, was in the midst of a tirade, directed at a rangy man whose quartered device bore the royal arms of England under a bend sinister.

Artois's face was very red, and his hand hovered over his sword hilt.

"Robert," King Louis said, sorrowfully. "You do yourself no good in the eyes of God to speak in such a fashion, nor by raising your hand against a fellow Christian. I have often said it: harsh words lead to quarrelling, which has ended in the death of countless numbers of men. Let not one of them be you, my dear brother."

Artois muttered something under his breath, but he let his sword hand relax.

The King chose to ignore his brother's ungracious response, and turned to the other man. "My lord of Salisbury, although my brother's words are intemperate, his complaint of you and your men causes me serious concern."

Michel wished he had heard exactly what that complaint had been. He tried to catch Robert's eye, but his cousin was too absorbed to notice him.

The Earl of Salisbury braced his hands on his hips. "Your Majesty, the men have nothing else to do but whore and gamble—"

The King's countenance grew stony with disapproval, and Salisbury fell silent.

"Then you should lead your men in penance, prayer, and fasting. This enterprise we are engaged in is a holy pilgrimage, and ought not to be profaned. Our Lord is merciful. Beg for His forgiveness."

"And let him beg for my forgiveness, too," the Comte d'Artois muttered.

Salisbury's glare, had Artois seen it, might have brought them both to blows at once.

"As you say, Sire," Salisbury said, bowing. He backed away from the King's presence, then left the tent.

Artois also bowed to the King, and returned to his place behind the King's right shoulder.

Next to Michel, Robert d'Agincourt relaxed. "That was close," he whispered out of the side of his mouth. "My lord Artois has a hot temper."

Michel started to ask what had caused such antagonism between Salisbury and Artois, but Robert shushed him, and the opportunity vanished.

Michel spent the next hours in a fatigued stupor, shifting from foot to aching foot and watching the bar of sunlight slanting across the tent floor change from a bronze spear to a white-gold wand. The proceedings were interrupted for a recitation of the Divine Office of Terce, followed by a saint's day mass. Michel listened to it while composing heartfelt prayers for Roland's deliverance.

He almost missed de Villette's announcement, "Sir Robert d'Agincourt, you may make your suit unto the King!"

Michel trailed Robert to stand before the modest throne and knelt on one aching knee. He wobbled as he tried to rise again, and Robert had to reach out to steady him.

The King's eyes warmed with genuine affection. "Good Sir Robert. Do you bring a kinsman to meet me?"

"Sire," replied Robert. "I do. My lord, may I present my cousin, Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne?"

"Sir Michel," Louis acknowledged.

All of Michel's carefully prepared speeches fled his mind. "My lord," he choked.

The King turned his acute gaze back to Robert. "What favor do you wish to ask of me?"

"It's my foolish brother, Sir Roland, my lord," Robert explained the situation, just as Michel had told it to him.

"—and the danger to the surviving knights is very great," he finished. "My lord King, may I have your leave to ride to the aid of my brother and the Baron de Sens?"

Michel dared to look up at the King's face, and was dismayed to see him scowling.

When Louis spoke, his voice was hard. "Sir Robert, do you recall that I sent my lord Beaumont to order that no one stir out of their quarters, until such time as I should order them to do so?"

"Yes, my lord," Robert murmured, his attention fixed at his feet, a flush creeping up his tanned neck.

"My lord de Sens and the other knights, in their disobedience, have brought this calamity upon themselves." The King sighed. "Nevertheless, they are fellow Christians, and we cannot abandon them to the enemy. Sir Robert, I give you and Sir Michel leave to ride to your brother's aid."

"Thank you, sire." Robert and Michel spoke together.

King Louis now addressed the pavilion at large. "My lords and knights, who among you wishes to join in a rescue of Lord de Sens and his men?"

An uncomfortable silence descended. No one dared to sneer openly at de Sens in the King's presence, but clearly, none here wished to risk life and limb for his sake. Michel cringed inwardly and made a silent vow: he would never, ever, let anyone know of his own unnatural inclinations, even if it meant swearing a vow of perpetual chastity.

Sir Matthew de Marly and Sir Philip de Nanteuil, Robert's friends and fellow knights in service in the King's household, conspicuously refused to meet Robert's pleading gaze, and his cousin's face darkened with humiliation.

Alarmed, Michel searched the silent assembly. Even if de Sens were heartily disliked, would no one help Roland? Had he wasted all these hours waiting on the King's pleasure?

As Michel's heart turned to ice with despair, a man stepped forward. His beard and white mantle, blazoned with a scarlet cross, identified him as a Knight of the Temple. "My lord King, Sir Robert, Sir Michel."

"Brother Henry de Trouville." The King inclined his head. "You may speak."

"As our Rule requires, I offer the aid of our Order. Brother Peter, here—" Trouville gestured toward a second Templar at his side, "Will take Sir Robert and Sir Michel to the Marshal, Brother Renaud de Vichiers."

Brother Peter was young and freckled, but just as lean and whipcord-tough as his companion. His easy smile parted the bristles of a bushy auburn beard. "Good sir knights," he said in the accent of Normandy. "Come with me."

Deo gratia! Michel thought, dizzy with relief.

* * * *

Brother Peter strode ahead of them toward the Templar encampment, his white surcote flapping around his legs, the sun gleaming on his polished mail.

Resentful at the young Templar's energy, Michel stumbled along beside his cousin. "Do you truly think they will aid us?" he asked Robert quietly.

Robert shrugged. "It's worth a try. But if the Marshal refuses us, none of the Brothers will help. They can't even piss without permission."

"Oh." Michel's mind worked sluggishly, and he hardly had time to frame his next appeal before they arrived at the neat cluster of tents.

Brother Peter slowed down just a bit as vigilant guards wearing the black robes of sergeant-brothers waved them through the entrance to another world.

Michel's head swiveled back and forth so he could look at everything. The Templars' tents were amazingly uniform in size, appearance, and placement. The whole camp was not only better organized, but cleaner than the neighboring motley collection of brightly colored pavilions put up by the Frankish lords, which stood wherever their owners had cared to pitch them, surrounded by the smaller and shabbier tents of the lord's servants and assorted hangers-on.

"Is that tent round because it's like the Templar churches?" Michel asked, feeling the spark of curiosity despite his fatigue.

Robert rolled his eyes.

Brother Peter didn't seem to find Michel's enthusiasm unusual. "No, the round tent belongs to our Master, Guillaume de Sonnac. The tent that serves as our chapel is the largest tent, in the middle. We're going to the Marshall's tent, the one next to Master Guillaume's."

"Where are all the knights?" Other than a few sergeant-brothers, the camp looked almost deserted.

"We stay in our tents to eat, pray, or sleep, if duty does not command us to venture outside," replied Brother Peter. His gaze was speculative. "It's a hard life, but a good one."

"Not much glory in it, though," Robert said, frowning at Michel.

Michel glared back at him.

Brother Peter, politely oblivious to the byplay between the two cousins, countered, "We fight for the glory of God, which will last beyond any worldly glory won in tourneys or battles."

Robert had no reply for that.

Michel was busy thinking. His spirit in turmoil, he found himself suddenly interested in the Templars. They were famous for their integrity, military discipline, and courage, but controversial for their close ties to Saracen sultans and emirs. He and Roland had not had much contact with any of the Templars other than the Under-Marshal, who was always too busy to converse. But now...

They had to swear a vow of chastity.

Michel mustered his failing strength to keep up with Peter's vigorous strides.

* * * *

The Marshal's tent was nearly as large as the King's pavilion, made of drab hempen cloth. To Michel's dismay, it was also empty except for the Marshal's burly assistant, Sergeant-Brother Gauthier, and the racks of arms the Marshal was responsible for distributing to the Templars.

This latest setback sent Michel into a frenzy of despair. "We have to ride out soon!" he said, urgently, to Robert. "It may already be too late." He wanted to carry out his original plan to buy a fresh horse with one of his bezants, and ride back, reinforcements or no.

"I will do all that I can to help you," Brother Peter assured them, and departed to find the Marshal.

Brother Gauthier courteously offered them stools to sit upon and glazed cups of hot, heavily sugared mint tea in the Saracen fashion. The tea soothed Michel's parched throat, but Robert refused, confiding to Michel that he expected wine as befit one of the King's knights.

But no wine was forthcoming. Thank God it was only a short time later that the Marshal entered the tent in the company of Brother Peter and four white-mantled Templars, all of them sunburned and shaggy-bearded.

Brother Peter flashed Michel a quick grin as he entered with the others, and then stood silent as the Marshal exchanged greetings and introductions. Brother Gervais de Toucy came from a district near Sens. Conrad von Bicken was a big blond German. Timotheo of Homs had been born in Outremer to a Saracen mother and a Byzantine father. Andrea Falier was Venetian.

Marshal Renaud de Vichiers himself was of middling height, but broad. Although his beard was patched with silver, he moved with vigor and his keen eyes missed nothing.

"We have heard of your request for aid. These knight-brothers wish to speak with you before they decide whether to accompany you," he said as he accepted tea from Brother Gauthier.

Michel swallowed and stood up to bow. "Thank you. How soon can we leave?"

The Marshal raised his hand, cutting Michel off. "First things first. Although we are enjoined by our Rule to rescue

foolish Crusaders, we will not ride blindly into danger. Victory requires not only God's help, but knowledge."

"What do you wish to know?" Robert asked.

"Oh, simple things, Sir Robert." Marshall Renaud counted on his fingers. "Where are we going? How long will it take us to travel there? How many Saracens might we face?" He raised bushy eyebrows, and stared expectantly at Michel, who slumped back down on his stool.

It was easy to describe the route they had taken, and the location of the ruined village and temple. It was more difficult to explain what had happened. "We were ten when we left Damietta—eight knights and two squires. Yesterday, only three remained: my lord de Sens; my cousin, Sir Roland d'Agincourt; and me."

The Templars exchanged calculating glances over Marshal Renaud's head.

"How were five heavily-armed knights killed?" Brother Conrad asked.

"There were many Saracens!" Robert replied, automatically leaping to defend the honor of his fellow Crusaders.

Marshal Renaud fixed Robert with a stern look. "Were you also part of this ill-fated raid, Sir Robert?"

"I was not," Robert admitted reluctantly. "But—"

"Then perhaps Sir Michel ought to answer."

Michel took a deep breath, feeling the assessing weight of the seasoned warriors' attention, and began his carefully edited recitation. He didn't get very far before Brother Conrad muttered, "Glory-seeking fools!"

Michel's temper rose, but he kept his voice even. "Sir, er, Brother Conrad, I cannot speak for the others, but my cousin and I were seeking coin with which to pay our stabling fees to Brother Gauthier."

Marshal Renaud gave a bark of laughter, then motioned Michel to resume his tale.

He was surprised by their reaction when he related Sir Dominic's stated affiliation to the House of the Rose.

"Sharibet al-Warda!" Brother Timotheo exclaimed, and they all crossed themselves. The Marshal's air of exasperated amiability vanished.

What did they know about Sir Dominic? Michel continued to the end of his tale without further interruption. When he finished speaking, he took a sip of tea and waited.

The knight-brothers gathered to consult. Michel hoped they would decide quickly. His body had gone past weariness and pain into a sort of numb languor, and he only hoped he wouldn't disgrace himself by falling asleep in the saddle when he and the Templars rode out.

If they rode out with him.

They had to help him!

"Sir Michel," Marshal Renaud turned back to him. "There are a few details that are unclear to us. May we ask you some further questions?"

"Of course." Michel tried to straighten up.

"You never mentioned how many warriors guarded Lady Sharibet's caravan."

"I don't know. It seemed that there were many, though," Michel offered lamely.

"How many of them were mounted?" asked Brother Peter. His sun-kissed face had lost its expression of good humor.

"Um," Michel felt a frisson of alarm as he tried to force his fatigued mind to work. But all he could summon was the memory of Sir Dominic's ironic smile. "Several. I don't know."

"Several. I see," Marshal Renaud said, skeptically. "And these ... several ... warriors defeated how many knights?"

"It wasn't all at once!" Michel blurted. His hands were both ice-cold and sweaty. He fought the urge to wipe his palms against his surcote. "Only Sir Hugues and Sir Oswald were killed during the actual raid."

"Sir Oswald of Geddington?" Brother Gervais asked. "I knew him slightly. By reputation." He made a brief but significant pause. Michel's face heated. Then Gervais continued, smoothly, "He was the champion of many tourneys. How did he die?"

This question at least Michel could answer with complete truthfulness. "Sir Oswald charged a Saracen knight, who unhorsed Sir Oswald and mortally wounded him."

"Then *you* captured this Saracen knight?"

Michel nodded, trying to appear modest. "Yes. I was lucky." The remembered pressure of a sharp blade pressed against his throat and the memory of Sir Dominic's icy gray eyes made him shiver.

"But none of the other Saracens you killed were armored or mounted?" Marshal Renaud asked. "Where did the Saracen knights that subsequently attacked your companions come from? And when did they appear?"

Michel took a nervous gulp of tea gone tepid and sickly-sweet. "The knight I captured had allies in hiding?" he offered. "Who, ah, followed us and attacked us later?" He hadn't really meant his reply to emerge as questions.

That earned him more frowns, and the Venetian, Brother Andrea, inquired, "Then why weren't those allies guarding the caravan to begin with? This account does not balance." He leaned forward, dark brown eyes boring into Michel's. "According to what you said, the raid ended with two Christian knights dead. But as of yesterday, there were only three of your party remaining. How did the other five die?"

"Some of them just disappeared!" Michel said, regretting his course of half-lies and omissions.

"Did they desert, or were they captured and killed?" Brother Andrea persisted.

"I don't know!"

"And why did you alone return for help, leaving your two companions behind?" Brother Conrad asked with contempt.

"I left because I was the only one who still could." Michel clasped his shaky hands together.

"Were your other companions wounded? Captured by Lady Sharibet's knights? What aren't you telling us, Sir Michel?" Marshal Renaud's voice was gentle, but uncompromising.

"Knight. One. There was only the one Saracen knight, Jesu help me!" Michel blurted. "He named himself Sir Dominic, but I think his real name was ... Menelaos." Michel could not remember how he knew this, but it felt like the truth. He drew a breath that was very nearly a sob. "I was not sent to fetch help by the others—I escaped."

He flinched at Robert's expression. A reputation for cowardice was worse than death, for a knight's honor could survive death, even be enhanced by it. Michel had only one excuse. "Sir Dominic cast some kind of a spell. I am certain of it!"

"Ah." Marshal Renaud slapped his knee with satisfaction at having finally cut to the heart of the matter. "Sorcery, was it?"

Michel nodded, torn between shame and relief that the truth was finally out.

"We know something of the House of the Rose," Brother Timotheo said. "This knight whom you captured—does he have a white streak parting black hair?"

Michel nodded in consternation.

Brother Timotheo crossed himself. "We know of him. It's said that Menelaos of Pergamon was a Byzantine, enchanted by the Lady Sharibet after the fall of Constantinople. That may be just a story." He smiled crookedly, then crossed himself again. "But we know that he's dwelled with her for forty years, and never aged a day. As for the Lady Sharibet ... None of our Saracen contacts will actually say what they fear about her. But no one—peasant, merchant, or noble—dares to offend the lowliest members of her House."

Something loosened in Michel's chest and he felt perilously close to weeping with relief. The Templars understood exactly how dangerous Sir Dominic was. "After we took him captive, he befuddled our senses somehow. We wandered around in circles—and the others disappeared one by one. I—I prayed and the spell was lifted from me, but—"

Michel realized that he was talking too fast, but his thoughts were racing. What if Roland were worse than dead by now? What if the pouch of coins meant that Sir Dominic had purchased Michel's soul? Was he damned for that kiss? "If we leave now, we can—" He jumped up from his stool.

"No," Marshal Renaud said firmly, lifting his hand to stop him.

"You won't aid me, after all?" Michel asked, shaken.

"We will help you, Sir Michel," Renaud replied. "But it is too close to sunset to depart now, and we must prepare for our journey. Go now. Eat, then rest. You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

Michel wanted to protest, but his body betrayed him. He concealed his fatigued sway in a deep bow. "Marshal Renaud, I thank you most humbly."

"Thank you, Brothers," Robert added.

Marshal Renaud nodded. "Go with God, messires, and meet us at dawn tomorrow at the South Gate."

* * * *

Robert accompanied Michel the whole tedious way back to Damietta without speaking a single word. He stared straight ahead, his mouth a grim line. Michel started to address him several times, but let the attempt die. What could he say?

His older cousin's stony silence continued as they bought meat pies and ale for supper in the market. Michel took a bite of greasy, pastry-wrapped mutton, but found that the weight of Robert's anger—and his own guilt—had ruined his appetite.

Finally, as they stood at the doorway of Michel's lodgings, Robert grasped Michel's arm, painfully. "I—Michou—" He gave Michel a little shake, gulped, then continued forcefully: "When this is over, I swear I will have you and Roland, both, horsewhipped like scullery boys, knight's spurs or no. I only pray God that my lackwit brother still lives."

Michel's throat was too tight to reply.

* * * *

Robert came to wake him at dawn, just as the bells began to ring Lauds. Still exhausted, Michel fumbled with his filthy gambeson and armor, then finished the rest of the previous evening's meat pie and ale under Robert's disapproving glare.

Then the two of them walked to the South Gate, where, as promised, five Templar knights with their squires, accompanied by ten mounted sergeant-brothers on their Turcoman horses, awaited them. There were two extra, saddled horses—a fine palfrey and a destrier with its own armor.

Brother Peter, the first rays of light glinting copper in his beard, said, "Sir Michel, Brother Gauthier says your mount shouldn't be ridden for at least a week. We've brought two fresh horses for you. Mount up!"

Speechless with gratitude, Michel did as he was bid. The Templars had brought Robert's horses with them as well, and shortly the party was cantering down the road along the shore of Lake Manzala.

The Templars maintained strict formation and silence as they rode. There was none of the singing and joking and

jockeying for position that characterized Frankish knights when traveling, only an endless cycle of canter-trot-walk, broken by occasional stops for the brothers to pray and the horses to graze and drink.

With nothing to do but keep up, Michel spent most of the time either composing fervent prayers to God and the Virgin to forgive his sins and to protect his cousin, or imagining fates that grew steadily more lurid as the hours passed.

He also covertly studied the Templars. At first glance, they looked like the plainest of knights, their harnesses, armor and shields devoid of any decoration or color save for the scarlet cross sewn on the breasts of their black or white mantles.

But on closer inspection, Michel saw that their equipment was of the best quality. Their mail was made of uniform-sized links, and fitted to each sergeant as well as each knight. The saddles were of superbly-stitched leather. Anything not new was well-maintained and ready for hard use. And every one of their sword blades was German steel, equal to the King's.

Michel looked ruefully down at himself. With his painted shield, embroidered surcote, and golden spurs, he felt himself a gaudy popinjay in the company of ravens.

And Robert, in the King's livery, was even more a peacock. If only he didn't look so sad, and so much like his brother...

* * * *

They reached the ruined shrine by late afternoon, the palm trees casting long shadows like clutching hands over the courtyard.

There was no sign of life.

Dread made Michel's chest constrict. He directed the rest of the Templars towards the remnants of the campfire. The disordered piles of burned blankets and gear could not disguise the presence of a corpse.

Michel dismounted shakily, and saw the silver tower on the dead man's surcote. "It's my lord de Sens."

The Baron's throat gaped, the edges blackened with dried blood.

"Killed by *djinni*," Brother Timotheo muttered, and swiftly crossed himself. The other Templars echoed his gesture.

What were djinni? Michel wondered. *And where is Roland?* *O Holy Virgin, let him be unharmed!* There was Roland's blanket, half-burned by the fire, partially covering his spurs, and his sword, the belt unbuckled, not cut. There was no other sign of his cousin. Had Roland escaped? But why leave his sword? Had he been spirited away like Sir Jean and the squires?

"And the other knights? They are buried over there?" Brother Peter inclined his head in the direction of the mound of earth in the center of the courtyard.

Michel nodded.

"While you search for your cousin, I will have the sergeant-brothers disinter the bodies for reburial in consecrated ground," Brother Peter said, turning away.

As the black-mantled Templars fetched spades and began to dig in the waning light, Michel and Robert frantically searched for Roland.

There was nothing in the courtyard, nothing in the ruined shrine itself. But when they emerged from the building,

Michel saw something pale at the lake's edge, many yards distant.

He ran, his feet slipping and sticking in the sucking mud. Robert followed him, breathing hard. Around them, birds flew up, flapping and screeing in dismay.

Michel bent over when he reached his goal, winded and sick. He was finally close enough to see what he hoped and feared it might be: Roland's surcote. Ripped, wrinkled, stained with water and mud, but the azure chalice that Mathilde had embroidered was still recognizable.

But if it came out of the water—then Roland must have gone into it. Wearing his armor, he would have sunk like a stone.

"No! Sweet Virgin Mary, please, no." Robert's voice broke. He dropped to his knees before the ruined surcote and a harsh sob convulsed him.

Michel turned away as Robert wept for his youngest and best-loved brother. Roland's death was his fault. He bowed his head and whispered: "Forgive me."

* * * *

When they returned to the shrine, the sergeant-brothers had finished opening the grave and laid out the stinking bodies in an uneven row. The squires, impassive despite the stench, wrapped each corpse securely in new shrouds, then hoisted them to the backs of spare horses.

By mutual agreement, they decided to travel some distance from the vicinity of the shrine before making camp for the night.

Michel, although fatigued, was restless. His mind was full of fevered images of Roland's fate. And of his own. The Templars had confirmed that Sir Dominic was more than human. Would the sorcerer seek him out to fulfill his unholy passion? And if he did, could Michel resist him?

Trying to sleep only led to troubled dreams, so he went to sit by one of the campfires kept burning all night. Most of the Templars, even under the threat of supernatural attack, snored untroubled, but two were awake and on watch.

Of course they slept peacefully. There was no room for doubt or error in a life where each hour was regulated by a monastic Rule, Michel thought, enviously. Assured of their place in heaven, they had only to concern themselves with fighting well and dying bravely, if God so willed.

"Sir Michel." Brother Peter, relieved from his watch, came to sit with him. "You should be sleeping. Are you well?"

"I am alive." Bitterness seeped out. "I keep thinking, if only I'd returned earlier! Or if I hadn't left at all ... their deaths are my fault."

"Their lives were in God's hand. It was His decision to take them."

"But—"

"Sir Michel," Brother Peter paused, as if considering his next words. "For you to take upon yourself the entire blame is tantamount to the sin of pride."

"But it really *was* my fault." Michel insisted, compelled to confess. "I—"

"Is that so? Did not Lord de Sens, Sir Roland, and the others choose to come on this raid of their own free will?"

"Well, yes—"

"Then they met their fates as ordained by God."

Brother Peter sounded so certain that Michel almost believed him. "No, they didn't."

Brother Peter turned a penetrating stare on Michel. "No? Was it your idea to attack a caravan belonging to the House of the Rose?"

"No, but—"

"Did you summon the djinn?"

"In a way ... yes." Michel was secretly glad to see a crack appear in Peter's composure.

"How?"

Under the sympathetic gaze of his companion, Michel found it possible to release his burden. "I cut Sir Dominic's bonds so he could escape. It seemed like the right and honorable thing to do. He said—and I believed—that de Sens would break his pledge and kill him. I didn't know Sir Dominic, er, Menelaos, was a djinn!"

"I see." Brother Peter sat in silence for a time, his freckled face thoughtful. "You were deceived into acting chivalrously. Is that all?"

"No," Michel said in a choked voice. "I still ... want what he offered me."

"Gold?" Brother Peter's voice was carefully neutral.

"No. Truly, I never thought he would pay me!"

"Then what did he offer you?"

"A position as a lord in the House of the Rose."

"In truth?" asked Brother Peter, fascinated. "I had heard that only djinni are raised to high rank within the House."

"I refused him—but only because of my Crusading vow."

Brother Peter inclined his head. "The sin lies not in being tempted, but in yielding to temptation, Sir Michel."

Michel groaned. "It was not my virtue but my pride in keeping my oaths that saved me. Sir Dominic even offered to teach me the ancient writing of the Egyptians!"

At Peter's puzzled glance, Michel explained: "All my life, I've been told, 'Don't ask so many questions, Michou.' 'Knights don't read books!' 'Only priests debate theology!' But Sir Dominic liked my questions! And had answers for them! He even implied he knew ... magic." Michel stared down at his knees in shame. "Now Roland is dead, and it's all because of me! I—I am damned, aren't I?"

"By our faith, and through our actions, Sir Michel, we travel either towards Heaven or Hell. Anyone can be forgiven, if his intention be sincere," Brother Peter said, fervently.

"Even one who has been cast out of Christian society."

"Really?" Michel was skeptical, but hope was hard to subdue.

Brother Peter smiled compassionately. "Indeed. A few years ago, I myself was headed straight for Hell. I had been excommunicated, for good cause. But the Merciful Virgin took pity on me and guided my steps to the Templars."

"How?" Michel hung on every quiet word.

"I was born Peter de Honfleur, the third son of a knight of renown. I was a hot-tempered youth, arrogant and lustful. When I reached my eighteenth year, Marie le Bon became my concubine. Then, after sinning with her for nearly a year, I discovered that that she was also having carnal relations with

Father Anselm, the village priest. Filled with rage and wine, I put on my armor, saddled my destrier, and rode to the church. There, I am ashamed to say, I struck down Father Anselm in the Presence of God." Peter sighed. "At first, in my youthful folly, I thought I would not care that I was excommunicated for murdering a priest. 'Let them pronounce the words,' I said, 'and extinguish the candles. I will just go on as before.'

"But not only was I severed from the rites of Holy Church, but I was also denied the society of my friends and family. No Christian was allowed to speak or correspond with me, nor could anyone show me any marks of honor or respect. I could not even partake of meals in the company of Christians. I was cast out like a leper. Only the Knights of the Temple welcomed me. They gave me a way to redeem my great sin, by serving God with my sword and my willing submission to the Rule." Brother Peter's face shone with grateful devotion.

"Could I—would I be saved if I became a Templar?" Michel asked.

"You alone know the state of your soul, but we have need of trained knights who wish to devote themselves to God." Peter raised a hand briefly, in blessing. "Listen for God's call, Sir Michel. If you hear it, the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon will welcome you with a guarantee of redemption."

With that, Brother Peter stood and retired to his bedroll. Michel lay down under his own blanket, thinking.

Brother Peter was so calm, so confident, so controlled. It was hard to imagine him as a wild youth, drunken and lusty. How had he resigned himself to perpetual chastity?

And what, Michel wondered, had happened to Marie le Bon?

Michel's last thought before falling asleep was to wonder whether a vow of chastity would help him forget, in time, that he had ever desired Dominic.

* * * *

...Standing on the broad, shallow steps of a cathedral, the sun hot on pale golden stone, the air stinking of blood and smoke. Holding a sword, its blade saw-toothed with nicks and lacquered with blood. Cut, parry, thrust—knowing that she has sworn to defend the church doors unto death...

And death comes to the solid presence guarding her back ... Raymond-Soleil! His soul is abruptly ripped away from her awareness.

Footsoldiers surge forward, thrusting lances and swinging axes in a silver-red blur.

"Witch!" someone screams. "Sorceress!"

A flash in her peripheral vision. Turning too slowly—pain explodes through her back, her chest, burning like Greek fire, brighter than the sun—

Michel woke, whimpering with terror.

Robert knelt over him, shaking his shoulder. "Michou! Get up!"

Michel groaned, rubbing grit out of his eyes, and climbed slowly to his feet. He felt like an old man.

The Templars were already mounted. Michel's borrowed palfrey was saddled, so he mounted and the whole troop cantered west. Someone handed Michel a journeycake, and

he gnawed on it, washing down dry crumbs with sour swigs of water mixed with wine. Gray shadows drained away as the sun rose and the fields around them glowed verdant green.

But Michel couldn't forget his dream. Even though the day burned sweltering hot, he was still shivering from its vividness.

When they paused for Sext at noon, so the Templars could pray and the horses rest, Robert approached. His face, framed by his mail coif, was pale and strained.

Michel wondered if Robert blamed him for Roland's death. "Are you coming down sick, Michou?" asked Robert.

When Michel shook his head, Robert gripped his shoulder, hard. "Wouldn't want to lose you, too."

If only he knew ... Self-loathing kept Michel silent.

* * * *

The return to Damietta was just as sorrowful as his imagination had painted it, and more humiliating. Amalric de Sens had been despised by all, it seemed. Michel heard comments that made his ears catch fire when a crowd of knights, men-at-arms, and camp followers assembled in Damietta's main street to watch the returning Templars.

Since de Sens had been the leader of the raid, the Templars brought all the bodies to the Baron's house, and gave his household orders for the disposition of the remains.

They also made Michel dismount there. Brother Peter promised to stable Roland's horses with Brother Gauthier.

"Here." Robert thrust the bundle containing Roland's sword, spurs and surcote at Michel. "I'm off to arrange a Mass

for the repose of my brother's soul. You're lettered. You send these back to my parents and explain what happened to him. I can't ... my God, it'll kill Maman and Peré!" His voice broke, and he turned abruptly away .

Michel was left alone in the deepening dusk, holding a sword wrapped in cloth disturbingly like a shroud.

He tried to find some comfort in a church converted from a mosque, but when he found himself looking for cartouches in the graceful Arabic script that flickered in the lamplight on the walls, he fled.

He looked for the gambling games run by the camp followers, but the city was closed up tight. He couldn't even find a moneychanger for his gold bezants, not that it mattered, for the marketplace was deserted and Michel would not have been able to purchase wine and food even if he had gotten smaller-denomination coins.

He would have just kept walking, but he ran into a patrol of Lord Salisbury's Englishmen, who informed him that the city was under curfew after sunset now, by order of the Frankish King, damn his pious eyes!

So Michel wound up alone in the fetid little room he had shared with his cousin. Tears burned his eyes in the dark: for Roland; for Roland's family; and for himself, lost and hungry and far from home.

After a while he lit a lamp, only to see the nest of tangled bedclothes on Roland's bed and the blank spot against the wall where Roland's armor had stood.

Michel sat, knees drawn close to his chest, until the stench from his grimy mail and clothing penetrated his grief. He

pulled off his surcote, loosened buckles, and let his mail slide to the floor with a dirt-dulled jingle. Then he peeled away the gambeson and stripped off his sweat-stained, wrinkled linen shirt and hosen. He missed his cousin's assistance, his quick good humor and sunny presence.

He kicked all the dirty clothes and sheets into a heap and resolved to hire a laundress tomorrow. He found wearable hosen and a shirt, and discovered, when he was done, that he was in the same place, staring at Roland's empty bed.

Darkness pressed in through the shuttered window, barely held at bay by flickering lamplight. He didn't dare go to sleep. Sleep was enemy territory.

Under his hand was the sad package he would have to send to his Aunt Blanche and Uncle Ulrich.

He unsheathed Roland's sword. The blade was already marred by speckles of rust.

Michel rose and found his oiled cloths and container of scouring sand. He began to polish the sword, waiting for dawn. But his thoughts would not be still.

Holy Mary! In all the activity of the last few days, he had not thought once of the wound on his arm. He pulled his shirt down off his shoulder, and pulled off the wine-stained bandage, inspecting the spot where Sir Dominic's sword had cut him.

Only a thin scab. No sign of inflammation.

Healed by sorcery—and for this, Roland had paid the final price.

Oh, God, what am I going to do?

Michel shrugged back into his shirt, wiped the polished sword clean, then buried his head in his knees, holding his breath to keep from whimpering.

It was his susceptibility to the wiles of the Evil One that had lead him astray. Each of his actions had allowed the Devil to creep into his heart. Who would save him from his folly now that Roland was gone?

Brother Peter's words echoed in his heart: "Listen for God's call, Sir Michel."

If he answered that call, his soul would be safe from further temptation. As a Templar, the Rule would redeem him. There would be no further occasion for his poor judgment to lead him into sin.

Michel expelled a breath, feeling suddenly hopeful.

When morning came, he would put his affairs in order, send off the letter with Roland's things, and then go make his application to the Templars. Perhaps someday Michel would forget Dominic, and find wisdom and serenity as Brother Peter had.

His decision made, he felt at peace for the first time in days. He lay down on his pallet, falling into blessed sleep.

Chapter Nine

"At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead."—
Judges 5:27

Dar al Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Friday, 24th of the moon
Jumaada awal, 647 AH (September 3rd, AD 1249)

Dominic sat alone in Sharibet's reception room, feeling late afternoon breezes sweep through the carved window screens, plucking idle notes from a beautifully crafted 'oud.

The caravan had arrived in Alexandria several hours earlier and quickly unloaded its bales and bundles at the Dar al Warda's warehouses near the harbor before continuing on to the House. Dominic had delivered young Roland, still unconscious from the latest dose of opium, into the tender care of Sharibet's servants while the rest of the caravaners went to their quarters to celebrate their homecoming and mourn the dead.

Dominic had bathed, changed into clean clothing, and refreshed himself with a jug of sheep's blood. Now he was impatient despite his weariness, wishing he were already on the way to Damietta to search for Michel.

Annoyed at being kept waiting, he didn't look up from his instrument when Sharibet finally joined him, glowing from her quick visit to the sleeping Roland.

He stiffened as she impulsively kissed him, and she retreated immediately. "Oh, Menelaos, he looks perfectly delicious, for a Frank. And he's so *young*." She sat on the

divan beside him and brought her hands behind her head, "So tell me—why are you giving him to me to Transform?"

He started a tune he had heard a street musician play in Syria. "I didn't want to take the chance with one of the Apkallu, aura-blind as I am."

At his bald statement, she pressed fingers against her eyes. "I am not accustomed to failure."

"You're not the only one who must live with it," he observed, trying to sound detached.

"Menelaos—"

"Call me Dominic now. Menelaos died in Béziers—something that has taken me a long time to realize."

Sharibet took his hand and brought it to her cheek. "Dominic, then. Though I miss the Menelaos-who-was. Are you certain you don't want to try the memory transfer again? Perhaps this time we could—"

"You know everything I've ever done, everyone I've ever been. I should think you would have had enough of me."

"Never," she teased, turning her head and kissing his palm.

He removed his hand, feeling shaken and sick. "Don't expect me to thank you, Sharibet. It would have been kinder to let me die with Honoria."

Even as he spoke the words, as he had thought them so often in the past forty years, he wondered whether he still believed them. His experience with the Frankish knights had thawed something in him.

"You should know by now, I'm never kind." She dropped his hand and turned her face away.

"Indeed," he said dryly. "But thanks to your not-so-subtle test, at least I know I can serve the House as Protector again. It's preferable to being a crippled charity case."

She smiled, still refusing to meet his eyes. "The knights were a good challenge, weren't they? Did they make you angry?"

"Very." The strings of the 'oud cut into his fingers. Carefully he said, "I—regret—the deaths of your kinsmen."

"You weren't the only one I was testing." She rolled over onto her side and propped her head up. "But I never anticipated that you would find any of our Lost. Sir Jean—" she chuckled. "He's so happy to be home. And I'm so glad you found Marcus—" She trapped the name against her lips with her fingers. "*Roland*. I would like to ask you to train him in the use of his powers. It might help you recover more of your own, as well."

"Or to better learn my limitations," he said, bitterly. "In any case, Roland has yet to survive his Transformation."

"He will. He's young, and strong, and healthy." She licked her lips.

"If he survives, I will train him." He gave her a slight bow. "But in return, I wish you to set your agents, Nazir in particular, to search for Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne among the Crusaders."

* * * *

Michel's going to pour water over my head any minute now, Roland thought, pushing aside a light sheet and rolling

over in a soft, wide bed. And then he's going to mock my hangover.

His temples were pounding in time with his pulse. Thirst and the foul scum coating the inside of his mouth finally drove him to open his eyes. He groaned as light reflected painfully from white-plastered walls and a high, intricately patterned ceiling.

Where was he? He groped for his sword, and remembered belatedly that he had unbuckled his belt and spurs before going to sleep last night. Then he recalled the rest of the strange events that had followed, and he clutched himself apprehensively.

He was naked—and still whole. All the saints be praised!

Sir Dominic had kept his word. Dimly he recollected short intervals of wakefulness, and more doses of Dominic's potions to make him sleep. How long had he slept under the influence of the drug? One night? Three? A hundred years, like in fairy tales?

He shuddered, made the sign of the cross, then looked for his clothes and armor. Nothing on the tiled floor. Nothing on the bed, which was a set of flat cushions tucked into an elevated alcove.

His head fell back onto a bolster. Above him was a small, latticed window, admitting the bustle of a busy street, and more damned light. Late afternoon light, as he discovered upon jumping up and grabbing the bars for as long as he could hold on to them. He was as weak as soggy bread.

The door was locked. And the window was too narrow to accommodate his shoulders.

Opposite the door a shelf supported on graceful arches held a silver pitcher beaded with dew. He drank greedily, letting cool water salve his raw throat and settle his stomach. He finished it all, used an odd-shaped chamberpot from amongst the metal and pottery vessels under the shelf, and then paced around the room for a short time before falling back onto the bed.

He rubbed his unshaven cheek. How long before Dominic and the mysterious Lady Sharibet came for him? Would they really make him their lord?

Or—more likely—were they going to sell him into slavery?

What kind of woman was Sharibet, to command a sorcerer?

Roland fretted until the door opened some time later, and a pair of armed Saracens silently beckoned him out. Wrapping himself in the sheet from the bed, he got up and followed them, determined not to show fear no matter what happened to him.

It couldn't possibly be worse than having Dominic drop him from a great height above Lake Manzala. His balls shriveled at the memory.

His captors marched him through a shadowed corridor to a steam-filled room where the air was hotter than the portals of hell. Small round windows overhead let in light that blazed off white marble floors, walls and benches. He immediately started sweating, and gratefully accepted a goblet of rosewater handed to him by a short but muscular servant.

While Roland drank, he glanced covertly at this new man, who was wearing only enough to conceal whether he was a

eunuch. The man firmly removed Roland's sheet, pointed at a marble table, and by means of emphatic gestures, commanded Roland to lie face down upon it.

Naked, unarmed, at the utter mercy of the strangeness of it all, Roland obeyed.

When the man laid hands upon his flesh, Roland shuddered and bit his lip to keep from flinching.

The hands skillfully kneaded muscles, manipulated arms, fingers, knees, toes, even his ears. The massage erased the last vestiges of his pounding headache and left him feeling quite boneless.

At some point, other attendants took rasps to his feet, hands, and elbows, removing his calluses, and trimmed his nails. When he peeked, he saw that the industrious hands grooming him belonged to modestly dressed maidservants.

They giggled when he smiled at them.

When they had finished with him, the women helped him to stand and walk to a smaller, much cooler room. Bands of blue and red alternated with gold rosettes all along the walls and floor. He was horribly conscious of his lack of braies when they sat him on a low stool, but they politely took no notice of his nudity.

Or not much. He caught a few appreciative smiles and suddenly felt much better.

As one woman poured tepid water over him from a large jug, the others scrubbed him vigorously with scented soap and soft pads made of palm-tree fibers. They rinsed him and brown water ran into a drain set into the middle of the floor.

The water gurgled away somewhere, and then they washed him again.

He relaxed. It was good to be clean again, and still alive. He would worry about his eventual fate later.

He only argued when they tried to remove the faience beads he still wore around his neck. When he insisted on keeping it they wrinkled their noses and washed the beads, too.

Another rinsing, then they led him to a deep pool full of cool water and sweet herbs. He sighed in contentment as he sank down as far as his chin. Paradise!

When his attendants returned after an all-too-short interval, they wrapped him in soft towels smelling of roses, and patted his stubbled face dry. They combed his hair and instead of shaving his beard, tried to shave his armpits and his groin.

After some emphatic words of his own, he allowed them to anoint him with fragrant oils and dress him in clean Saracen-style clothes. First he put on full knee-length cotton drawers tied with strings; then a loose, open-textured linen shirt, with full sleeves to his wrists; and finally, an ankle-length loose vest of striped blue and white silk, with very full sleeves which extended a few inches beyond his fingertips. All new, clean, and made to his measure. Around his waist they wrapped a colored shawl as a belt. He had never worn anything so fine. And there were even soft leather slippers for his newly tender feet.

They tried to put a turban on his head, but he shook it off, saying "La! La!" which meant, "No!" Or so he hoped.

The maidservants laughed at him, but desisted.

The armed servants returned and ushered him across a deeply shaded courtyard, and into another large, high-ceilinged room. His feet encountered a plush floor covering and he bit his lip, amazed at a house so wealthy that its occupants walked on priceless tapestries.

He stared around the room. Tall filigreed doors opened onto the courtyard garden. Two latticed windows, one above the other, showed the sunset sky tinted magenta and saffron. Then the light dimmed, and it was night.

A breeze filled the air with the scent of roses.

In the dusk a burning lamp magically ignited, illuminating a dais with a heavy carved chair placed like a throne. On cushions at the chair's foot lounged Sir Dominic.

Roland halted, unsure, and Dominic waved him forward. "Sir Roland, sit down and listen carefully. Your life depends on it."

Knees suddenly liquid, Roland sank onto a cushion near a low inlaid table holding a pottery flagon and porcelain goblets. Sir Dominic poured thick red wine for himself, and sipped at it.

"What is this place?" Roland smelled exotic oranges and his stomach rumbled with hunger, but Dominic did not offer him any of the wine.

"The House of the Rose in Alexandria." Dominic frowned. "To show courtesy when in the presence of those of higher rank than yourself, it is customary to cover your hands. Yes, just so," as Roland hastily hid his fingers under his long

sleeves. "And now I will acquaint you with the rules of the House, which you must obey."

"But—I thought you said I was going to be their lord!"

Dominic inclined his head. "Though they serve us, and we are their lords, our relationship to the kin of the House is complex. The members of the House will serve you in all your material needs. In return, you will be their Protector. You are expected to defend them to the death."

Roland nodded. This sounded like the obligations of a liege lord to his demesne.

"You will treat all members of the House with courtesy. You will take nothing of the House that is not freely offered—and that includes the maidservants," Dominic added, sternly. "You may ask the favors of any woman or youth of the House, but if they refuse you, you are not allowed to rape. Treat the members of this House as you would your family, for that is what they are."

"What if I offend them without meaning to?" Roland asked. "I mean, I am a stranger here—"

"If you have questions, you may ask anyone. Allowance will be made for your ignorance, and if appropriate, your question will be answered. Some answers, however, must wait until you pass your probation period and are raised to lordship here."

Probation period? What sort of lord was that? In Roland's experience, the people were expected to please their lord, not vice-versa. He sighed.

Dominic heard him. "I suggest you avoid disappointing the people of the House."

"What happens if I do?" Roland asked, boldly.

"Do you know how Sharibet fertilizes her rose garden?" Dominic let the threat hang in the air, smiling unpleasantly. Roland swallowed, hard.

Dominic rose gracefully to his feet as the door to the garden opened and a woman entered. "Lady Sharibet."

Roland hastily scrambled to his feet, his heart knocking. When she came into the lamplight, and he could think again, he thought, *Blessed Virgin, she's beautiful!*

Sharibet was a woman no taller than the middle of his chest. Golden ibis-shaped shears gleamed in her hand, and she carried a basket of freshly cut roses over one arm. Scarlet silk draped her honeyed skin, and her night-dark hair was braided with gemmed ornaments. Her eyes, amber outlined in kohl, sparkled with a delight that outshone her gold and jewels. Putting her burden down next to the chair, she walked around Roland, trailing a cloud of rose perfume.

"Sir Roland, Menelaos," she greeted them. Her grin was white and impish as she stood on tiptoe to kiss Dominic.

Sir Dominic, of a height with Roland, had to bend his head to receive her kiss. He closed his eyes as their lips brushed, almost flinching at her touch, like a thirsty man offered poisoned wine.

Lady Sharibet patted his ear fondly as she drew away, her eyes returning admiringly to Roland. She seated herself, caressing the arms of the carved chair.

Dominic bowed. "Lady Sharibet, may I present to you Sir Roland d'Agincourt?"

She nodded, looking just like the Queen of Faerie. "It is good to meet again, Sir Roland." Her langue d'oïl was good, but oddly accented.

Roland wondered a little at her words, then was captured in the warm web of her golden eyes. "My lady, I thank you for your hospitality." He indicated the clothes he wore, placed his hand on his chest, and continued in a rush before his voice could grow unsteady, "Allow me to place my heart and my sword at your service, until the last drop of blood has left my body."

"A very pretty speech." Sharibet gave Roland a smile that left him impossibly exalted. Without shifting her gaze, she asked Sir Dominic, "Does he know what we are offering him?"

"I told him that the House has need of a knight to serve as its Lord and Protector."

Roland had a moment of relief at her satisfied appraisal, then she queried him severely: "Will you serve my House, Sir Roland? I warn you, our service is demanding, but we can offer you power as you never dreamed of. Are there any ties you cannot—will not—sever to the world?"

"None, my lady," he said quickly, impelled by some deep instinct, a feeling of rightness in what he did.. "My heart shall be wholly in your keeping, for as long as you desire." God, she was beautiful! And *very* rich...

"Ah." Her smile was pure mischief now. "*Mon coeur*, you delight me."

"I hope I am as you wish me." He was more than willing to be her heart, or whatever else she wanted, as long as she kept him—alive and whole.

She licked her lips. "Then I accept your oath of fealty on behalf of the House."

Releasing his pent breath, all too aware of Sir Dominic's silent presence at his side, Roland sank onto one knee, raised her cool hand to his lips and kissed it reverently. "I, Roland d'Agincourt, swear by the Blessed Virgin that I will to you, Lady Sharibet of the House of the Rose, be true and faithful, according to the laws of God and the laws of the world. Nor will I ever, through word or deed, do anything which is displeasing to you, on condition that you will hold to me as I shall deserve it, and that you will perform everything as befits a liege Lo—uh, Lady. I hereby declare myself your liege man, in life and limb."

"I accept your fealty with a joyous heart, Sir Roland." Then she embraced Dominic. "You have done very well, Menelaos—Dominic. The House rejoices."

"As do I," Dominic replied coolly.

Lady Sharibet made a graceful gesture and a servant entered, placing a platter of food on the low table. Roland's stomach rumbled again at the aroma of fresh bread and spiced meat.

"Please, eat," Lady Sharibet said.

There wasn't much food there. "Won't you join me?" he asked, including Dominic in his question with studied politeness.

"Ah, no. Men—Dominic has already broken his fast, and I," she smiled at him gleefully, "shall do so later."

The portent in her voice unnerved him, though he wasn't sure why.

"Sir Roland, I bid you welcome to the House of the Rose. It is good to meet again." Sir Dominic nodded curtly, and swept from the room.

Lady Sharibet looked disappointed at Dominic's retreat. But when she returned her gaze to Roland, it was filled with uncomfortable sympathy.

"Poor Roland, I know you must be very confused right now. Do sit down. Food will make you feel better."

He sat as the servant proffered a copper basin and ewer. Lady Sharibet slipped out of her chair and knelt next to him.

Smoothly she tucked his right sleeve up above his elbow. "It is our custom to wash one's hands before every meal."

He was tempted to explain that he too had been raised to wash his hands before every meal, but the brush of her fingertips against his skin was too enjoyable to stop.

When she had finished, Lady Sharibet dried his hands on a square of fine cloth, then draped the napkin over his knee. She offered him a dish. "Try this. The spices are most agreeable."

There was no knife, no trencher. "Ah, how do I...?"

She folded his hand around a piece of flat bread and dipped his fingers, bread and all, into one of the dishes on the tray, surrounding a morsel of meat. She released his hand, smiled again, and placed her fingers against his mouth, as if teaching him how to eat. He parted his lips and kissed her fingers.

Her eyes lit with amusement—and something else, that stirred appetites beyond those growling in his hungry stomach.

His hand felt as heavy as if he lifted an entire sheep, but he finally raised it to his mouth, and the taste of stewed lamb cured his paralysis. He ate frantically after that.

When he was done, and drinking a dark, bittersweet hot beverage he could not identify, she asked, "Do you have any questions?"

He could think of only one that he dared to ask. "Why did you call him Menelaos? I thought his name was Dominic."

"He changed his name recently. But what he is called now isn't important," she replied. "I remember his True Name. As you will yours, very soon."

He shivered pleasantly at the anticipatory lick she gave her sweet, full lips, and decided further questions could wait.

The rest of the evening passed in conversation and anticipation almost more delicious than the food.

* * * *

At some point she decided to show him her garden, filled with roses of every kind. Light from her lantern gilded flowers, leaves, and lady alike.

"...and these are the newest variety I've transformed," she said with girlish eagerness, fingering the blossoms with a lover's touch. "See how many petals they have!"

She walked as if moving in a measured, sensuous dance, and the graceful sway of her hips distracted him. Her silken garments rustled, emanating the sweet scent of the flowers she cultivated. He wanted to feel her touch, her velvet softness, before he lost his nerve entirely. He stopped in the

path, watching her walk away from him, still chattering about the husbandry of roses.

She noticed his absence after a moment and turned. "What is it?" Her voice was low, inviting.

"You are so beautiful!" He strode toward her and sank to one knee, seizing her fingers. He caressed the mound of Venus at the base of her thumb, feeling her fingers curl around his. Her skin was as cool and smooth as cream. "My heart is filled with your beauty, Lady Sharibet!"

"Ah," she said. "My ardent one." Her free hand played in his hair and he arched his neck cat-like. She tilted his head up and brought her face close to kiss him.

Her arms came around his neck, and he lifted her slight weight as he rose to his feet. The feel of her against his body nearly drove him mad with longing.

All too soon she made him put her down. She took him by the hand and led him through the deserted house to her dimly lit bedroom.

He discovered that his new clothes were sinfully easy to remove. Her scarlet gown already lay like a pool of blood beside the divan as he stretched out beside her tiny, perfectly formed body, kissing her with all the skill at his command.

She embraced him, returning his caresses, nipping his throat as he entered her smoothly, so smoothly.

It only took a few urgent thrusts, then he shuddered with his release. Too soon! But it had been such a long time since ... He twined his fingers in her dark hair and turned her face up to his so he could kiss her again. "Wait for me, my lady," he said softly.

"Indeed?" Her lips brushed tantalizingly against his neck.
"You were so hasty."

"I have more for you."

"Ah, you are a man of great power," she said, kissing his nose.

"You inspire me," he replied, tasting her dainty ear. She wore a round gold earring there, only a shade or two brighter than her eyes. Her black hair, released from its ornaments, rippled across the soft pillow. As he buried his face in that silken mass, she sang to him in an unknown language. The melody was like nothing he had ever heard, but it seemed to him that he should know it.

When she finished he said, "That was pretty. What did it mean?"

She stroked his chest. "It's an old, old song." She translated:

"Enlil is indeed your lord, but I am your lady. If you are my lady, let my hand touch your cheek. The seed of your lord, the all-bright seed, is in my womb. The seed of Sin, the all-bright seed, is in my womb."

He raised his head up from the pillow. "Who's this Sin fellow?"

She drew her finger along his jaw. "The moon-god, who has been lost for centuries."

"Oh. Who is Enlil, then?"

"The Lord of the Air," she said. "He rules the sky." Her fingers traced his eyebrows, his eyelids.

He kissed her shoulder, and moved within her. "'If you are my lady, let my hand touch your cheek,'" he quoted, his hand

on her face. "You are so beautiful!" He kissed her, lost once more in the seeking rhythm of love, free of thought, free of fear.

Hours passed in this most delightful of ways, sometimes tender, sometimes fierce. He listened for the catches in her breath and her bell-like laugh as they moved together, shattered into cataclysms of sensation, slept, and then began anew.

When the Saracen calls to prayer announced the approach of dawn, Roland was moving slowly, his limbs heavy, joined to Sharibet above him by a liquid thread of mutual ecstasy. She was laughing again, a low, wild laugh, and her hands were in his hair.

"It's almost morning," he whispered when she paused. His voice had gone hoarse with shouting long before.

"Mmmm?"

"What happens now?" he asked, then bit his lip. Bound to her service, he had to know.

Her amber eyes opened wide. "You're mine," she said, her hand upon his cheek. "Right now you're mine alone, with no ghosts between us."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow ... depends on your Transformation."

He had no time to ask her what she meant, because she held him down, hands on his shoulders. He moved within her. His release, long-sought this time, was near. She moved upon him, decided, deliberate, and he threw his head back, feeling the soft mounds of her breasts against his palms. She was exquisite.

"Oh, yes, you're mine," she said, as he fell silent, gasping, subsiding. He was so tired he couldn't open his eyes. He felt her breath, her kisses, cool against his neck.

"Forever?" he whispered, on the edge of the gulf of sleep.

"Mmmm."

He felt a sharp pang thrilling through his throat. His eyelids were heavy.

With his eyes closed, he dreamed she had bright honey-colored angel's wings that enfolded him. Wherever they touched him, a lightness rose through him, a rushing release utterly different from his recent climaxes. He gasped at the waves of pleasure rising up through his body into her winged embrace, rising and rising.

His heart lurched at the shocking magnitude of his joy, and went still.

But it was all right, even if he could no longer open his eyes or move his hands to caress her. She rested against him, whispering, "Oh, how I have missed you, my Marcus, my Enlil. I wish that you could be mine, forever."

The room—some infinite space—was all gray shadows, invisible, familiar.

He surrendered, and became a shadow, too.

* * * *

Dominic looked in on Sharibet later that morning, and found her measuring grains of frankincense onto the coals of a brazier.

Roland's body had been washed again, and laid out upon a divan, but the incense did not cover the musk of prolonged lovemaking.

He waited patiently while Sharibet chanted the traditional formulae of resurrection in a language already ancient when the Bible was newly scribed.

"Let the gates be opened, let the wanderer return. Let the gates be opened, let the house be prepared." She completed the ritual with a kiss upon Roland's slack lips. "Return to us, O wandering spirit, and dwell in the immortal temple of thy body!"

"It went well, then?" he asked, disguising his anxiety.

"Oh, yes," Sharibet sighed happily.

They stood together, looking down at the body on the divan.

"Dominic," she said softly "Don't be jealous. We'll have Honoria back among us, soon."

"As a young man," he said, forcing himself to smile.

"I remember, you used to like young men very well."

But he could not respond to her light tone. Ancient memories, true or not, swirled through his mind. "When I was Queen of the East and he was the Young Man of Eridu. But time has altered us yet again."

"No one escapes the Underworld unmarked," she quoted. "Roland ... was a bittersweet pleasure. It was good to love him again, but it pained me to share a song, a jest, and receive only a blank stare." Her eyes shone with unshed tears. "And yet I must wait until Cecilia arrives to Raise and

Name him before he will remember me." She reached out and brushed Roland's cool brow.

"But then he *will* remember you," Dominic said. Fortunate Roland, that he would not need to have his memories spoon-fed to him!

"You won't be alone," Sharibet said. "Cecilia may ask you to be her consort."

"Half a djinn being better than none?" Dominic asked, sarcastically.

Sharibet sighed again, and knelt by the divan. "I tried my best. I gave you forty years."

He didn't reply. He couldn't.

And she said nothing more, though he waited a few moments before leaving, closing the door behind him quietly, as if the chamber's occupant were merely sleeping.

Chapter Ten

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light."—*The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 13:12

Damietta, Egypt—Saturday, September 4th, AD 1249

"You thought I was dead?" Roland's grin made Michel feel foolish. They were riding side-by-side on a road that wound along a barren coast. The air smelled of salt spray and the dark, fishy odor of rotting seaweed, while overhead, white gulls soared in the bright sunshine and cried their plaintive "eee-eee-eee."

"And there I thought you'd forgiven me for drinking that jug of Shiraz red." Roland continued, putting on an exaggerated woebegone expression.

"Fool!" Michel was laughing despite himself. "Clown! No, it was just a bad dream." Clear as memory, the images of rushing brown water still haunted him.

His head felt curiously constricted, as if he were wearing a too-tight cap. He was clad in some sort of heavy gown with wide sleeves that kept slipping over his hands and interfering with his grasp on his horse's reins. He looked for the sun's position. "We'd better pick up our pace, or we won't arrive in Tyre before they shut the gates for the night—curse these sleeves!" He shoved loose gold brocade up his forearms for the hundredth time this day.

It looked like an old-fashioned woman's robe. And what were those pearl rings doing on his fingers? They looked like something Mathilde might wear...

Michel frowned at the sudden strangeness, glancing over to Roland. Something was different ... something to do with Roland's copper hair...

"Don't worry, my love," Dominic said from his left. He was dressed in rich but old-fashioned robes of a deep indigo blue that complemented his black hair and gray eyes. He gave a smile filled with such sensual promise that Michel's chest tightened and he missed a breath. "We'll arrive in plenty of time to witness Anna's Appointing. And I'll help you take off that uncomfortable gown as soon as we get to our rooms."

Holy Virgin! Michel awoke with a gasp. It was barely past dawn, but he was already sweating as the heat of the newborn day clawed its way into the room. In the time it took his heart to calm, relief threaded through the soul-churning strangeness of dreaming himself a woman yet again.

Roland wasn't dead—

Michel glanced over at Roland's pallet, and saw only threadbare linen sheets. His relief congealed into a leaden mass. His cousin *was* still dead.

It had only been a dream.

Michel rolled off his own pallet with a groan, and knelt on the dirty wooden floor, his hands clasped tightly in despair as he prayed. "Merciful God, forgive me! I knew not what I did. I beg you, protect Roland if he is still alive, and receive him into Heaven if he is dead. Amen."

He knelt there, straining for some sign that his prayer might have been heard.

Nothing.

Roland was dead, and it was Michel's fault.

Michel rose, every muscle aching from three days of punishing travel. He dressed, gathered up scattered clothing and bedding in crude bundles, and left the room with dragging steps. Gloom shrouded him like a dank gray North Sea fog, leaching all color and interest from his surroundings.

After getting a pouchful of change for one of his bezants, Michel hired a laundress, then paid a sou to a squire willing to earn a day's wages sanding and oiling Michel's armor. A few hours later, he quit the awful little room for what he hoped was the last time, his pouch lighter of coin but his laundry washed, sun-dried, and folded, and his mail shining once again.

It was well past noon when he returned to the marketplace. He wasn't hungry, but he forced himself to purchase and eat a slice of tough mutton wrapped in bread, and to drink a mug of watery ale. The food did nothing to raise his spirits, but it renewed his strength.

Then, having delayed his most difficult chore as long as possible, Michel purchased parchment and ink from one of the monks in the Queen's retinue. Sitting cross-legged in the shade of a colonnade, he wrestled with the letter that Robert had asked him to write.

To my lord Ulrich d'Agincourt in the county of Artois, and to his lady Blanche, Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne sends

greetings four days before the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary.

Right worshipful and well-beloved uncle and aunt, I recommend me unto you. It is my mournful duty to give you such sad tidings as I have of the death of your son Roland, whose soul Jesus assoil...

Michel paused, staring down at the formal phrases he had just written. How could he reveal the full circumstances of his cousin's death?

In the end, he wrote simply that Roland had been killed while fighting bravely against Saracens, and that his body had not been recovered for burial. He added assurances that Robert was well and prospered in the King's service. He closed with:

I beseech your forgiveness. I wish I had been able to save him. Roland was dearer to me than a brother, and guarded me well on our journey. May you find comfort in receiving his sword and surcote. And may God rest his soul.

He spent another, even more difficult hour chewing on the end of his goose-quill pen as he wrote his sister Mathilde, explaining why he was sending Roland's spurs to her.

Finally finished, he sealed the letters and wrapped them in the two packages containing Roland's things. Then he went out through the harbor gate, to the docks, and sought a supply galley that might be returning to Europe soon.

After much awkward haggling with a Venetian merchant, the negotiations hampered by language difficulties and Michel's aristocratic disdain for money matters, they agreed on terms for delivery of the letters and accompanying

packages to their distant destinations. Sealing the deal with a handshake and more coins, Michel was finally free to settle his fate.

It was only a short distance to the Templar camp from the docks. Michel changed his mind a dozen times on the walk over there. But each time his step slowed and he was tempted to turn back to his old life, he remembered Dominic's smile, filled with lies and corrupting promises.

When he arrived at the perimeter of the camp, a black-mantled guard at the entrance asked his business.

"I've come to pay my stabling fees," Michel wavered, wondering how much closer to hell he could get.

He knew the way to the Marshal's tent, and accepted as a sign from God the fact that Brother Peter was alone there.

Peter looked curiously at Michel's bundles, but did not remark upon them as he offered Michel sweet mint tea.

Michel swallowed impatience and doubt as Peter took forever to fetch the bulky record book from a large chest, and totted up the sums owing for the stabling of two warhorses and Roland's palfrey. He wanted to blurt out his request before he lost his courage, but dared not until Brother Peter had finished his transaction.

In due course, Michel handed over bezants and silver in the sum of seventy-two sous, a sum that a week ago had seemed impossibly large, and received a neatly written receipt.

"Now," the young Templar said. "Is there anything else I might do for you, Sir Michel?"

"I—ah" Michel drank tea to moisten his suddenly dry throat. "I was hoping ... when we spoke before, you said—I mean, I thought I should—"

"Yes?"

"I wish to become a Templar." There it was, stripped of all the courteous circumlocutions that Michel had composed while going about his errands.

"Well." Brother Peter sat back and regarded Michel thoughtfully. "I expected you to spend more time contemplating your decision. This is not a matter for impulse, Sir Michel. We do not take our vows lightly."

"I have considered it."

Brother Peter waited with controlled patience.

Michel shifted uneasily. What could he say to convince Brother Peter that he was serious? The Templars had to accept him. How else could Michel hope to expiate his sin? Then he realized that only the truth would serve. He raised his chin. "Brother Peter, you told me that you had been a sinful man, but that the Order offered you an honorable way to redeem yourself by serving God. I need that redemption, and I am prepared to serve for it."

"You are wise to be concerned for the state of your soul," Brother Peter said, frowning. His plain white mantle with its red cross lent him dignity beyond that afforded by velvet. "And you have unquestionably been tempted by the Powers of Darkness. But I, too, have had time to think since our conversation, and I wonder if perhaps I was too hasty in urging you to join us. You are a young man, and impulsive—even in this request you make—and our brotherhood is

founded on the principle of utter and unquestioning obedience."

"But that's just it," said Michel, miserably. "I was deceived by that sorcerer because I acted on my impulse, against God's design. I need guidance, discipline, to ensure I don't make an error like that again. Please. I want to join."

"You seem sincere in your desire, Sir Michel, but the Order does not accept every applicant," murmured Brother Peter, with a twist of his lips that was not quite a smile. "Are you absolutely certain that you wish to spend the rest of your life as a slave in the service of God?"

"Yes!" Michel answered, his heart beating wildly.

"Come with me, then, and see if you are acceptable to the Brothers." Peter stood, and Michel, in a fever of apprehension, followed him outside.

They went to the pavilion in the middle of the camp that served as the Templar chapel. Brother Peter ushered Michel inside. "Wait here while I fetch three worthy Brothers who will question you."

Inside, the chapel tent was dim and stiflingly hot because the flaps had been closed. The scent of stale incense brought back a vivid memory of myrrh and the thrill of mysteries revealed. Crossing himself, Michel knelt and said a prayer for the men who had died because of his sin.

But when he tried to say a prayer for himself, the only words that came to him were the verses Dominic had read on the temple walls: *My heart is finished, not even remembering yesterday.*

My heart is finished ... oh, Roland. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa! All of it my fault, my great fault.

At last, Brother Peter returned, accompanied by three older Templars.

"Marshall Renaud, here is Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, who wishes to join the Order. Sir Michel, you know the Marshall and Sergeant-Brother Gauthier already. Brother Jakob," he indicated the man who wore a cope of much finer cloth than the others, "is our Chaplain Brother."

The Marshall spoke in a no-nonsense voice. "Sir Michel, is it true that you seek the company of the Order of the Temple and the participation in the spiritual and temporal goods which are in it?"

"Yes, Marshall."

"You seek what is a very great thing," Marshall Renaud said, his voice taking on the cadence of oft-repeated formula. "Because you have seen that our Order is well-dressed, well-mounted, and well-equipped, you think you would have a soft life here. But you do not know the harsh commandments we follow. You, who are your own master, will never again do anything of your own will. When you wish to be on this side of the sea, we will send you beyond it; or if you wish to be in Acre, you will be sent to Tripoli or Antioch or Paris, wherever we have houses and possessions to care for. And if you wish to sleep, we will order you to stay awake; or if you are eating, someone will order you to get up and go to an unknown destination. Can you bear these things for the honor of God and the safety of your soul?"

"I can," said Michel.

Brother Peter whispered, "You should say: 'Yes, I will bear them all if God pleases,'" and Michel echoed the phrase.

The Marshall continued solemnly, "You should seek us for only three reasons: firstly, to reject and renounce the sin of the world; secondly, to do the work of Our Lord; and thirdly, to be poor and do penance for the salvation of your soul. Knowing this, do you wish to be, all the days of your life henceforth, a serf and slave of the house?"

"Yes, if God pleases."

Questions followed, some asked by Master Renaud, others by Brother Jakob: was Michel truly a belted knight, and the legitimate son of a knight and a lady? Was he married, affianced, or promised to another Holy Order? Did Michel believe in the Catholic faith? Had he been excommunicated? Had he bribed anyone to gain entrance to the Order? Did he have any secret disease or infirmity that would prevent him from serving as a knight? Was he in debt to anyone?

Michel answered the last question with a ringing "No!"

The Marshall nodded. "Take care that you have told us the truth, for if we accept you and you have lied about anything, you may be expelled from the house."

Crossing himself against such a fate, Michel felt lightheaded and battered. Would they accept him or not?

The three venerable Templars merely nodded to Brother Peter and left.

Dazed, Michel turned to Peter, who said: "We'll be holding chapter tomorrow, after Mass. The whole convent will vote then whether to accept you. At least you won't have to wait long." Brother Peter was grinning.

"Do you think—?"

Brother Peter thumped him on the back. "You are welcome to stay in my tent tonight, and—" His head came up and he sniffed. "I think the evening meal is just about ready. Come on, and get a taste of life in the Order." He lifted the flap, and led the way to the mess tent. "We're not supposed to talk during the meal, but you'll be too busy eating, anyway. And—"

Michel drank in every word he said, on fire with waiting for tomorrow.

* * * *

And still waiting ... the next day, in Brother Peter's tent, meditating on his decision, and praying for the Templars to accept his petition. *Forgive me, O Lord. Let me be saved by serving You. Save me from myself.*

In due time, Brother Peter and Marshal Renaud appeared, accompanied by two unfamiliar knight-brothers. The Marshall said, "Remove your coif, and come to the chapel to face the brothers."

Had he been accepted?

Michel swallowed dryly, uncovered his head, and followed the knights to the chapel tent where the knight-brothers gathered, nearly three hundred white-mantled warriors, all of them staring at him, holding his future in their hands. As Peter had instructed earlier, Michel walked, stiff-kneed, toward the grizzled Grand Master of the Templars, Guillaume de Sonnac, and knelt before him, putting his hands together in the formal gesture of appeal.

Out of the corners of his eyes, Michel saw the massed ranks of the Templars, but he could not see their expressions. He focused on Master Guillaume, and recited the application speech as Brother Peter had coached him:

"Sir, I come before God and all the brothers here, and I ask you for the love of God and Our Lady to welcome me into the companionship of the Order and participation in its spiritual and temporal goods, because I wish to be a serving slave of the Order all the remaining days of my life." Michel also wished his voice hadn't cracked in the middle of his profession, but at least he had gotten through the whole of it without stumbling.

Master Guillaume repeated, in front of everyone, the same questions that Michel had answered yesterday in private. Michel fought terror with each answer. Were they accepting him or not? There was a pause, and the Master stepped forward. "Any further questions for the applicant?"

Marshal Renaud, at the forefront of the ranks of Templars, came to stand before Michel, and fixed him with an uncompromising gaze. "Sir Michel, we are aware that you have escaped a sorcerer's temptations by the grace of God. Can you swear that you have renounced the snares of the Evil One and that you abjure and deny him and all his works?"

"Sir, yes, if it please God." Michel's voice shook. *They know everything.*

The Master repeated, "Any further questions for the applicant?"

On hearing only silence, Master Guillaume said, "Now go outside and pray to Our Lord that He advise you."

Michel climbed unsteadily to his feet. Did that mean he had been rejected? What was he going to do now? If the Templars wouldn't accept him, where else could he go?

Brother Peter took him by the arm, leading him back to the airless vestibule. Michel wasn't aware that his misery showed until Peter said awkwardly, "We must wait in silence until they finish voting on you."

"But—but they know—Won't they reject me?"

"Trust God," Brother Peter said, and began a Paternoster.

Praying with Brother Peter brought Michel some measure of calm until a dignified older Templar summoned them back to the chapter meeting.

Michel walked through the parted ranks of the men who held his fate in their hands. He returned to the spot where he had knelt before, and fell to his knees, all his hopes focused on the Master, who now spoke.

"Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, let me ask once more: do you wish to be a serf and slave of the Order and leave behind your own will forever to do another's? And do you wish to suffer all the hardships of our house for the remaining days of your life, and carry out all the orders you will be given?"

"Sir, yes, if it please God," Michel replied, trembling.

Smiling gravely, Master Guillaume said, "Good lords, pray to Our Lord and Our Lady that he does it well."

The assembled brothers repeated the Paternoster together in a deep-voiced chorus. No one cried out 'Stop—don't accept him!'

At the end of the prayer, the chaplain-brother stepped forward from his place at Master Guillaume's side, and said some prayers in Latin. Then the Master came toward Michel, carrying a large book with a gilded cover. Opening the book to show gloriously illuminated pages, the Master said, "Here you see the holy words of Our Lord."

Michel took the heavy volume with awed reverence and an irrepressible itch to decipher the crabbed calligraphy. But he forced his attention back to the Master.

"Now, Sir Michel, do you promise to God and Our Lady that henceforth all the days of your life you will be obedient to the Master of the Temple and whatever commander will be over you? And do you promise you will live chastely, without property, keeping the fine traditions and good customs of our house?"

"Yes, sir, if it please God," said Michel, his heart overflowing.

"And do you also promise to God and to Our Lady Mary that you will help to conquer, with all the strength and power God has given you, the Holy Land of Jerusalem; and that which Christians hold you will help to keep and save within your power; that you will never allow any Christian to be killed or disinherited unjustly; that you will never leave the Order for stronger or weaker, for better or worse, unless you have permission of the Master and of the convent authorities?"

"Yes, sir, if it please God."

The Master took the Bible from Michel, and gave it to Brother Jakob. His hands covered Michel's clasped hands, like

a liege lord. "Then, on behalf of God and Our Lady Mary, and our father the Pope, and all the brothers of the Temple, we welcome you to all the spiritual benefits of the house, from the beginning to the end of time, as you welcome us to be your brothers. And we promise you the bread and water and the poor clothing of the house, and much pain and suffering, for the glory of God."

He had been accepted! God had saved him.

The Master took a white mantle from a grinning Brother Peter, draped it around Michel's shoulders, and fastened the laces. Brother Jakob recited a psalm, then the Master raised Michel to his feet and gave him the kiss of peace.

Michel was acutely conscious of the smells of incense and sweat, of the soft, sandy dirt under his feet, of the soft bristle of another man's moustache against his lips, of the silent approval of a host of new brothers. The chaplain-brother came forward to bestow the kiss of peace as well, and then Brother Peter, who clasped Michel's arm jubilantly.

"Brother Michel," Master Guillaume said. "Our Lord has led you to your desire and has placed you in the fine company of the Knighthood of the Temple—" the brothers agreed with this sentiment with a roar. "And so you should be at great pains to ensure that you never do anything for which it would be necessary to expel you. Brother Peter will shortly tell you some of those things that we consider failings of the house and the habit. Remember you may ask anyone, at any time. And may God let you say and do well."

"Amen!" And he was still allowed to ask questions? Praise God!

At the sound of six hundred shuffling feet, the Master returned to his spot and said, "Good lords, let us disperse, for by the grace of God there is nothing but good. May it please God and Our Lady to grant peace to the Church and to the Holy Kingdom of Jerusalem, to all religious houses, and to all our brothers and sisters in Christ. May God bless the benefactors of our house, and the living and the dead."

The resounding communal 'Amen' shook Michel to his bones.

As the assembly began to depart, some of the younger Templars came by to meet Michel and commend Brother Peter on his recruit. A few of them jibed Michel about his youth, but all of them were friendly, accepting him fully as their new brother.

Finally, laughing, Brother Peter said, "I have to take him away and read him the Rule now or I'll be liable for penance." They left the chapel together, all but Brother Peter returning to their various duties.

Michel followed Brother Peter to his tent and sat submissively at his feet for two hours listening to a recitation of all the rules and restrictions of his new life. In summary, he thought with numb gratitude, Robert had been right: he could no longer even piss without permission.

"And now," Brother Peter said cheerfully, putting aside his copy of the Rule. "You go to the Draper. He'll issue you the clothing and equipment befitting your place as a knight-brother. You have to give over your arms, armor, and horse to the Marshal—"

At Michel's involuntary sound of protest, Peter laughed. "Don't worry, you'll get new ones, just as good. Remember, Brother Michel, all the goods on your person now belong to the Order. And may God make you a worthy man."

Michel fingered the rest of the gold bezants in his belt pouch, which could have gone to Robert if he'd known.

But the coin was cursed, tainted by sorcery. Better Robert not be burdened with it.

Already the Templars were saving him from himself. Michel had been born a free man ... and a weak one. Well, he was free no longer. He had pledged himself as a slave of the Order. Now he belonged to God.

And wasn't that what he wanted?

Yes. No more temptation. No more yearning after forbidden knowledge. No more mistakes.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Monday, 27th of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH (September 6th, AD 1249)

Roland gradually became aware of his surroundings.

The rose-scent of the sheets told him he was still in Sharibet's bed. The coolness and stillness argued for pre-dawn. His head rested on something soft and hard at once. He moved slightly, testing the surface. He felt Sharibet's hand gently brush hair from his forehead, and realized in a rush, *Oh. I've got my head in her lap.*

Thoughts chased themselves around inside his head with a clarity he couldn't remember ever having before ... before...

Had the strange end to their lovemaking been an illusion? Her teeth at his throat, the luminous wings that embraced him?

No. Something had happened to him. Something momentous.

He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

Sharibet's face floated above him, veiled in shifting light. Her lips brushed his, and he felt the aura that surrounded her, pressing against him like the softest fur.

"Mon coeur," she said. "How do you feel?"

He stretched. He felt strange and somehow *right*, as if his life until now had been a dream, and he had finally awoken. His lassitude dissipated and a sense of boundless strength pervaded his limbs.

"Wonderful," he murmured, turning his face to her throat. He kissed her there, relishing the sensation of warm skin paired with the odd, almost springy texture of her shining aura.

Then a pain clawed his middle, sharp as if a sword had gutted him. He gasped. "And hungry, too. I think."

She offered him a jug from the floor beside the divan. The smell from it made his mouth water, and the thick liquid, tasting of iron, salt, and oranges, appeased the torment in his belly. All too soon, the jug was empty, and he upended it to get the last drops.

He sniffed at the scarlet film coating the rim of the jug. "Lady Sharibet," he said, concealing his sudden terror. "Was that blood?"

"Indeed, it was."

How could she be so calm? How could he have just drunk blood—and found it good? "What have you done to me?"

"I have given you eternal life, eternal youth." Her voice was like the singing of a sword blade slicing through the air.

"How?"

She patted his neck. "I Transformed you while you slept."

"Sharibet," He strove to recall the bits of Arabic he had picked up in the Damietta marketplace. "That means 'she drank.' Doesn't it?"

"It does," she said, and cast down her golden gaze. Her hair fell in a rippling cascade across her shoulders.

"Am I a demon now?" he asked, bewildered, but strangely not as frightened as he ought to have been.

"Not at all. Merely restored to what you once were." She leaned toward him, kissing his cheek. "You're stronger, faster. No wound will mark you. We will teach you how to use your powers..."

He held himself very still, keeping the strangeness at bay. It was too much. What had he become? Whatever else he might now be, or she might be, she was a woman, and he was a man.

"The only power I want is the power to please you." The black waves of her hair tangled around his fumbling fingers.

Kissing his throat, she murmured, "I don't have to teach you that."

Her teeth pierced his skin but there was no pain, only a strange overpowering pleasure as she drank his blood. When her lips withdrew, instinctively his mouth found her throat. The newly-sharp edge of his teeth drew blood, and with the

first mouthful, his body from his center outward was filled with the taste of her, spice and sweetness mingled inextricably.

Roland drank her blood, ancient and terrible, as dizzied as if he teetered on the edge of an abyss. He saw a succession of images: *stair-girdled temples rising like artificial mountains from a vast cultivated plain ... A many-columned pagan temple blazes with a thousand torches while worshippers prostrate themselves before a brown-skinned woman crowned with dazzling wings of light ... Dominic, his hair unmarked by white, wearing a tunic of antique cut, roars with rage and smashes a lyre discordantly against a mosaic floor ... In a dance of intertwined limbs, fevered endearments, caresses and thoughts felt as one, the strange-familiar face of a red-haired man stares back at him, as if from a mirror...*

He pushed Sharibet away with a gasp and sat up.

"*Mon coeur*, don't be afraid," she said, reaching for him.

"No!" Gripped by blind panic, he rolled off the low bed and landed on all fours. The cool tile floor bruised his knees, and the room spun. He was strangling on the light that engulfed him, and he strained for breath with a sound perilously akin to sobbing. He felt cloth under his hand as he scrabbled to his feet, and reflexively grabbed it.

"Roland!" Sharibet called after him as he lurched out of the room, but he paid her no heed. He found the corridor and ran.

The house was utterly silent. He saw no servants as he passed darkened rooms. No lamps had been lit. There were no sounds of pursuit.

His steps slowed gradually, and finally he stopped, leaning against a painted wall for support, his chest heaving. He had drunk her blood, and he had seen ... himself? With a different face, red-haired and stocky where he was golden-haired and lithe.

But how that could be, he did not know.

He had drunk blood—unhesitatingly, as if it were something he had done a thousand times, like buckling his armor or saddling his horse.

Remembering the taste, Roland wept for all he had lost, and all that he had become.

Time passed. His tears left him clear-headed and aware that he was standing naked in the middle of an alien house.

Roland wiped his wet, heated face with the garment he still clutched in his hand. Shaking it out, he recognized it as the long shirt he had been given by Sharibet's servants. He pulled it over his head, and began to walk.

He quickly found himself in the reception room where he had eaten supper with Sharibet. He stopped short and stared around in amazement. His vision, in darkness, was more acute than it had ever been in light. Caught up in the need to pay attention to Sharibet and Dominic, he had missed so much: the mural of the river with a crocodile lazing on the bank; the border of twining roses with their thorns; lotus blossoms atop gilded columns.

He saw a pool of golden lamplight spilling into the garden from one of the rooms on the other side of the courtyard. Perhaps it was Sharibet's room—and he should make amends for leaving her so abruptly.

He would render his apologies and beg her, on his knees if necessary, to undo her spell. She had promised him eternal youth but the ancient memories he had glimpsed in her blood convinced him that a mortal span of years was more to his liking.

He crossed the courtyard to the lighted room, the graveled path sharp under his bare feet.

The tall windows had their filigreed wooden shutters open to the night air. Roland stepped over the low sill, and found himself inside a room with plain white walls, furnished with tables and cushioned chairs and tall cabinets that held hundreds of scrolls and dozens of leather-bound books.

Someone was sitting at one of the tables, clad in robes of light that blazed so brightly that Sharibet's were cast into insignificance. Great luminous wings, like an angel's, swept out and back.

Roland tried to peer through the shimmering glare.

The angel was Dominic, engaged in the clerkly task of copying a scroll that lay, partially-unrolled on the table before him. He glanced up, and saw Roland gaping at him. "So, you awoke, after all."

"Yes. How long was I asleep?" Roland blinked, squinting a little, trying to see Dominic's face through the sun-bright aura. To his surprise, his eyes adjusted and he saw that the great wings were scarred, somehow. One even appeared to be dragging, as if broken.

"You've been ... injured," he blurted.

Dominic's surprisingly kind smile disappeared. "Your Transformation took three days to complete."

Roland felt a sensation akin to seasickness. In the aftermath of his panicked flight through the house, he had nearly convinced himself that Sharibet had been jesting about transforming him, and that the robes of light were a minor enchantment, like the tricks practiced by marketplace magicians who also pulled coins out of thin air.

Dominic capped his inkwell and put down his pen. "Come, let us find more agreeable surroundings. We have much to discuss, and I am certain you must have many questions." He picked up one of the metal oil lamps that illuminated the room.

"Where is everyone?" Roland asked, as he followed Dominic out into the silent courtyard.

"It is customary for the people of the House to withdraw when a new djinn awakens from the sleep of Transformation. They will return soon to pay their respects to you."

Dominic turned into another one of the many rooms and set the lamp down on a small table. This chamber was furnished with banks of cushioned divans around its perimeter. And like all the other rooms in Sharibet's house, it was painted with murals. Brightly colored birds of all descriptions flew through the air and perched in painted trees.

A pale aura-glow emanated from a wrought-iron cage in one corner of the room. When Roland looked closer, he saw a large gray-and-white bird with a short red tail.

Even birds had auras!

Then the bird shook itself awake, peered at the intruders, and spoke in Arabic. Its soft voice sounded like Sharibet's.

Dominic, the white streak glimmering in his dark hair, nodded toward the bird. "She's asking for fruit."

"It's actually speaking?" Roland thought he had worn out his capacity for amazement amid all the evening's strange events.

There was a flat bowl heaped with fruit on the table next to the cage. Before he could gabble any more nonsense, Roland pulled out his belt knife and sliced through the leathery red peel of a pomegranate. He cautiously offered one of the seeds to the bird, which was now clinging to the bars of the cage with scaly, black-clawed feet.

The large, dark-gray beak opened and delicately took the seed from Roland's fingertip. "*Shoukran!*" said the bird.

"*Enta tayr mezyan,*" Dominic said fondly to it.

A bird that says please and thank you like a human being! Roland marveled. "Is it yours? What is it?"

"A parrot. She is named Humairah. Sharibet has owned her for the forty years since I have lived here."

Shock coursed through Roland's body and he blurted out, "The Lady Sharibet is your wife?" He remembered the kiss Dominic had given her, the easy intimacy between them.

Dominic had no visible reaction, but his aura-wings contracted. "No. My wife is dead."

Embarrassed, Roland concentrated on extracting more seeds for the bird from the pomegranate's sticky white pith.

"Did—" Roland swallowed, striving for a calm indifference.

"Did you know that Sharibet would ch—do this to me?"

"Transform you? Yes."

"Now what?" Roland choked. "What will become of me?"

"Sharibet wishes me to teach you the duties of your new position. Depending on how well your body adapts to the changes Sharibet wrought, and how well you learn your lessons, the elders of the House will nominate you as a Protector."

"Atili shwiya anta elfakiha!" shrilled the bird.

Dominic offered a fig, and the parrot grasped the purplish fruit eagerly in one foot and began tearing chunks out of it.

"Then what?" Roland hardly dared to breathe.

"If the elders of the House have found you trustworthy and competent, you'll undergo the Appointing, where the members of the House will swear fealty to you, and you will swear to serve them as Protector."

"What, for all the Houses?"

"No, but you'll be responsible for Iberia to Baghdad."

"What about you?"

"I will probably serve as Protector in Europe, but perhaps they will ask me to protect the Houses along the Silk Road. Or—" He shrugged.

Roland shifted his weight, and absently tried eating one of the pomegranate seeds himself. It was overwhelmingly sweet and acidic, and he spat it out. Too bad he couldn't as easily ignore Dominic's revelations.

"How did you come to serve Lady Sharibet?"

"I was sorely wounded, and Sharibet consented to heal me." Dominic's mouth twisted as if in memory of bitter medicine.

"So you're not her ... ah..." But he *had* been her lover. Roland felt a burst of jealousy at the flash he had seen among

the myriad of images from Sharibet's memories: Dominic kissing Sharibet's breasts, her fingers gripping his shoulders.

"Paramour?" Dominic smiled. "You will learn, soon enough, that things are different among the djinni."

Roland bristled.

"You're very young," Dominic continued. "Don't be misled by her smiling face. It's all you've seen so far, but it's not the only one she wears."

"She's the most enchanting woman in the world!" But the weight of Sharibet's centuries was dust on Roland's tongue.

Humairah finished the fig, and spoke again. Dominic reached through the cage bars and lightly ruffled the feathers covering the round head, now turned halfway around on its neck. The bird's eyes closed in bliss.

Sir Dominic remarked, "If I tried to do this to a hawk, I'd lose a finger. It would grow back eventually—that is our nature—but it would be painful, all the same."

"Our nature?" Finally, a chance to find out what Sharibet's Transformation had done to him!

"The Qu'ran says that God 'created man from potter's clay, and the djinni from smokeless fire.' In these lands, these times, we call ourselves djinni. In other lands and times we have had less benevolent names, such as ekimmu, lamia, or vampir."

"So I *have* become a demon, after all!"

"To Christians, demons are any creatures who fall outside the hierarchy of God, his angels and saints, and man. So they name all the gods who came before, their servants, and their avatars." Dominic's fingers now scratched under the bird's

beak, and she turned her head completely around. "Long before the priests of this God bowed down before his vacant altars, you were the Lord of the Air, a name men called out in prayer. And so you shall remember, once you are Raised and Named."

Unsettled by Dominic's reply—*Lord of the Air?*—Roland almost missed Dominic's next words.

"You will find some ignorant and superstitious persons believe the Protectors of the House to be powerful *afreet*, even *marids*. Take care not to reply when someone pours a libation and says '*Destoor*,' which is to say, 'With your permission,' or they will be utterly convinced of it."

"What's an *afreet*?"

"An evil djinn who is not of the faithful."

"But you said we are djinni. No," he corrected himself. "You said, 'we *call* ourselves djinni.' But what is a djinn?"

"Djinni are believed to be creatures halfway between man and the angels, capable of changing shape or becoming invisible, and of living for centuries, yet not immune to death. It's a fortuitous name, one that affords us a great deal more freedom than we might otherwise have." Dominic finished caressing the bird's head, and moved away from the cage despite its squawk of protest. "Within the House of the Rose, there are three major ranks: the highest are the Apkallu, who have the oldest souls and greatest powers among the djinni. You and I are both Apkallu. Then there are djinni who were ordinary mortals and awarded Crowns of Service. They have lesser powers, but also serve the House as Protectors. Finally, there are the kinfolk of the House, who are Sharibet's

descendants for the most part, who serve us and whom we protect. They have no special powers, but they have been Raised and Named, and thus remember all their lifetimes back to the Flood."

Roland blinked, digesting the mass of information. Good, so he was going to be a lord of the House, after all! As for the rest ... "I can change shape?" Holy Mother of God, but he was sounding like Michel with his never-ending questions. Pray God Michel was all right, and Robert, too.

"You can influence men to see what you wish them to."

Roland rubbed his aching head, and braced himself to ask another question, no matter how foolish it might sound.

Sharibet's perfume rose up in a cloud behind them, and distracted him. Both men turned towards her as one and bowed respectfully.

"My lady, I beg your pardon for leaving you so discourteously," Roland said, relieved she did not appear angry.

"But you are better now?" She favored him with a warm smile. "I know it is quite a shock to awaken thus." She dropped her gaze, and gave sweet words of greeting to Humairah.

"I am better," Roland agreed, then forged ahead with his most important question. "Lady Sharibet, becoming the, um, Protector of the House ... it sounded like an honorable position for a knight. Before, you, ah, turned me into a djinn. What I wish to know is ... exactly what duties I am to perform?"

Dominic answered for her. "Protect the members of the House from harm. If you cannot prevent injury, avenge it. Be Sharibet's consort, her eyes and ears when it comes to political and other changes. Search for the lost Apkallu and members of the House. Participate in the House's rituals."

Roland's attention focused on the final item on Dominic's list. "Ritual? I won't change my religion!"

Both Sharibet and Dominic stifled laughter, and Roland gritted his teeth. God's Nails, but he resented being treated like a fool or a child!

He was only slightly mollified when Sharibet slipped her hand through his arm. "By virtue of who you are, you are of the House of the Rose forever. This is what I tell my children when they come of age: Because spirits never die, you have returned from the Underworld to the House of the Rose. Death has broken the bonds of your memory, but we djinni remember you. And when you are ready, *mon coeur*, Lady Cecilia, the first among us, will lift the veil of forgetfulness so you, too, can remember your past lives."

"That's heresy! I think..." Roland said uncertainly. God knew, he was no theologian. But the more he pondered Sharibet's words, the stronger his revulsion. True or not, to be burdened with the memories of a dozen lifetimes would send him mad.

"That is our truth," said Sharibet firmly. "The children of my House conform outwardly to the dominant religion wherever they are stationed. You, too, will be expected to look and act in such a way that you cause the House no harm. I don't care what you believe or practice in private, but

your duty is to the survival of the House. And I will hold you accountable for that." Now there was no mischief, no amusement in her eyes.

His spine transformed into cold, quaking jelly. Fortunately, the bird squawked, "*Enta tayr mezyan! Atili shwiya anta elfakiha!*"

"Yes, you are a good bird," Sharibet cooed, and the uncomfortable moment passed. "Don't worry. Dominic will teach you what you need to know until you can remember for yourself."

Dominic moved back into view. "Remember, Roland, the House's survival is our survival."

"Yes," said Sharibet. "And there is one more thing, *mon coeur*: while you are in the House, you must never drink any blood not willingly offered to you."

"Or—?"

"Or we will cast you out," Sharibet said with finality. "Don't make it necessary to find out what would happen to you outside our protection." The lovely planes of Sharibet's face were suddenly stark and grim.

Roland swallowed. "I would never—" He found himself unable to speak the rest of his thought out loud.

Dominic waited until it was clear that Roland wasn't going to say anything else. "Do you have any other questions?"

"May I contact my family, and tell them where I am? Or at least that I'm, uh, safe?"

Dominic shared a glance with Sharibet, then said, "Once you have passed your probation, if such contact will not endanger the House, and you still wish to."

He nodded, wondering yet again at what he had so unwittingly consented to. Already his head felt stuffed with too much knowledge, most of it things he never wanted to know. And if he could see pictures in Sharibet's blood, could she see pictures in his? Did she know everything he was thinking?

Frantically, he tried to distract himself from the things he wanted no one else to know about him. He wondered if she would be offended if he asked her to reverse the spell that had made him a djinn.

—Indeed, I do hear your thoughts, *mon coeur*, — Roland felt Sharibet's amusement lapping over him like the cool water of her bath.—A Transformation cannot be undone. You will be a djinn for as long as you wear this body. Be glad. You may serve the House for centuries, savoring new experiences or—No!—he interrupted.—I don't want to know everyone I've been, everything I've done. I want to stay as I am!— Everything changes: customs, languages, even our names, in time. Only our bonds to one another remain.—Am I bound to you?—Roland asked. He dropped to his knees, and pressed a kiss to the soft skin of her palm, inhaling her spice. He needed the reassurance of her love right now.

"You're bound to all of us, forever," she said aloud.

Chapter Eleven

"I hope I never have a wealthy life which brings me sorrow or the kind of happiness which galls my heart."—Euripides, *Medea*

Templar Encampment, Damietta—Monday, September 6th, AD 1249

The reality of being a Templar was quite different from what Michel had envisioned. Based on his vows and on Brother Peter's instructions, he had half-expected to live like a peasant, wearing rags and eating bread crusts while everyone told him what to do.

He had, in fact, been hoping for sufficient mortification to begin his atonement for Roland's death.

He began to discover his mistake after morning services, when Brother Peter took him to the modest tent of the Standard Bearer, a harried sergeant-brother in charge of the unassigned squires.

"He'll need an experienced fellow," said Sergeant-Brother Gerald after giving a quick assessment. Brother Peter nodded, and Gerald left.

He returned shortly with a sturdy, red-haired man some years older than Michel and clad in the brown mantle of a Templar squire. "This is Brother Aumery—he will serve as your squire, Brother Michel."

"On behalf of God." Brother Aumery bowed his head.

Michel was guiltily thrilled as the three of them walked down the street between the neat tents—his very own squire!

But as soon as they were out of hearing of the Standard Bearer, Aumery looked Michel over disdainfully and said, "Eh, Brother Peter, if I'd wanted to be a nursemaid, I would've gotten married instead!"

Michel bristled at the squire's insolence, but Peter spoke first. "You should thank God you're out of the horse caravan with a knight-brother of your own to serve. And if I hear you being rude to him again, I'll have you up in Chapter for it."

"I speak as my conscience gives me to speak!" Aumery retorted stiffly. "My lord de Honfleur."

"Brother Peter," corrected the other Templar.

Sensing a serious quarrel brewing, Michel interrupted with a forced smile, "As it should be, Brother Aumery. But not, I think, in front of Brother Peter." Hoping desperately that his stratagem would work, winked conspiratorially at Aumery. "I'll try not to need a nursemaid for long. You should be able to return to your regular duties in less than a year, I'm sure."

While Brother Peter coughed, Aumery succumbed to a fit of snorting laughter. "Yes, Brother Michel," he said, granting Michel a close and honest appraisal. Evidently he approved, for he spent the next hours tirelessly fetching and carrying all Michel's new gear without further complaint.

Peter went off to help the Marshal train the sergeant-brothers, leaving Michel in Aumery's care.

Their first stop was the Draper, whose pavilion was as large as Marshal Renaud's, with two smaller tents beside it to house his squires and tailors. There, as prompted by Aumery, Michel offered the Order all of his clothes and equipment.

His arms and armor, including his sword with its amber-set pommel, his painted shield, and his golden spurs, were dispatched to the Marshal. His surcote, embroidered with his falcon device, and all his spare clothes and bed linens disappeared into the Draper's stores. He was allowed to keep the shirt and braies he was wearing, with orders to give them to the Draper directly after robing in his new habit.

Michel was grateful that Aumery knew what he was doing as he took charge of the other property issued to Michel: a tent, eating utensils, towels, storage bags, sundry clothing and caps, as well as caparisons, blankets, and saddle bags for the three horses he had yet to be issued. Michel was measured for two pairs of braies and hose, two shirts, a small belt to tie over the shirt, and two vests. The tailor-brothers promised that at least one set of clothing would be given to him tomorrow after they had altered ones in stores to fit him.

The Draper also accepted Michel's bezants for the good of the Order. He told Michel that most of the coins would be donated to the Commander, who kept the Templar's treasury aboard one of the Order's galleys.

Feeling dazed by the wealth heaped upon him, Michel said, "On God's behalf."

Then off he went with a heavily-burdened Aumery back to the roped-off encampment for an interview with Marshal Renaud, who issued Michel a clean gambeson, mail chausses for his legs, shoes, mitts, and a hauberk which looked suspiciously like his former equipment. When he surreptitiously checked for the slit in the arm of his hauberk that Dominic's sword had made, he saw that, indeed, a neat

repair had been made, probably by one of the Under-Marshall's craftsman-brothers.

In addition to his armor, Michel received a helmet, a superbly forged Templar sword of German steel, a lance of ash and steel, a triangular shield, a Turkish mace, a dagger, a pocketknife, and black iron spurs.

It was hard to remember that none of this vast array of equipment actually belonged to him. He would have to make an accounting if anything were lost or damaged.

He understood why he had to give up his golden spurs for plain ones, but parting with his mother's gift still pained him. At least he was beginning to repay some of his vast debt of suffering.

By that time the sun was lowering in the sky. Michel and Aumery went to the area where Brother Peter's squadron camped, so that Aumery could pitch the tent. While the squire was still engaged in this task, the bell rang for Vespers.

Peter led Michel in silence to the chapel tent. There, Michel followed Peter's cues when to kneel and rise, as the Divine Office was sung by Chaplain Brother Jakob and a number of the clerks.

While he worshipped, Michel almost forgot how he had come to be living this life, and thought only of how right it felt to be a member of this noble and holy company.

Afterwards, while the knight-brothers and the sergeant-brothers were still assembled in the stifling warmth of the huge tent, the Master and the Marshal and the Knight-Commanders of the individual squadrons, called Houses, gave their various orders for the night's duties.

Michel jumped when he heard his name called out by Marshal Renaud. "Brother Michel, you are assigned to the squadron of the House of Hebron, commanded by Brother Henry de Trouville, in replacement for Brother Odo de Tarascon, God rest his soul."

"On—On God's behalf!"

Brother Peter jabbed him companionably in the ribs and a number of either assessing looks or smiles were directed at him from his new squadron mates. Among them, he recognized the brothers who had come with him to rescue Roland: Brothers Gervais, Conrad, Timotheo, and Andrea.

Then the bell rang for supper and they filed out together toward the canopied mess ground. Brother Peter explained that, as the junior member of his squadron, Michel now had the duty of queuing up to receive the squadron's communal food from the cooks. But of course, as a knight, Michel wouldn't have to carry the food, merely supervise his household—that was Aumery—who would perform the actual labor.

Michel tried to ignore the delicious odors as he worried whether Aumery could find him in this crowd, but the squire appeared, eeling through the crowd to Michel's side just as they were about to receive the dishes.

Aumery handed Michel his bowl and spoon, then accepted the laden platters and bowls of food with a humble attitude and downcast eyes. Michel found himself witnessing a minor miracle: three hundred knights finding their places at trestle tables in complete silence and without jostling, while food for all of them was served almost simultaneously.

Michel led Aumery to the House of Hebron's table, then joined his brothers in prayer until every table was served, including a long head-table, at which stood the Master and the other officers of the Order. Everyone remained standing until Chaplain-Brother Jakob blessed the food, and led the whole company in a Paternoster. Then everyone except the serving squires sat down in unison, and started gobbling huge portions of beef stew, roasted duck, bread, dates, cheese, and vegetables.

He ate until his stomach bulged, and then he nibbled sweet dates. Around him, the brothers communicated without words, flashing finger-signs as clerks stationed at each corner of the tent read the Latin gospel nearly in unison.

This meal was nearly as sumptuous as Michel's knighthood feast, which had been paid for by the last links of the gold necklace his mother had given to a goldsmith to gild his spurs, Michel thought. And the Templars ate like this daily!

There was still food on the tables when the chaplain-brother rose with a prayer. Everyone rose with him, staying silent for the duration of another Paternoster. Then they dispersed, still silent, passing by the lines of the sergeant-brothers, whose turn it was to eat next.

But once Michel's squadron was beyond the shade of the canopy, headed for their tents, the knights fell to laughing and teasing one another.

"Looks like our new brother has a good appetite!" said Brother Conrad.

"Yes. His poor paupers will go hungry tonight," added Brother Andrea.

"He's still growing," teased Brother Gervais. "Anyone want to wager that his mail will need to be let out next month?"

Many laughing protests greeted this proposition.

"Never bet against Gervais," Brother Peter confided. "We all owe him candle stubs."

"Paupers?" whispered Michel.

"The food you don't eat goes to feed two paupers," explained Brother Timotheo. "Or, when we're on a campaign like this, two squires or other members of the household."

Michel, ashamed of his gluttony, vowed to eat less at the next meal. Aumery should not starve while Michel gorged himself!

They reached their tents. Brother Gervais asked, "Who wants to play *marelles*?"

As his mates accepted or demurred, Brother Peter said, "We're free till Vespers. I'm going for a ride. Care to join me?"

Michel followed Brother Peter to the horse caravan and duly admired Peter's magnificent destrier and two palfreys, as Peter's squire Imbert saddled the riding horses. They rode around the island for an hour, with Peter holding forth on the sloppiness of the Hospitaller's encampment, the general degradation of the secular army, and his own foolproof strategies for ridding the Holy Land of Saracens.

Michel listened with half-an-ear, making occasional nods or murmurs of agreement, and took pleasure in the responsive horse between his knees and the stained-glass sunset.

They returned and, since Imbert had disappeared, groomed the horses in the short time before the Compline

bell pealed. The brothers gathered at the chapel in their squadrons, received their orders, drank an astonishing amount of lightly-watered wine, and sang the final office of the day. They went to check on their horses, then retired to their tents.

Brother Peter taught Michel how to fold his mantle properly to show it the honor it deserved. He praised Michel for how well he was learning everything, and then left.

Michel lay awake in the comfortable darkness of his crowded tent while his squire snored. Aumery had organized and put away all Michel's equipment, set up his own camp bed, then had fallen into well-deserved slumber. But Michel found himself troubled by the paradoxes of his new life.

Where in all this luxury would he find fitting penance for his sins?

* * * *

Dar al Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Tuesday, 28th of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH (September 7th, AD 1249)

Roland stood very still in the darkness, listening to the sounds of breathing coming from his divan.

Dominic had conducted him to his chamber—was it only yesterday? It was to be his alone: no one, not Sharibet, nor Dominic, nor even his valet Abdulaziz, the middle-aged manservant who spoke *langue d'oïl*, was to share with him the large room with its cool tile floors and carved screens.

That simple gift of privacy had hit home. His life had truly changed.

Roland peered through the dark to see who it might be, but his head was whirling from the wine he had drunk. Thank all the saints he could still drink and eat a little, although food didn't taste the same, and Sharibet said it wouldn't nourish him.

Deprived of sight, he tried to think who might have sneaked into his room. Was this some test Dominic had set him?

He wished he hadn't drunk so much, but the people of the House had seemed so happy to meet him, after they had returned to the House. The entire day and half the night had been devoted to as rollicking a celebration as Roland ever had the good fortune to be part of, all on his behalf. He hadn't known there would be so many pretty Saracen girls to dance with, and all of them unveiled.

And they all treated him as if they knew him.

The breathing changed, and a spark caught flame in an oil lamp's wick.

The occupant of his divan was Abdulaziz's sixteen-year-old daughter, Nadira, naked except for decorative bangles at ankle and wrist, and intricate henna designs on her nut-brown skin.

"What are you doing here?" he said, amazed at the steadiness of his voice. His prick stirred, despite himself.

"My lord, I am to be your concubine," Nadira said, in halting *langue d'oïl*. She ruined her shy smile with a calculating glance from her dark-amber eyes. She moved her foot, seemingly at random, but the motion showed off her

pretty toes and delicate arch, disturbing a bangle, drawing his eye up and up her shapely leg to her—

"I didn't ask for a concubine," he said, for the record. Would Sharibet allow him one? Or was she testing him to see how faithful he was?

Fertilizer, Dominic had threatened.

"It's the custom of the House," Nadira explained, eyes now demurely downcast. She shifted again, just enough so that the lamplight limned her young breasts. They were tipped with small, rouged nipples. He swallowed hard, his groin suddenly stiff and aching.

"While you can still sire—" she added, then bit her lip.

Still sire! "What do you mean by that?" God, he wished his head wasn't whirling so.

"Lord!" She flinched, proving what he suspected: her seductive pose was a ruse. Either someone had compelled her to do this, or she wanted something from him. She flexed her painted toes and tossed her blue-black hair. He waited through four breaths for her to speak.

She sat up straight, destroying the perfect symmetry of light and shadow on her lissome body. A fold of skin at her navel held vast reaches of darkness. Head lowered, not looking at him, she said, obviously groping for the words in langue d'oïl: "Only in this month after your Transformation, Lord, can you sire a child. Once you become ... wholly djinn, it is not possible any more. We hope for a baby that will be—be..." Here, her limited vocabulary failed her. She stopped speaking with an apologetic shrug.

Impatiently he urged, "You hope it will be what?"

"Apkallu. Or one of the Lost, returned to the House. When souls are ... born again," she bit her lip with white little teeth. "Sometimes they come back to those they love."

"You're here to make a baby with me?" Incredulous nausea rocked him. "And were you commanded, or did you choose?"

Now her mouth folded tight. "Sharibet sent me. I have the Sight, which few mortals do. She hopes the children of my body will also ... But I wanted this! I have been a member of the House only in this lifetime. My True Name is Nadira." Her eyelashes trembled, and she averted her face slightly, as if anticipating a blow.

Distracted by the rapid pulse beating at her throat, he had to scramble for coherent thought. "You said—my only chance to have children?" Something that both Sharibet and Dominic had neglected to tell him!

"Yes, Lord."

She smiled then and stretched her arms out to him.

Roland tensed.—Sharibet!—he called along the mental link that bound them. Already the mind-speech came as naturally as if he were calling between rooms. Holy Virgin protect him!

—Yes, mon coeur?—she responded sleepily from her own chamber.—You don't need to shout.—Nadira says you sent her to me to make a baby.—

Sharibet's laugh trilled like liquid bells in his head.—She spoke the truth. Don't you wish for a child?—You cannot give me one?—

She laughed, but the bells were brittle.—I have given you one of my daughters, Nadira. Enjoy her charms for this short time. At the end of the moon, you'll be mine again.—What if I

say no?—Then you'll never be a father.—She sounded indifferent.

—But I love only you!—That's not your body's answer,—she said slyly.

The hair on the back of his neck lifted as he felt her touch, gossamer as air, sliding along the vortex of desire that burned within him.

—Go to her. May your joining bring home one of our Lost ones.—Sharibet added:—Be gentle with her. She's a virgin. And do not taste her blood.—

Then her presence vanished.

Now he trembled with a mix of anger, violation, and desire.

"Lord, will you come to me?" Nadira slid one knee ever so gently away from the other, revealing the cleft of her woman's place.

His blood burned. His prick throbbed.

And Sharibet wanted him to do this. The girl wanted him. He could smell her readiness. The scent of her, roses and cinnamon and musk, fanned the fire coursing through his veins.

He shrugged off his silken robes, blew out the lamp and lay down beside her. In the dark, he caressed her with all his skill, and when she was ready for him, he came into her as gently as he knew how. Together, they quenched the fire that burned between them. He did not taste her blood, though the rich smell of it tempted him until he shook.

Afterwards, he mourned. A child of my own. God of Mercy, spare me.

* * * *

Nadira was gone before the morning light.

Roland, grateful for that, started guiltily when Abdulaziz appeared to help him dress. The dried stain of his daughter's maiden blood marked the rumpled sheet on the divan, but the man appeared not to notice as he helped Roland don a pair of braies, a tunic, a long Egyptian-style surcote, and slippers.

Roland, writhing inside, submitted meekly, until it came time for the turban. There he balked. He would not wear it.

The valet insisted, even after Roland repeated the Arabic word he thought meant 'no.'

He blinked, and his vision shifted into that strange new mode that Dominic had called his 'Seer's Eyes.' It had faded, sometime during yesterday's festivities, but now he saw Abdulaziz crowned by the jeweled flame of his aura. Dominic had said he would learn how to switch back and forth. Roland forced himself to relax, and saw only the man, not the marvel.

The stubborn man offered the roll of cloth, again.

Fortunately, Dominic entered the chamber at that point and started jabbering in Arabic with the valet. At the completion of the exchange, the servant set the cloth on a chair and slipped silently out the door.

Dominic, his mouth curved in a half-smile, noticed the bloodstain. But he said only, "I thought you agreed to start your training today."

"Yes. But I'm not wearing *that*." Roland indicated the offensive material.

"Are you dissatisfied with Abdulaziz's services?"

"No. Yes. He wouldn't listen to me." His daughter is my concubine, and he doesn't mind.

Dominic laughed. "Don't pout. It makes you look younger than you already are."

Roland bristled, but the other djinn forestalled him by unrolling the long strip of folded cloth. "Pay attention. Your turban is more than just a statement of fashion. It identifies your family, its wealth and power, and which sect of which religion you adhere to. Abdulaziz will help you with it before you leave the house, but you should know how to wind it yourself, and how to wind it appropriately for different circumstances."

"Um..."

"You'll also need to let your beard grow."

"But I don't want to be a Saracen!" Roland wailed.

"Who said you had to *be* a Muslim? You must only appear to be one. Christians, especially now that the Franj have invaded, are considered enemies of the Sultan. And you cannot serve as Protector of the House from prison."

Roland bit his lip. "What if somebody asks me—?"

Dominic turned a withering gaze on him. "Answer cleverly. Or lie. I don't care. Sit down."

Roland collapsed into a cross-legged heap, on the divan along the wall opposite from where he had slept with Nadira.

Dominic separated out one end of the cloth. "You start here." His fingers were cool against Roland's forehead, cheeks, and the nape of his neck. "If you were a Muslim youth, you would have learned this at your manhood."

"Don't you mean a Saracen youth?"

"Ah. You would be wise to note the words people use to describe themselves, and the words they use to describe others." Dominic fell silent, concentrating on the twist of fabric.

Roland swallowed rebellion. After all, he *had* agreed to be lord over these people.

"Now this turban, this shape, this color, this cloth, proclaims you a member of the House of the Rose." The end of the cloth was in Dominic's hands. "You tuck it in like this." And he proceeded to complete the demonstration.

Dominic handed him a small brass mirror so he could see the effect.

"I'll stand out like a lamb in a litter of piglets," Roland said grumpily, refusing to look at his reflection.

"It's not as bad as you think. Sharibet worried that you might be abducted into the *bahariz*, but if you wear her turban, you should be safe."

Bahariz? He refused to ask any more questions, but Dominic took pity on him. "The Sultan's Mamluks, or 'Owned,' were bought as slave-children and rigorously trained to be warriors of Islam. They are also called *bahariz*, or People of the Water, since their headquarters are on an island in the Nile. Some of them are fairer than you."

Roland made the mistake of actually looking at his image in the mirror, and suffered a profound shock. A pale Saracen stared back at him, a stranger who might be Muslim, who might be immortal, who was without doubt a drinker of blood.

Dominic took back the mirror and Roland quickly lowered his trembling hand. "It won't matter a bit what I look like if I can't manage that throat-mangling language."

"Good," Dominic said patronizingly. "I'm glad you realize it." He rolled up one silk sleeve. "Your skill with languages may be the deciding factor in your survival here. It can take years to learn a language well enough to pass for a native. Fortunately, since you have a great deal to learn in six months, there is an easier way to teach you."

Roland eyed Dominic's bared forearm apprehensively. Dominic nodded as if able to read his thoughts.

"This will be a lesson in your nature as well as in your duties. You've experienced the blood bond with Sharibet, sharing her memories, as she's shared yours. Once the bond is established, you can exchange thoughts and find one another at great distances. If not renewed, the bond will fade in seven years, or at death..." Dominic took a breath. "In a mortal's blood, you can see their whole life in an instant."

"Sharibet told me, um, last night, not to taste, er, blood..."

"At your Appointing, when your probation is over and you have been Raised and Named, you will be allowed to taste a mortal's blood. Until then, it would be too dangerous for the mortal. But I am djinn, and I can stop you from drinking too deeply." Dominic smiled unpleasantly.

The more Roland learned, the less he understood! "How can we see pictures in blood?" Definitely a question worthy of Michel, God save him.

Dominic's head tilted with the barest hint of surprise. "We can't, really. The blood initiates ... a connection. We speak of

'pictures in the blood' but the blood is not the carrier. It can't be, because you can see things that happened before this present life."

Roland had been right to be frightened. This was quickly edging toward sorcery. He knew what Dominic was about to say. He knew it as if he'd heard it before.

The room swam. Roland bent his head and covered his eyes. "Spare me," he pleaded, trying to thwart another lecture. "Just teach me the language. That's all I need to know."

Dominic tapped his lips thoughtfully. "Very well," he agreed. "I thought to prepare you, but..." He sat next to Roland on the divan and stretched out his arm.

Roland threw up his hands and edged away. "I-I already know quite a bit of Arabic. See? *La! La! Shoukran!*" And then he wished the earth would swallow him as Dominic's eyes nearly closed with silent laughter.

"*Afwan*," Dominic responded to the courtesy.

"You can just ... teach me, can't you?" *Oh, please God, no more strangeness!*

"My way, you'll get two lessons at once." Dominic moved close beside him and raised his naked forearm so it hovered in front of Roland's face.

"What ... what am I supposed to do?"

"Bite."

This order made Roland recoil inwardly. "Do we have to ... you know ... Sharibet and I..."

Dominic's other arm was suddenly around Roland's waist. "It's not strictly necessary. But we can, if you like," he said with a damned silky smile.

"No! Uh, no, thank you," Roland hurried to reply. Was Dominic jesting? Or was he serious? And if he was serious, how could Roland refuse without giving offense? He had played a delicate game in seeking Baron de Sens as a liege, but at least he had known the rules. Here, in this strange new world...

"Well, you've gotten more polite since you were Marcus," Dominic said, gray eyes laughing. He withdrew his embrace, to Roland's relief. "While you drink my blood, you'll be seeing my memories. I'll attempt to keep the worst ones from you. No need for you to suffer them also."

Submitting himself to the inevitable, Roland reached for Dominic's proffered forearm with shaking hands. Soft skin, warm against his lips, was a delicious shock.

"Now bite," commanded Dominic.

Obediently, Roland's newly-sharp teeth pierced that softness. The first salty drops welled out. The taste was like smoke, fragrant and bitter at the same time. And the images, as in Sharibet's blood, were appalling: *A gray-eyed little boy, examining his serious reflection in a bronze mirror. A line of cavalry, in unfamiliar armor and riding without stirrups, charges with silver-shining spears, shouting "Alexandros!" ... A dead, dark-haired woman on a blood-soaked pallet: "I'm sorry, my lord, but she has gone to the Underworld, and taken the baby with her."...*

And then, knowledge poured into him. *Abu*. Father. *Umm*. Mother. Word after word with its meaning. Pronunciation. Sentences. How to address a woman. Two women. How to address a man. Two men. Men and women together. How to speak of a man, a woman, many men, many women. Polite phrases. Vulgar ones.

Scrap by scrap, an entire edifice of knowledge was erected. And every piece came accompanied by a discrete memory: when Dominic first heard the word and understood its concept. Where this happened: what country, inside, outside, day, or night; what position Dominic's body had been in. What position Dominic's lovers—male or female—had assumed while sharing knowledge through the blood bond...

Roland couldn't squirm. Dominic held him too tightly. But he wanted to escape as still more knowledge poured into him, a giant stream with every swallow.

Grammar, with the words to describe the words he was learning. Terms of address. Place names. Trade routes. Political figures and their predecessors, heirs, enemies, and bribery rates. The entirety of the Qu'ran. The differences between Sunni and Sufi, Shiite, Druze, and Hashashin. The meanings of names. Entire conversations. Accents. Differences in dialects from one end of the Levant to the other.

And every picture, every moment was the same: overshadowed by Sharibet's presence, and empty of emotion as a withered breast.

No, Roland realized with growing horror. Every one was empty except: Michel's lips are firm, and warm, a little

chapped. Dominic closes his eyes and lets his kiss linger. It is his Honoria, returned in the body of this beautiful youth! The young knight sighs, and to Dominic's astonishment, returns the kiss with languid intensity. With a movement as slow and graceful as if they had both been underwater, Michel's hand rises to touch Dominic's hair in a brief caress. "Menelaos..."

Roland became aware that his hands were wrapped around Dominic's forearm, grinding the bones together. He fought two disparate urges—to keep drinking until he drowned in that infinite sea. And to retch until every atom of blood he had ingested was purged, along with the images of *Dominic kissing Michel. Dominic desiring Michel. Michel, returning Dominic's kiss...*

"Stop now." Dominic's voice sounded as loud as cathedral bells. Louder than a muezzin's call to prayer...

He was going to stop. He was going to stop soon...

There was a sharp tug on his hair and suddenly Roland couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe. Dominic's forearm was pressed tight against his throat.

"Learn to command, or threaten, only once. It will save you a great deal of time and sorrow. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." But the shape of the word felt wrong in Roland's mouth. The aftertaste of smoke lingered like guilty desire.

Dominic had not spoken *langue d'oïl*, but Arabic, and Roland had understood it. He closed his eyes, shaky and heartsick. He thought of Michel's thirst for knowledge, and came close to tears. His cousin, in Roland's place, would have been bubbling with happiness and questions. Now Roland had to live with the idea of Michel desiring another man.

Of Michel, being remembered by Dominic as a cream and copper beauty in a gown of gold-embroidered silk and a hairnet beaded with pearls.

Roland felt stuffed with knowledge like an old skin trying to hold new wine. And the images of Dominic at love plagued him. Dominic with Sharibet. Dominic with red-haired Honoria. Dominic with Arsinoe, the dark-haired woman who had died in childbed. Dominic, kissing Michel...

The world spun as day faded into untimely darkness.

* * * *

Strange dreams plagued him while he slept, but they were unrecoverable when he woke some time later. He felt odd, even more not-like-himself than he had since he had been Transformed.

Second-hand memories threatened to engulf him, but he pushed them back, somehow, and struggled to sit up. The very conservative turban that Dominic had wrapped for him sat neatly on the chair dedicated for that purpose.

He stared at it, feeling ill-used as Dominic's memories paraded before his inner eye, with commentary.

Roland rolled off the divan, and picked up the turban, wondering how to put it back on without collapsing the wrappings. Then he knew how to do it but his fingers didn't quite have the knack. He was grateful to hear Abdulaziz open the door.

"There you are!" Roland said, in fluent Arabic. "Help me adjust this, and then please tell Lord Dominic I'm awake now."

Abdulaziz gave a respectful nod of assent and lowered his eyes, but not before Roland saw the flash of amazement in them. *Ha!*

The servant quickly combed Roland's hair and fitted the turban onto his head, adjusted his robes, then slipped out of the room. He never once looked toward the sheets.

Roland sat down, cross-legged, in a posture that his mind knew now, but his body didn't yet. He tried not to think anymore, until Dominic arrived.

He spent the rest of the day learning, in a more straightforward fashion, all about Sharibet's management, security, official taxes, manufactured goods and trade items, shipping schedules, and the locations and current personnel of every one of Sharibet's far-flung houses.

Neither of them mentioned Michel.

And Nadira came to Roland again that night.

* * * *

Templar Encampment, Damietta, Egypt—Tuesday,
September 7th, AD 1249

Michel was still looking for his fitting punishment.

Matins was an hour of joy and praise in the darkness between midnight and dawn, then back to bed on his herb and straw-stuffed mattress. He rose with the glorious sun, sang Prime, Sext, and Terce one after the other as the morning ripened and the heat grew.

He listened to the orders of the day then sat down at noon to eat with his brothers. This meal was fresh fish, beans and onions, bread, oil, and watered wine, but when he tried to

leave a big portion for Aumery, his squadron mates frowned and finger-signed their displeasure. Therefore he ate, swallowing unworthiness with every bite.

Michel returned to his tent to find his new clothes had been delivered, with orders from the Draper to bathe before donning them. Aumery led Michel to a small tent nearby that held a tub which had formerly seen service as a wine tun. He heated buckets of cloth-filtered river water and filled it.

The squire cut Michel's hair while Michel sat awkwardly naked in the half-barrel, trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that every man in the Templar camp was leering at him. When Aumery dried him off, Michel rubbed the stubble on his head, feeling vulnerable with the air moving against his scalp and his bare, clean skin. He steadfastly refused to think of the rough bath he had provided Sir Dominic.

Aumery helped Michel to dress and fastened the buckles and ties of his armor. Michel swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. So had Roland performed this service for him these past months.

Fortunately for his composure, he was not given leisure to grieve. Brother Peter conducted him once more to the Marshal's pavilion so that Michel could obtain his three allotted horses. They waited until Marshal Renaud had time to attend to them, then walked the short distance to the horse caravan.

His palfrey and a pack mule were chosen for him by the Marshal from the available pool. Picking a warhorse was a more involved process, since Michel's life might depend on his ability to control his mount in battle. By this time Michel knew

that he wasn't supposed to ask for any specific horse, but he ached for his own well-trained Ardennais destrier.

Near where the horses were tied in lines, there was a large, open area where the ground was scarred by countless hoofprints. Michel mounted one destrier after another, taking each horse through test paces at the Marshal's direction. From Renaud's keen study, Michel guessed that his horsemanship was being evaluated as well as the horses.

Some of the destriers fought against the bit, or refused commands, or tried to throw him. But Michel had grown up helping his father and uncle train horses, and didn't let any of the mounts get away with bad behavior. The final mount was his own steed, happy to see him, even though he didn't carry a treat. Michel, determined to impress the Marshal, showed off his former horse's excellent paces, including some of the battlefield maneuvers that were his father's specialty.

As he waited, sweaty and tired, for the Marshal's decision, Michel wasn't sure what to pray for: a mount he could trust implicitly when he rode into battle, or perfect submission to the Marshal's will, leaving his fate solely in God's hands.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed when the Marshal allowed him to keep his own familiar destrier.

Likewise mixed was his reaction to being assigned to help the sergeant-brother in charge of the horse caravan train the horses. Michel knew he could perform his new duties well, but he had hoped to learn new things, too.

No, he reminded himself firmly. He should hope only to atone for his sins. Though the Order had given him more than he expected, he had no right to desire anything more.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Wednesday, the 29th of the moon Jumaada awal, 647 AH

Dominic spat a rude curse after Nazir left the room, having given the report delivered by the House's swift birds.

Michel was nowhere to be found. Last seen talking with a Venetian ship-captain, he had vanished from Damietta. Even a search of the Crusader camp had failed to spot him.

Had he gone back to Europe? Sailed to the Kingdom of Jerusalem? Gone into hiding elsewhere?

If only Dominic could shed his tiresome tutoring of Roland, he would find the young knight, no matter where he had gone.

Damning his promise to Sharibet, he composed messages to be sent by bird and by ship to all the Houses bordering the Mediterranean: 'Advise if you hear any news of a young Frankish knight called Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne.'

* * * *

In the weeks that followed his Transformation, Roland mastered his lessons if not with ease, then with dutiful attentiveness.

Dominic took him on a tour of the by-ways of Alexandria, and explained how to discover who influenced the decisions of the city officials, and how they influenced the Sultan. How the

Crusader presence interrupted all the normal trade routes and made daily life uncertain. How to adjust to those changes.

Nadira failed to conceive, which was a blow to her ambition. It left Roland with very mixed feelings, chief of which was relief.

He clung to Sharibet in the spice-scented nights, and had to work hard to remember that he had ever spoken another language besides Arabic, or that he himself was Franj, having once upon a time sworn to regain Jerusalem from the infidel.

Without further protest, he joined Sharibet's household at the neighborhood mosque on Fridays. As he, in the midst of the men, bowed and prostrated in prayer toward Mecca, he assimilated the ancient memories he had drunk. They faded his short, mortal life into insignificance.

And, as the weeks passed, he no longer found it strange.

* * * *

Templar Encampment

As September flowed into October, Michel eased into the routine of his new life. He spent three afternoons a week drilling with the other knights in his squadron. Brother Henry, the Knight Commander, impressed on him that a Templar never, ever broke formation in battle, unless to go to the aid of a fellow Christian. Templars fought as a team, not as lone knights seeking worldly glory.

In addition to the tasks that occupied his hands, and the myriad of written rules and unwritten customs that occupied his mind, each day brought with it the obligation to say sixty

Paternosters: thirty in memory of the dead, and thirty in honor of the living.

Michel always thought of Roland as he prayed for the dead. He mourned his cousin at odd moments: during a practice at arms, when his opponent moved a certain way; at supper, when a clerk read a particular verse from Scripture. At such times, a knot would form under his breastbone, as if a lancehead lodged there, and Michel had to hastily bow his head to hide tears.

The heat eased only a little during what would have been autumn in the Ardennes. Michel fought off homesickness for the harvest, the grape crush, and the first crisp frost.

As the days grew shorter, boredom and irritability affected everyone outside the Templar camp. The Crusade was still stalled because the King refused to advance on Cairo until his brother Alphonse, Comte de Poitiers, arrived with the other half of the army.

The Templars had their prayers, exercises, camaraderie and good food. They alone waited with perfect patience until the time came to fight.

Chapter Twelve

"The soldiers who march under my standards cover the plains, and my cavalry is not less redoubtable. You have but one method to avoid the tempest that threatens you. Receive priests, who will teach you the Christian religion, embrace it, and adore the Cross; otherwise I will pursue you everywhere, and God shall decide whether you or I be master of Egypt."

Letter of Louis IX of France to the Sultan es-Salih Ayyub before the commencement of hostilities.

Damietta, Egypt—First Sunday of Advent, November 28th, AD 1249

Text of a report written in Sumerian cuneiform and sent to Sharibet in Alexandria by courier:

Beloved Mother Sharibet, your son Nazir sends you respectful greetings and the latest news from the Christian encampment in Dumyat.

As you suspected, Sultan es-Salih Ayyub passed to the Underworld on the night of the 15th of the moon Sha'ban, having appointed as his successor his son Turan-shah, living in Damascus.

Although his chief wife, Shajar ad Durr, in conjunction with General Fakr-ed-Din and the eunuch Diemal-ed-Din, resolved to keep this secret and to act in the old Sultan's name as if he were yet alive until Turan-shah arrives in Egypt, the Franks have nevertheless been informed of his death.

Also, the brother of the Frankish king, Alphonse, Comte de Poitiers, arrived in Egypt several weeks ago on the heels of a

terrible storm. Since then, hoping to take advantage of the sultan's death, the King and his Barons, along with the masters of the Knights Hospitallers and Templars, have been deliberating whether to attack Misr, which they call Cairo, or to advance on Alexandria. Another brother of the King, Robert, Comte d'Artois, at last persuaded the King to advance on Misr and crush what remains of the sultanate.

Their army is preparing to quit the plains of Dumyat, leaving behind their wounded, the sick, the pregnant Franj queen and her household, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and all their merchants.

O Mother, I beseech you to send word to the Houses in Al-Mansurah and Misr and bid them prepare for arrival of the Crusaders. The Egyptian army goes to meet them, but rumors of the Sultan's death have greatly affected morale of the troops, and we should prepare for the worst.

Your most faithful son,

Nazir al-Warda

By my own hand, this 22nd day of Sha'ban, 647 AH

PS. Please tell Lord Menelaos that there is no news of the Franj knight he seeks.

* * * *

Damietta, Egypt—Monday, November 29th, AD 1249

The colorful pavilions were swiftly uprooted and packed, leaving behind trampled earth and mounds of rubbish, the chaos of the Crusader army slowly resolving into rough organization. Groups of knights, surrounded by archers and footsoldiers, gathered at the banners of their liege lords. The

air rang with shouts and songs, and soon each lord's vassals and soldiers sought to outdo their neighbor's battle cries, like cocks crowing in their brilliant plumage.

"*Saint Denis! Saint Denis!*" shouted the King's men, gathered around the great red-orange Oriflamme banner.

"*Kyrie elesion!*" came the reply from those gathered around a blue-and-gold flag. They were answered in turn by "*Deus veult!*" from a third group.

"Saint George!"

"*Christi!*" And a dozen more.

Only the Templar squadrons of knight-brothers, sergeant-brothers, and squires gathered under their black-and-white banner were silent. Their war cry, "*Beauseant!*" was reserved for the actual charge against the enemy.

Already packed and mounted, the Templar campsite swept clean, Michel waited alongside his squadron mates for the rest of the army to finish forming up. He ignored the clouds of stinging flies and mosquitoes, saying his required sixty Paternosters to quiet his mind.

Some of the King's knights rode past, and Michel's breath caught at the sight of a familiar chalice device adorning one shield. For a moment it seemed as if Robert d'Agincourt would not stop, but then he pulled up his palfrey before the House of Hebron squadron.

"Peace be with you, brothers," he called.

Michel's heart gave a treacherous leap of joy. Their last exchange had been held at the gate to the Templar's encampment three days after Michel had vowed himself to the Order. Robert had been enraged by Michel's failure to

consult him and 'impulsive fool' was the kindest term he had used.

Michel had not heard from Robert since. But now ... was that respect on his cousin's face? Robert's slow nod in Michel's direction confirmed it.

Michel grinned. "And also with you, Cousin Robert." A stern sideways look from Brother Peter, and Michel pretended to be serious. But his heart was light for the first time since Roland's death.

Robert saluted the squadron, then touched his spurs to his horse's sides, taking his place in the King's entourage.

Michel drank from his flask of heavily watered wine, anticipating a day spent breathing in the dust raised by thousands of feet, hooves, and wagon wheels. Today, the Templars and Hospitallers held the rearguard.

The King's orders called for the Crusaders to follow the banks of the Tanis branch of the Nile south towards Cairo, so that supply ships filled with provisions could accompany the army.

If the King ever got his undisciplined mob moving.

Michel assigned himself an extra Paternoster for his uncharitable thoughts, and resigned himself to wait.

* * * *

Along the Nile—Feast of St. Nicholas, Monday, December 6th, AD 1249

The Crusaders made slow progress in the week that followed their departure from Damietta. Dogged by enemies

at every step, there were frequent skirmishes. The first of these came shortly after beginning their march upriver.

Their route, following along the twisting course of the Nile, required them to cross many streams and canals. Most of these could be forded; but this particular tributary had proved too deep. The army was forced to halt while the King's engineers built a dam to allow safe passage.

The Templar squadrons were the first to cross once the dam was completed. Michel's horse was splashing through muddy water now only fetlock-deep when movement on the opposite shore caught his eye.

"Beware! Saracens!" shouted the Marshal at the same instant. Renaud de Vichiers rode in the center of the squadrons, the Templars' piebald banner flying high above him. "Remember the King's orders!"

Michel suppressed disappointment. Louis had commanded that no man should sally to fight with the Saracens. Although hours of practice had conditioned him not to break ranks even under the most flagrant enemy provocation, it went against his nature to act the passive target as arrows began to fall around them like a swarm of wasps.

The Templars crossed the stream, ignoring taunts and missiles, their hauberks and the padded armor of the horses soon bristling like hedgehogs with dozens of embedded arrows.

Emboldened by the lack of response, the Egyptians charged. The Templars staved off the worst of the attack, except for one unfortunate knight-brother riding near the Marshal. A lance pierced his throat and he fell directly in front

of the Marshal's horse. Red blood fountained up to stain Renaud de Vichiers' white surcote.

"For God's sake, have at them! I can endure this no longer!" bellowed the Marshal.

At last! Michel spurred forward, eager for revenge, shouting "Beauseant!" with his brethren.

The fight that followed was quick. The lightly armored Saracens were no match for the massed charge of the Templars. Intoxicated by his perfect union with his squadron mates, Michel lanced, hacked, and thrust until no more Saracens came into his view.

When the fighting stopped, Michel returned to his senses, tired, bloody, nauseated by the stink of death, but tremendously satisfied. They had proved the rightness of their cause on the bodies of the enemy. All the Saracens had perished. Those who had tried to escape by fleeing into the river had either drowned or been transfixed by the King's Genovese crossbowmen.

* * * *

Text of a message sent via pigeon post from the House of the Rose in Al-Mansurah to Sharibet in Alexandria:

To Sharibet from Fatimah, Mistress in Al-Mansurah, 21st day of Ramadan, 647 AH. Crusaders with fleet arrived today. Nasir Daoud, prince of Karak, defends Nile's eastern bank this side of Achmoum canal with General Fakr-ed-Din and Mamluks defending city.

Cannot evacuate. Please send Protector.

* * * *

Along the Nile, Egypt—Late December AD 1249

Michel spent Christmastide through Candlemas living in his armor, sleeping with helmet and sword, ready to spring into action when the alarm was raised.

Just before Christmas, the Crusaders had arrived near Al-Mansurah. It was a sizeable, heavily defended Saracen city, and, unable to bypass it, King Louis decided to lay siege.

There were two problems: the broad expanse of water separating the Crusader army from the city and the Saracen army camped on the opposite bank.

Engineers and footsoldiers toiled heroically to build a causeway, while catapults and trebuchets provided covering fire. They suffered a major setback when the Saracens dug new channels for the canal, undermining the causeway itself, and ruining three weeks' work in one night.

Fortunately, the Saracens seemed unable or unwilling to press an all-out attack. Templar turcoples, who acted as scouts or spies at need, reported that most of the Saracens were ignorant of their Sultan's death, but all knew that an aging general, Fakr-ed-Din, had been appointed head of the army.

The older Templars knew Fakr-ed-Din well, and took seriously his threats to dine in King Louis' tent by the next full moon.

Michel and his squadron mates were kept busy during this time, rescuing unwary or unfortunate Crusaders like Sir Pierre d'Avallon and his brother, the Lord le Val, who ventured outside the palisaded ditch guarding the Crusader camp on

Christmas Day, and quickly found themselves surrounded by Saracen cavalry.

The constant harrying took its toll on morale. They made no progress with the causeway once the Saracens started using Greek fire, filling the nights with missiles that arched across the sky like ill-omened comets, engulfing anything in their path with unquenchable flames. The King begged his nobles to donate decks and railings from the provisioning ships to add to the causeway defenses, but still the Crusade did not advance.

Michel yearned for action, coming close to happiness only when an alarm disturbed the routine of work and prayer. He dutifully fulfilled his obligations, but repairing tack, sharpening his sword, and carving tent pegs left him prey to reliving the nightmares that had begun to plague his sleep.

No longer did he dream of idylls with Dominic, and of being a woman. Now, every night, he dreamed himself the member of a stern council, passing judgment on a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman dressed in a long, fringed linen shawl. Then a wall of water as brown and muddy as the Nile roared through the judgment chamber, battering him and closing over his head, but not before he heard someone beloved to him screaming in counterpoint to a terrible song that shook the earth...

On such nights, as Greek fire fell on the causeway defenses at the other end of camp, he would wipe his tears and wearily roll out of bed, hoping he had not disturbed his squire. Then he would kneel, repeating hundreds of

Paternosters until the dream's impact faded, or the dawn brought new promise of fighting.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Misr—27th of the moon Shawwal, 647 AH
Roland frowned, invoking his Seer's Eyes, and concentrated on pushing one wing of his aura against a dish perched some distance away on the wide marble lip of a splashing fountain.

"Very good," said Dominic, as the dish slid a hand's length. "Now lift it."

Roland frowned. "How?"

"Solidify your aura into a hand of air, and place it under the dish. Then up—" Dominic swept his hand in a graceful arc, as if hefting an invisible vessel in his palm.

Roland concentrated until his eyes blurred, then huffed an impatient breath as his aura-wing passed through the pottery rather than bearing its weight.

How had he pushed the damned thing in the first place?

They were sitting in the pleasant courtyard garden of the House of the Rose in Cairo, shaded by tall palms. The air was filled with the scent of roses mingled with mint, rosemary, and basil from the herb border.

Roland and Dominic had been traveling since before Christmas—since the beginning of Ramadan, Roland corrected himself—visiting the Houses of the Rose in Sidon and Acre as well as all the Houses in Egypt. Though the journey had been pleasant, Roland quickly found himself missing Sharibet. The novelty of being presented to each House as its new Protector

had faded quickly. He was weary of all the feasting, of the strange customs and stranger people who all greeted him as if they knew him.

"Concentrate, Roland!" Dominic commanded, as moments passed and the dish did not rise.

Oh yes, and there was the burden of always wondering when Dominic might choose to share his memories again. Roland didn't like Sharibet reading his mind, but at least it seemed natural for them to be intimate.

Roland had just managed to tip the plate upwards a fraction when Mustafa al-Warda, the Master of the House of the Rose in Cairo, emerged from the house.

"My lords, I beg forgiveness for the interruption," he said, "but a bird has just arrived with an urgent message from Alexandria." He held out a scrap of paper.

Reprieved! Roland sighed, rubbing his temples, and craned his neck as Dominic took the message. "What news?"

"Trouble," Dominic answered shortly. "The Crusaders are encamped before Al-Mansurah. We are summoned to protect the House there."

Roland's heart sank. He had sworn to serve the House as Protector, but—God's Nails! Could he really fight his former companions? His brother Robert? Michou?

Roland felt Dominic's assessing stare. "I stand ready to do my duty," he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Mustafa bowed. "I will send word to Mistress Fatimah."

* * * *

Near Al-Mansurah—Monday, February 7th, AD 1250

"...And the lords all agreed that the King's engineers will never complete this causeway across the canal," announced Master Guillaume de Sonnac to the gathered Templars at the beginning of Compline. "But by God's favor, a Bedouin came to Constable Imbert de Beaujeu and offered the location of a good ford for five hundred bezants. The King thought it a bargain, and so paid him." The Master nodded to the assembled convent. "We will, of course, be the vanguard of the crossing."

Although no one spoke out of turn, excitement surged through the knight-brothers assembled in the chapel pavilion.

At last! Michel thought. A chance to engage the enemy!

The Master of the Temple raised a hand. "There are, however, complications."

Whispers fell to wary silence.

"The King's brother insisted that he and his knights have the honor of crossing first. The Earl of Salisbury contested this, and the King decreed they should go together."

Michel exchanged dismayed glances with Peter.

The bad blood between Artois and the Earl of Salisbury was notorious by now. At one point, while the army was still encamped at Damietta, the burgeoning quarrel between Salisbury and Artois had caused the English earl to withdraw to Acre, taking all his knights and soldiers with him. Artois's remark in council "Thank God we are rid of those tailed monkeys!" had not been mentioned by the King in his negotiations to convince the Earl to return.

The Master now gave orders for the following day. All thirty squadrons were to assemble after Matins. They would rouse the men of Salisbury and Artois, and allow the informant to guide them to the ford. Once they had crossed, they were to secure the bank and wait in formation until the King and the rest of the army, including the Templar sergeant-brothers and squires, arrived.

His stomach leaden with foreboding, Michel sang Compline. Then, pursued by a whining cloud of mosquitoes, he returned to his tent.

Aumery was cleaning some equipment when Michel ducked under gauzy hangings meant to keep the insects out. His squire's reaction to the news was not sanguine.

"Salisbury and Artois together? Blessed Virgin preserve us!" Aumery clapped his hands to kill the mosquitoes that had followed Michel inside. "Have we offended my lord the King, then?"

Since he agreed with Aumery's sentiments, Michel did not reprimand his squire for breaking the rule of silence. "I think the King wishes us to serve as a buffer between them."

Michel looked out through the tent flap. Images of roiling floodwaters from his nightmares returned to him as he contemplated crossing the wide Nile with its opaque greenish water. "Can you swim, Aumery?"

"Not in armor, Brother Michel."

Michel folded his mantle as Aumery took his surcote and removed his boots. Michel shrugged, and yanked his hood-like mail coif over his head. Then Aumery unbuckled his hauberk and pulled it off.

Sitting cross-legged on his mattress, Michel rolled his shoulders with relief. He was grateful that he wouldn't have to sleep in his armor tonight.

He tried to dismiss his fear. "I know how to swim, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Whatever happens is God's will."

* * * *

Along the Nile, Egypt—Shrove Tuesday, February 8th, AD 1250

Stars glittered in the predawn sky as Michel kneed his war-horse forward in step with the rest of his squadron, following a fluttering white triangle across the ford. It was too dark to see the black half of the piebald Templar banner.

The shallow bottom suddenly dropped away. His mount thrashed briefly, then began swimming. Cool water soaked Michel to his thighs. To either side of him, the white mantles of his brothers ghosted across the water. Only hushed orders, muffled curses from the secular knights, splashing, and snorts from the horses marred the silence.

He said a thankful Paternoster as he passed the middle of the river and his horse regained a foothold. Then they were scrambling up the opposite bank and out of danger, unlike one drunken knight in Salisbury's group, who was unhorsed and sank without the chance to scream.

Chilled and dripping, the Templars proceeded down a narrow path, clearing the bank for the rest of the knights to cross. The path opened into a tilled field wide enough to accommodate the hundreds of men and horses. In the distance, the fires and torches of the Saracen camp could

clearly be seen. About two miles beyond it, the walls of Al-Mansurah were silhouetted against the dark gray sky.

The Templars formed up in ranks of ten, but the English and Frankish knights milled restlessly.

The field was nearly full when two white-robed Egyptian peasants, carrying water buckets, appeared at one end. They goggled as if seeing apparitions, threw down their buckets, and fled screaming in the direction of the Saracen camp.

"After them!" the Comte d'Artois shouted, spurring his mount. "Don't let them get away!" His knights followed his fleur-de-lys banner in a pack.

"Stand fast!" called Marshal Renaud, in vain.

"How dare you try to steal all the glory, you Frankish bastard!" roared Salisbury. He clapped his spurs against his destrier's side, shouting "Saint George!" Surrounded by his knights, he raced after d'Artois and his men.

"Those fools!" Master Guillaume de Sonnac spat noisily, then crossed himself.

He turned to address his squire, who was mounted on a swift Arab horse. "Go, and remind my lord of Artois about the King's orders!"

The squire left in a flash of hooves after Salisbury's knights and the Master leaned over to confer quietly with Marshal Renaud, both of them shaking their heads.

None of the Templars moved, though all of them, if Michel was any gauge, badly wanted to.

Shortly some knights sworn to the king's youngest brother Charles, Comte D'Anjou, came up the path from the river into the field. On hearing that Artois and Salisbury had gone

ahead, Anjou's men mocked the Templars: "We'll save some spoils for you!" Then they, too, headed toward the Saracen camp.

As the thunder of their hooves faded, Michel heard a great clash and ululation come from the direction of the Saracen camp.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," the Master, forbidden by the Rule from swearing, prayed through clenched teeth. "Brother Raoul, go and tell the King what has transpired here. Marshal, have one squadron hold the path to the camp. Bid the rest follow me."

"House of Sidon, maintain here. All other squadrons, advance!" ordered the Marshall.

"Beauseant!" bellowed the Templars, spurring forward.

Michel and his squadron came upon the Saracen camp in the pearly light of dawn. Across the wide expanse of the canal, the King's failed fortifications rose above the half-built causeway like a dragon's charred skeleton. From the enemy's tents came sounds of screaming and the ringing crash of weapons.

On command, the Templars halted, lining up by squadron for a massed cavalry charge. Michel, knee-to-knee with Brother Peter on one side, and Brother Timotheo on the other, loosened his sword from its scabbard, swung his mace, and checked the fastenings of his mail coif and his steel cap.

Concentration narrowed Michel's vision, reducing the world to a straight-ahead view. He took a deep breath and gave a brief, wordless prayer as he couched his lance.

Exaltation rose in him, so that only the weight of the weapon in his hand anchored him. He waited for the Marshal's command to loose them like lightning.

But it never came.

The sleeping Saracen army had been caught unawares. Bloody, dismembered corpses lay everywhere in the tangles of rope and cloth and splintered poles that had been tents. Spaces in between tents were filled with screaming men, even some women and children, in various states of armor and undress. Although a few Saracens made futile stands against the heavily armored Frankish knights, all were being cut down as ruthlessly as deer in a park.

On the far edge of the camp, those Saracens who could do so mounted wild-eyed horses and fled towards the crenellated walls of Al-Mansurah, leaving the camp in Crusader hands. Hundreds more ran away on foot.

"House of Joppa, secure those horses!" ordered the Marshal. The squadron leaped to obey as the sun rose and illuminated a red-drenched shambles.

Michel's battle exultation boiled away into distaste and disappointment.

Most of the English and Frankish knights had already dismounted to loot the remnants of the camp, kicking aside tents and bodies alike in the search for booty. They rolled bundles of weapons and armor in bloodstained silken carpets, tying them behind their saddles. Others stripped corpses, stuffing jewelry and trinkets into makeshift bags made from the garments of the dead. Here and there, brawls broke out between knights disputing the richest prizes.

Only the Templars remained mounted, grouped around their black-and-white banner. The Master sent men to find the Comte d'Artois and the Earl of Salisbury for a hasty conference.

When at last Robert d'Artois came, greeting them with a grin, Master Guillaume was beyond fury.

"Sir, the King your brother bade us wait for him," the Master said with cold precision. "Not to pillage." His gauntlet-clad hand waved at the anarchy surrounding them.

"You're correct, Master Guillaume," Robert d'Artois said. His grin vanished. "My brother's orders are always to wait, to delay. He does not stir himself to seize advantages—but I do! And we have captured all of the Saracen siege engines. Now, if we can only get that whoremonger's ruffians," he gestured at Salisbury, who was hurrying to join the meeting, "to leave off looting, we can take the city as well. The Saracens have left their gate open!"

"The King's orders—"

"Are you a fool—or merely timid?"

Master Guillaume flushed dangerously. "Sir, you have already gravely insulted us this day by taking the lead when you should have followed after. Were I you, I should not—"

The Earl of Salisbury, came up then, his fair Plantagenet features flushed with excitement. "Fine pickings here today!" He clapped his mailed hands like a well-satisfied merchant. "Now this is what I came on Crusade for!"

Robert d'Artois glared at the Earl. "*That* is what I came for," he said, pointing towards the city, "And I shall not rest until I have it."

"But the men aren't finished here," Salisbury countered.

Artois turned on him savagely, "If Mansurah falls, Cairo cannot stand, and with Cairo falls all of Egypt. The future of the Holy Land rests on our actions—we must move now!"

"We should await the King and the rest of the army," Master Guillaume reiterated. "To guard the engines, if nothing else. That open gate is a trap. Do not let pride lead you into it. I know how these Saracen commanders think."

"You Templars would know, wouldn't you?" sneered the elderly knight who held Artois's fleur-de-lys banner. "Filthy Saracen-loving traitors. If not for you, we would have vanquished these heathens years ago."

Michel's fingers cramped around his lance as he fought the urge to spit Artois's man on the end of it.

"How dare you call us traitors, when you are the ones defying your liege lord?" Guillaume de Sonnac responded.

At that moment a lathered horse and frantic rider wearing the king's livery galloped up. "My lords! My lords!" he called out. "The King desires you to go no further! He says, wait here for him, for he is coming shortly with the rest of the army."

Artois's expression hardened. "You see? Nothing but 'wait for me!' Well, I will not." He gave de Sonnac a wolf's smile, then turned to his squire. "Blow the trumpet, Godefroi. We will capture Mansurah. If the Templars and the English are afraid, then let them stay and guard the camp!"

"I'll be damned if I let you raise your banner over the town and claim all its prizes!" Salisbury snapped.

The Master's tanned face grew pale as the trumpet summoned disgruntled knights from their spoils. "Sir Robert," he said, deliberately choosing the least of Artois's titles. "My brethren and I are not afraid. We will go with you; but I doubt whether any of us shall return."

Michel shivered and glanced at Brother Henry, hoping his commander would protest. But Henry de Trouville was staring straight ahead, chin high and face impassive.

Steadying his lance, Michel tried to emulate that stoicism. He must accept the fate that God chose for him, and thus expiate his sins. But in the rising warmth of the day, fear held him in a chilly hand.

"At them! At them!" yelled Sir Foucault de le Merle.

Robert d'Artois inclined his head. "At them, then!"

In near unison, the knights spurred their horses and bore down on the gates of Mansurah.

* * * *

"The Franj attack the town! The Franj attack!" The messenger sped past, making his announcement to all the householders on the Street of the Perfumers. The sounds of fighting were faint so far, but had already overcome the hushed silence that had taken the place of the normal hum of daily activity.

The men of the House of the Rose took swords from their storeroom, and fastened on armor, while the women packed up the House's treasures and collected the children.

Roland had asked on arrival why the women and children weren't being evacuated from the Mansurah House. Mistress

Fatimah had argued that they were all safer behind the city's stout walls with two djinni Protectors and the disciplined Mamluks to defend them.

He had reluctantly agreed, but found himself now paying close attention to the smallest details, not only because this was his first chance to prove himself as Protector of the House, but also because supervising the preparations kept him from dwelling on his dilemma. He could only pray that the Crusaders would not come this way.

Having observed Dominic conducting similar preparations as an exercise during his tour of the Houses this winter, Roland was acutely aware of both the Mansurah House's shortcomings, and his own.

Worst of all were Dominic's oblique glances as Roland hurried back and forth, as if the older djinn knew exactly what Roland was thinking and feeling.

Abu Ali and the other grown men were too slow in securing the shutters, the group of them working at cross-purposes in their haste. Fatimah had grabbed the bundle containing the monthly receipts, not the title and loan documents, and several of the children were gleefully ignoring the maid's summons to gather in the fortified *harim*.

At the end of his patience, Roland grabbed the ear of the leader of the gang of boys who were rampaging through the house, slashing imaginary swords.

The boy yelped, and tried to wriggle free, but Roland's grip was unbreakable. "Ali, take your brothers to the *harim*."

The boy laughed insolently and Roland twisted his ear a little. Thus had Uncle Jan gotten Roland's attention when he was a page. "Silence, Ali, or—or—I'll give you to the djinn!"

The boy sobered instantly, his gaze darting to Dominic, who lounged on a courtyard bench, watching.

Roland released the boy. Ali gave a creditable bow and retreated with his followers through the doorway to the women's quarters.

Roland strolled over to stand next to Dominic. He shrugged apologetically and waited to hear a caustic dissection of his performance.

Dominic's lips twitched. "May you, too, live long enough to become a bugbear to children! But I suppose you must use whatever weapons are to hand."

Roland was glad to be let off so easily.

He made another inspection tour of the house, to ensure all the shutters were fastened, that each man had his weapons and was at his station, that jars of water stood ready in every room in case of fire, and that Fatimah had actually bundled up the correct documents. He checked on the children in the *harim*. They were still giggling and punching each other and jumping on the divan.

Then there was nothing left to do but wait in the entrance passage. The door was bolted shut, but the narrow grated opening in the center of the door afforded him a limited view of the street, still draped in early-morning shadows.

Dominic joined him, showing no anxiety, but Roland knew better than to pretend courage, for the Crusaders wore nearly

impenetrable armor, and their horses were huge and unstoppable.

Earlier town criers had brought the news of the slaughter in the army camp outside the city. There were varying accounts of the death of General Fakr-ed-Din, all of them sending the citizens of Al-Mansurah into near-panic. Only the news of an approaching Mamluk force offered hope.

Minutes passed in silence, waiting in the narrow passageway that led from the stout wooden door on the street to the large interior courtyard. In addition to their swords, Dominic and Roland were each armed with a steel-tipped lance.

"You're glad it's all on my head, aren't you?" Roland said.

Dominic did not deign to reply.

The screams of horses and the yelling of men came closer. The sewer stink of death borne on the dawn breeze began to overpower the scents in the Street of the Perfumers.

Roland shifted his grip on the sword that Sharibet had given him before he departed Alexandria. The blade was damascened steel, sharp enough to split a hair. It felt strange to his hand, too light, though the blade had beautiful balance.

Surreptitiously he wiped his hand on his robe, not looking at Dominic. He only hoped that if Crusaders came to this street, he would not recognize any of them.

* * * *

The knights overtook the fleeing soldiers and camp followers almost under the rounded crenellations of the city walls. The next few minutes were a jumble of brightly colored

images from a Book of Hours: red stains on golden stone; the tall wooden city gates; pursuing Saracens mounted on fleet Arab horses through streets lined with flat-topped building barred with stout gratings.

There was an almost palpable sense of being watched through the latticed windows that projected outward from the houses' upper stories. A tiled mosque with a gilded dome and slender minarets presided over a nearly empty square, as Saracens on foot fled into a maze of crooked streets.

Then the Crusaders found themselves charging through another set of arched gates left open at the far end of the city.

The fresh air and green fields beyond the walls woke Michel from his battle daze. The Knight-Commanders of each squadron issued orders to halt and form up just outside the walls. Their commands were barely audible over a foreign fanfare of trumpets and the deep thrumming beat of Saracen kettledrums.

Michel saw a glittering sea of lances and armor as rank upon rank of Mamluks, banners flying, advanced purposefully from the south to defend the city.

Everything became horribly real as Master Guillaume snarled, "Retreat? Now?" in response to an unheard comment from the Comte d'Artois.

"They are too many!" the King's brother shouted. "We must hold the city!"

"You hold the city then," the Templar Master said coldly. "We have Saracens to kill." He gave quiet orders to the Marshal, who shouted, "Brothers, let the knights of England

and France retreat through the gate! House of Acre, guard the retreat! Squadrons already past the gate, Forward! Charge!"

"Beauseant!" roared the outnumbered Templars as they surged together towards the foe.

As he maneuvered his mount to stand next to Brother Peter's, Michel muttered, "We knew it was a trap! Why did we—?" but no one listened to him.

There was milling confusion as the knights of Artois and Salisbury fought each other to be first back into the town. Curses sounded amid the crash of armored men and horses.

Salisbury's knights used the weight of their warhorses to keep the Saracen guards, trapped above in the gatehouse, from shutting the gate. The jostling mob of Crusaders began slowly to retreat into the town, but not quickly enough.

"A barricade! The Saracens have raised a barricade across the street!" came shouts from inside the walls.

The approaching Mamluks raised a deep-throated howl and began to bear down on the Crusaders still outside the gate. Tattered Templar squadrons, still holding formation, converged on the piebald banner falling limp in the cool morning air.

A rain of arrows began to fall. Master Guillaume and the piebald banner fell back, and someone—not a Templar—shouted, "Get your damned horses through the gate!"

There was a rush, and suddenly Michel and his squadron had room to move through the dark tunnel of the gatehouse and out the other side. More Templars followed, their white mantles splashed with red.

At some point the Master and the Marshal arrived, issuing brisk orders. "We're almost all through. Get ready to close the gate! No, don't do it yet—just be ready!" and "Jerusalem! Take your squadron to guard the English! Hebron, you follow Artois!" and, "Brother Esteban! Hold the gate with your squadron as long as you can."

"On God's behalf!" replied Knight-Brother Esteban de Vilanova. "God be with you."

"And also with you," replied the Marshal, gravely.

Nothing in either man's mien reflected the knowledge that Brother Esteban and his men had been handed a death sentence. They would not be able to hold the gates for long against the Mamluks.

Artois should burn in Hell for daring to call Templars cowards! Michel thought. Then he concentrated on guiding his horse to follow his squadron mates as they escorted the Comte and his knights back through the city's narrow streets.

They had retreated less than a quarter of the way through the town when they found a makeshift barricade of loose timbers stacked across the street.

The Master of the Temple rode forward to consult briefly with Artois. Then the Master's banner dipped to indicate a change of direction, and the whole group backtracked a distance of five or six houses, to a side-street. But this proved to be a costly error. The narrow passage left them vulnerable to stones, beams, and tiles flung from the rooftops. Horses panicked, rearing and plunging, unhorsing some of the knights. The fallen men were promptly set upon by

townsmen, who rushed from houses and alleys to attack the invaders with clubs and knives.

Michel and his squadron mates attempted to rescue the unfortunate knights, but they were just as sorely beset as those whom they tried to aid, and the street was too narrow for two horses abreast.

They managed to drive off the attackers, then, grimly, they rode past the bloodied bodies of their comrades, striving to keep the others in sight as the street twisted and turned, narrowing and widening unexpectedly, branching into a bewildering and deadly labyrinth.

At one point, an English horse just ahead of Michel was brought down by a well-aimed arrow. Its rider flung away his encumbering shield and lance, springing clear as the destrier collapsed.

A bundle of loot burst open as it came loose from the saddle, sending jeweled gauds tumbling across the street. Foolishly, the knight scrabbled after them. Even as Michel spurred forward to aid him, Saracens emerged from nearby doorways, clubbing the unhorsed knight with iron-toothed maces.

Michel bloodied his sword, but it was too late: the knight lay broken, his head battered beyond recognition, bleeding heavily from ears, mouth, and severed nose.

Brother Peter, riding behind Michel, paused briefly over the body, making the sign of the Cross. "God rest his soul." He began a Paternoster, and Michel bowed his head, repeating the familiar Latin phrases for this stranger, and for Brother

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

Henry, their commander, and Brother Timotheo, who had fallen outside the gates.

The remainder of Michel's squadron and Artois' knights pushed steadily forward through the byways of the city, advancing a few streets, then encountering barricades, attacked without respite from all sides, retreating and advancing in increasingly futile hopes of finding clear passage.

Chapter Thirteen

"Recall to your mind that passage of the Qur'an, which says, 'Those who make war unjustly shall perish;' and also another passage, 'How often have the most numerous armies been destroyed by a handful of soldiers!' God protects the just; and we have no doubt of his protection, nor that he will confound your arrogant designs."—*Letter from Sultan es-Salih Ayyub in response to the letter from King Louis of France.*

Dar al-Warda, Suk ar-Rayhaniyin, Al-Mansurah—Tuesday, 4th of the moon Thul qidah, 647 AH (February 8th, AD 1250)

"What's happening?" Roland called to the rooftop lookout.

Bahram leaned over his station at the edge of the roof, his voice echoing off the high stone walls. "A group of the Franj approach from the direction of the Misr gate!"

The gate to Cairo! Had they gotten all the way through the city and were coming back again? Roland peered through the wrought-iron lattice of the door's spyhole. A hundred painful heartbeats later, a knight mounted on a blocky gray destrier—Flemish, or Roland was a eunuch—pushed into the street. The knight's shield was white, with six horizontal red bands.

Roland's heart sank. He knew the man. It was Raoul de Coucy—one of Robert d'Agincourt's drinking companions.

"My lord," called the Sire de Coucy over his shoulder. "Come this way." He paused directly opposite the House of the Rose's door, and raised his mace, preparing to strike the planks.

Roland thought of the children upstairs, and their likely fate if the knights broke into the house. He had no illusions about knightly conduct. He braced himself to thrust the point of the lance through the spyhole. It would slide under through the unarmored space under Coucy's arm, and into his heart—

"Ho, the house!" boomed De Coucy. His mace pounded against the door, but not to break it down. "If anyone speaks our tongue—we seek aid in return for gold!"

Three other mounted knights came into view. Two of them were pounding on doors on the opposite side of the street, making the same request as de Coucy. The third knight's war-horse, although ridden by a Templar, looked exactly like Michel's gray destrier. It carried a double burden: the rider held another man, covered in gore, across his saddle.

Roland blinked, torn between two worlds.

The wounded knight's azure surcote, slashed and stained with blood, was emblazoned with golden fleur-de-lys. But he wore no crown. He was, he could only be ... "The king's brother!" Roland exclaimed.

"Oh, gods." Dominic pushed Roland aside and slid the door bolts open, tense and quivering like a hunting dog taking the scent of a stag.

"No!" Artois bestirred himself. "I can fight. There are still Saracens to kill. Heaven awaits us, good sirs."

But Roland smelled the blood that flowed beneath Artois's gilded mail.

"My lord, my lord, your wound ... We must surrender!" Coucy paused, and then raised his mace to pound the wood again.

To Roland's horror, Dominic opened the door a handsbreadth, barring the entrance with his sword. "I accept your surrender," Dominic said in langue d'oïl.

"Praise God! We seek aid for the most noble Comte d'Artois and for ourselves!" Coucy said, hurriedly dismounting. "We offer noble ransoms in return for your pledge to treat us according to our stations—"

The street was suddenly filled with a rain of falling tiles. One of the knights was struck to the ground. His horse staggered, nearly falling on the Dar al-Warda's doorstep. The knight did not rise. The King's brother slid from the saddle into Coucy's waiting arms.

"In God's name, hurry!" cried Coucy, grabbing Artois from the Templar's embrace. He pushed his wounded liege forward. The remaining knight crossed the street, dodging tiles and stones, and pressed close to de Coucy, seeking shelter from the barrage.

Dominic stepped out from the shelter of the doorway and, using his djinn speed, seized Artois then slammed shut the door with a swift kick. Roland scrambled to bolt it as the knights trapped outside yelled in outrage and began to savage the planks in earnest with their maces.

"They're going to break down the door!" shouted Roland, as Dominic bore the struggling Artois away.

"Then you must kill them," came Dominic's cool reply.

"Kill *me*!" Roland heard Artois exclaim as Dominic turned the bend in the passageway. "I would rather be dead than defeated!"

The thick planks of the door jumped.

"Bahram! Fatimah!" shouted Roland. "More missiles! Now!"

Within seconds screams sounded in the street, and the pounding stopped.

But even hot oil would not hold the Crusaders off, not while their liege lord was a prisoner inside the house. Cursing Dominic's rash act and calling for the missile fire to cease, Roland unbolted the door again, and, seizing a lance, pressed his attack.

It was sickeningly easy to kill the two knights, who were fatally slowed by their heavy mail and helmets. He speared Coucy through the throat before he could react to Roland's sudden appearance. While Coucy was crumpling, blood gushing from the gap between helmet and hauberk, the shieldless knight fell victim, too.

That left only the single Templar, who had been waiting out of sight of the Dar al-Warda's doorway, his shield high over his head to protect himself and his fellows. Still mounted and miraculously uninjured, he turned his skittish destrier with difficulty in the narrow street. Shouting, "Beauseant!" He raised his sword and clapped spurs to his destrier's flanks.

Roland could only stare, dumbfounded. Although the Templar's face was hidden by his helm, Roland recognized Michel's voice. And that *was* Michel's horse.

As if he had all the time in the world, Roland opened his Seer's Eyes, and saw the fiery winged aura of an Apkallu rushing upon him like an avenging angel.

And Michel was almost on him! Employing his unnatural speed, Roland reversed his lance and sidestepped the charge, striking a mighty blow across the knight's chest with the

shaft. The resulting impact threatened to tear off his arms, but the Templar flew over his horse's rump and crashed backwards into the soft dirt of the street. His destrier reared, then danced nervously to join the three other horses a few yards away.

Roland rushed to Michel's side. "Michou, are you hurt?" he demanded in Flemish.

Dazed blue eyes gazed back at him through the helm's eyeslits.

Pulling off the great helm, Roland helped Michel sit up.

His cousin stirred, coughing and gasping. "Roland—but what—?" He sat up abruptly, nearly impaling himself on the lance's point. "You're not dead!"

Roland hastily reversed the lance, acutely conscious of Dominic's presence in the house behind them. His throat felt tight, dry.

"We found your surcote in the lake—I wrote letters—oh, God, Roland! Tell me this isn't another dream!" Michel shook his head and reached with his left hand to grasp Roland's mailed arm. Michel blinked as he took in the details of Roland's turban and beard. "You—You've gone over! How could you turn apostate?"

"I—I have an honorable position here," faltered Roland. "I'm the Protector of the House of the Rose—and, and you could be, too." He was making a muck of things, but time was short. Who knew when the next band of Crusaders would stumble on this street?

"Never!" Michel spat. "How could you—with that unnatural—that sorcerer?"

Roland recoiled at Michel's vehemence, but part of him was relieved to hear it. The memory Dominic had shared with him, of Michel's kiss, must have been the result of Dominic's djinn coercion rather than Michel's own proclivities, thank God!

"I had no other choice," Roland said. "The people of the House need me. And there's this woman—"

"A woman?" Michel asked with loathing. He rose painfully to his feet, his white mantle caked with dirt and dried blood. "Oh Roland, what will your parents think? Or Mathilde?"

Roland swallowed shame and regret. Clearly Michel could not be persuaded to join the House under these circumstances—nor did Roland want him to, not with Dominic dangerously consumed with unnatural lust. But neither could Roland kill his cousin...

He made a calculated decision. Staring deep into Michel's eyes, he said, "They need never know." Concentrating, he employed another of his hard-won lessons, bringing one wing of his aura to rest lightly on Michel's forehead. "Forget that you met me here, Michel. I am dead to you. Remember only that today you fought bravely but your companions were all killed. Mount your horse and ride away from here. When you reach the end of the street, turn left, and keep riding to the eastern gate. Then leave this city. There is nothing but death here for you."

Michel blinked slowly, his sharp gaze gone vacant and his face slack.

Roland left him then, to recapture his destrier. But Michel's war-horse was bleeding from many shallow wounds across his

chest and shoulders. He lumbered out of reach and would not be collected. So Roland caught another of the horses and guided Michel to its stirrup. He pressed a swift kiss to his forehead before returning his great helm to his head, and then pushed him, still bespelled and obedient, up into the high saddle with a combination of physical and supernatural strength.

"Go with God. Remember that I loved you like a brother." He stepped back. "Let him go, Hakim!" Roland called to the rooftop watcher. "Any man who harms him will feel my wrath!"

Michel, untouched, rode off as if asleep in the direction Roland had ordered.

Eyes stinging with unshed tears, Roland watched him go, then recalled himself to the business at hand, and snatched the reins of the remaining horses. They were rich prizes with bundles of looted goods tied to their saddles. After he finally tricked Michel's destrier near, he guided all the horses carefully through the doorway of the House, where two boys stood ready to receive them. The first horse shied at the entrance to the dark passageway, but a makeshift blindfold soothed it, and the rest followed tiredly.

Roland and the stable boys of the House dragged the corpses of the knights inside and stacked them in the alcove occupied by the porter in more peaceful times. After bolting the door, Roland bowed his head to say a quick prayer for the repose of the dead knights' souls.

He felt breathless and sick and strange, as if he had crossed some final threshold. He had not wanted to kill a

fellow knight. At least he could ensure that the bodies were treated honorably, and returned to King Louis for Christian burial.

If only Dominic had not decided to abduct Artois!

Roland strode towards the courtyard, determined to have strong words with his teacher.

He stopped short as he entered the enclosed space with its potted palms and kitchen garden. It was crowded now with four very large horses, Dominic, and his prisoner.

Contrary to the rules of chivalry, Dominic had not allowed anyone to tend Artois, who sat, half-slumped, on a stone bench against the wall, his face gray and beaded with sweat, his wounds still bleeding.

Dominic towered over the Comte, the scarred wings of his aura wrapping the King's brother in the embrace of compulsion.

But Artois was apparently immune to Dominic's powers. "There are many knights on this Crusade," he muttered, one mailed hand pressed tight against the wound in his side. "How should I know them all?"

Dominic's aura ignited with red rage, but his voice remained deceptively gentle. "The young knight I seek is a kinsman of Sir Robert D'Agincourt," he prompted.

Artois set his jaw, and stubbornly stared down at the ancient limestone fragments edging an herb bed.

Dominic spoke again, still in that gentle tone, "You have offered me ransom, my lord d'Artois, but I wonder whether you might bring greater profit—and the favor of the sultana—if I sold you to the Mamluks. They will geld you and parade

your shame before your brothers and your companions, saying: 'Behold, O King of the Franks, here is thy eunuch brother!'"

"No!" Artois looked up, hatred distorting his expression. "No—I—perhaps I did see your Sir Michel. Yes, yes, now I remember." His breaths came short and fast. He spoke with great effort. "He came to see the King a few months ago begging for a rescue party for that sodomite de Sens."

"Then what?"

Roland stepped forward and said in langue d'oïl: "Dominic, stop."

Artois's eyes widened as he saw Roland. "You! Agincourt!"

Roland turned his head, unable to bear the condemnation in Artois's eyes.

The Count laughed nastily, but it turned into a drowning cough halfway through. When he regained some breath, he said, "Well, well—and there I thought your pretty-boy cousin was the only one who'd surrendered his arse to de Sens. Didn't realize that you both favored the taste of cock!"

Rage choked Roland and he half-drew his sword. Just in time, he realized that Artois was trying to bait him. What had he said earlier? *I would rather be dead than defeated!*

Dominic, unmoved by his prisoner's insult, pressed his dagger tighter to Artois's throat. "Where did he go?"

"Who cares where a buggerer goes?" retorted Artois. "You should all—"

Abruptly, he thrust himself forward. The sharp dagger tore through his throat.

Blood sprayed out in wide pulses, drenching Dominic from head to foot, though he snatched back his dagger, and pressed Artois' wound with his hand in a vain attempt to stanch it.

"Damn you!" Dominic snarled, his face, his mouth, dripping blood. "Fool, put your hand of air on this wound and seal it up!"

As Roland realized Dominic was talking to him, and not to the dying man, Artois's death throes ended in stillness and stink. *He's dead! The king's brother is dead! In my house!* Rage gathered like a mighty wind, filling his head and his heart. "You accepted his surrender! He was our prisoner!"

"What does it matter now?" Dominic affected unconcern but, as he tried to wipe his dagger on Artois's surcote and found no dry spot, his hands trembled. To Roland's Seer's eyes, his aura wings shone mottled, raised as if for further battle. He shrugged as he sheathed the knife, still gory. "His wound was a mortal one, anyway. Another hour or two—"

Roland gripped the hilt of his sword and stepped forward. "I may not have all my memories, but, by God's Nails, I am *not* a fool! Your rashness, your obsession with Michel have endangered the House!"

"Michel—" Dominic began.

"Was outside. You didn't even recognize him."

Dominic's aura flared as crimson as the blood that drenched him. "Where?" He tried to push past, but Roland shoved him staggering into the wall.

"He's gone."

"Gone! You let him go?" Dominic flinched as if he'd been struck. "How could you—"

"I spoke to him. He refused us."

"You did what? Out of my way!" Again, Dominic attempted to force past, this time slamming Roland with his hand of air.

Roland blocked the attack, extending his own wings to catch the other djinn and hold him prisoner.

Dominic struggled to break the bonds of air, but his scarred wings were smaller and weaker than Roland's. "Let me go! Let me go to him!"

"Would you really leave the House undefended while the city is still under attack? Is that the lesson you wish me to learn?" Roland strove to keep his tone calm, reasonable. He must not revel in his victory, not when Dominic was balanced on reason's knife-edge.

"But he's out there, in the midst of battle! Anything might happen to him!"

"Yes. He chose to fight," Roland said sternly. "As we have chosen to protect the House."

After tense moments the crimson of Dominic's aura began to fade back to bronze, and his shoulders relaxed. He gathered his composure and put it on like armor. "Very well," he said, studying Roland with barely-restrained hostility. "I will wait until the House is safe. And then I will find him, and bring him home."

Roland breathed again, and cautiously released the other djinn. He might not be able to stop Dominic from searching for Michel, but by God's Nails, he would be there to halt any excesses when ... *if* ... Michel were found.

* * * *

Suk Ar-Rayhaniyin, Al-Mansurah

Michel blinked, and found he was riding down a street deserted but for the enraged Saracens on their flat rooftops. Stones and tiles rang on his upraised shield. His chest and back ached fiercely with every breath.

He was alone. He was riding a strange chestnut destrier—some secular knight's horse, given the amount of silver chased into the bridle and saddle cloths.

How had that come to pass? He had been separated from the rest of his squadron by an avalanche of timbers and divan cushions that had blocked a narrow street, with him and a few of the Comte's knights on one side of the barricade and the rest of their Templar escort on the other. Then what?

He remembered Brother Andrea being dragged off his horse with hooks and stabbed to death before the others could come to his rescue. Brothers Conrad and Gervais had perished when a heavy beam fell and crushed them and their horses. And so it went, a numbing litany of death, as Michel lost the brothers he had trained and prayed with over these past months.

How had he gotten onto this horse? He had a vague recollection of a wounded Artois being hoisted onto his saddle, and of a tall, pale Saracen in a rose-red turban...

Michel shook his head. It was gone. Perhaps this was all just another terrible dream, from which he might awaken. There was no exultation here, only the wearying, fearful work of defending himself in a strange place, utterly surrounded by

enemies. He didn't remember when he had last seen the Master's black-and-white banner.

He reached the end of the street, and impelled by an inexplicable feeling, guided his borrowed war-horse to the left. He couldn't tell whether he was making any progress towards the city walls. All the streets looked the same, tall houses blocking out the sky, preventing any sight of landmarks.

But just ahead was another Templar, mounted on a white destrier. "Peter! Peter de Honfleur!" Michel called to him.

The other Templar stopped and waved.

Michel caught up, and they clasped hands.

"God be thanked!" exclaimed Peter. "I thought you dead. But where are the others? And your mount?"

Michel shrugged. "I don't know. We became separated. It's good to see you, Peter."

"And you, Michel. Let's try to find the others, and then get out of this hellhole."

They rode on through the narrow warren of streets, occasionally having to lift their shields to deflect missiles. Finally they emerged into a space within sight of the city walls. It was a square, surrounded by a colonnade of arches, with a tiled fountain at its center.

Michel's initial relief turned to horror when he saw a gruesome mound of dismembered corpses piled against the wall nearest the fountain. Some of the bodies had been stripped naked already, but most were still armored. With them was the carcass of a destrier, still bearing a blood-stained saddlecloth with the Earl of Salisbury's device. Beside

the horse, nearly unrecognizable, was the Earl himself. The Saracens had severed his legs and his sword arm.

"God rest the souls of those brave knights," Brother Peter said, crossing himself. Michel followed suit. But before they could say a Paternoster for the dead, a squadron of living Templars beckoned to them from the far side of the square.

It was the Master, Guillaume de Sonnac, with Marshal Renaud and the piebald banner, still safe.

Michel's heart lifted. He and Brother Peter spurred their mounts and were halfway across when the next attack came in a hail of arrows. One shot slipped through the narrow eyeslit of Master Guillaume's helm. The Master, in reflex or by God's grace, reached up to pull the arrow away. It came free dripping blood and other fluids.

"We must help the Master," Peter said, urgently. "Should he die—" He stopped to look down at the thick crossbow quarrel that suddenly sprouted from his chest.

Time, which had been strangely malleable all this disastrous day, slowed again as Peter collapsed over his high saddle. Michel rushed to hold him upright with his sword arm. He urged their horses toward the relative shelter of the colonnade and their fellow Templars.

Peter's face was dead-white under his freckles, and he coughed a fine spray of blood. "Brother Michel, I don't fear death," he whispered.

Michel swallowed hard.

"But ... I ask your forgiveness."

"For what?"

"For misjudging you." Peter coughed again, crimson blood bubbling. "When you first came to us ... always ... asking questions ... I thought you wouldn't last under our discipline. But I was wrong—your heart is firm ... and obedient ... to God's will. Forgive ... me?"

"I forgive you," Michel answered, shaken. "But..."

With a racking exhalation, Peter de Honfleur went limp.

Oh, no, my brother, my heart is not firm.

"To us, Brother!" The Marshal's shout roused him from grief. De Sonnac's helm trickled blood. Nevertheless, he brandished his sword as a mob of armed men charged into the square.

Michel grabbed for the reins of Brother Peter's destrier. He hadn't reached the injured Master's side when the Saracens attacked. He fought madly, aided by the greater freedom of movement in the spacious square. He killed six or seven of his attackers to a chorus of encouraging shouts from his brothers, before an unseen opponent caught his right arm with a spiked mace. The sound as well as the pain told him his bones had snapped. His sword flew from his numbed grip. He tried to bash those closest to him with his shield.

He was dragged, struggling, from his saddle. Blows rained on him, some dull and heavy, some biting sharply into flesh. Then something smashed into his right thigh with the force of a destrier's kick, and more pain exploded as a blow caught his head.

He had no fight left in him. Nor consciousness.

* * * *

He came back to his senses an unknown time later to find Aumery urging him to sit up. Corpses lay everywhere—God have mercy!—and his squire was shouting, "...the bridge is nearby, my lord! Just on the other side of these houses! Are you awake? Can you hear me? I'm so sorry I let you fall!"

"Aumery?" It was hard to speak. His vision was blurry, obscured by bright speckles.

"Thank God!" Aumery kneeled at his side. "Can you get up?"

"I..." Michel started to say, and then was seized by violent nausea. He vomited, each spasm sending spears of ragged glass through his flesh. He tried to push up from the ground, and uttered an involuntary groan as his right arm refused to support him.

"He's sorely injured, Brother Aumery," came the Marshal's voice, calm as ever. "Look at his leg. He won't be able to mount. He can't even stand. We'll have to lift him."

Three sets of hands grasped him. Michel screamed as the ground fell away, then he knew no more.

* * * *

He was draped over the back of a horse, looking down at the bobbing planks of a pontoon bridge over muddy red-tinged water. The light stabbed his eyes, and it hurt to breathe.

But he was alive. "What—"

He felt a firm hand on his shoulder like a piercing spike. "It's just a little further to the camp," Aumery said, his voice thin. "The King's army drove back the Saracens."

"How—?"

"God led me to find you," Aumery said. "Hold on, my lord. We'll be—"

Michel didn't hear the rest. He thought, *I have to get up and fight*. But his hands were caught on something and when he moved, his sword-arm flared with hot pain and his fingers refused to do his bidding.

The horse shied at something and Michel felt his right leg being torn off.

* * * *

Dimly, he perceived sergeant-brothers untying him from the horse. Someone forced a bitter draught between his lips.

* * * *

He was still in Mansurah, his wounds throbbing like the omnipresent beat of Saracen kettledrums.

He rode alone, at night, through a maze of narrow streets glowing with golden torchlight. The houses rose impossibly high, blocking out the stars. Where were the others? He had to find them. He had to warn them...

"Brother Henry? Brother Peter?" he called as he rode past a dead Saracen. When he looked down, it was Roland, wearing a turban, his blue eyes staring blankly. But Michel blinked, and it was a different man, with red hair...

Dominic appeared, smiling and sinister, proffering a chalice. "He drank, and so should you. Why should you live, when he is dead?"

"No!" Michel tried to spur his horse, but it vanished like smoke. He ran down an alley so narrow it was like a tunnel. The stone walls on either side were carved with hieroglyphs. He had to run, to find the others, but he wanted to read the words on the wall. Perhaps they would provide the answer ... He slowed, but none of the graceful shapes stayed still so he could read them. The figures walked, and flew, sliding one into the other.

"There he is, the traitor!" someone shouted.

Michel whirled around. A group of knights bore down on him. He recognized them: Sir Amalric and Sir Bernard, slashed throats staining their hauberks; Sir Oswald, wild-eyed, a blood-encrusted hole where his nose and mouth had been; Sir Hugues, head canting oddly; Sir Gui, naked and mutilated, his prick an obscene tongue between his lips...

He turned to flee, but Dominic held him by the shoulders, murmuring tenderly, "Your soul belongs to me!"

Darkness smothered him.

* * * *

Dar El Warda, Suk ar-Rayhaniyin, Al Mansurah—
Wednesday, 5th of the moon Thul qi'dah, 647 AH (February 9th, AD 1250)

That night, Roland sat alone and sleepless on the flat rooftop, thinking as stars wheeled overhead.

Was life just a chain of happenstance, or had he any control of it at all?

It wasn't as if he had decided to kill de Coucy. Or to let Dominic kill Comte Robert. And it wasn't as if he'd even

decided to go on Crusade, he thought, disgusted. He'd needed to leave Flanders because of Mathilde...

Roland sighed. Mathilde. It was no use thinking any farther back than that.

He sighed again. It was right and just that he should find himself here, listening to the celebrations still ongoing after the victory over the Franj.

Amongst the cloud of pigeons reporting the Mamluks' victory to Cairo, one bird had flown northwest to Alexandria, carrying the good news of the Al Mansurah House's survival to Sharibet.

He knew she would be pleased with him. Dominic was probably less pleased ... but he would not think of Dominic while he sat on a rooftop as the first hint of dawn faded the stars, wondering if his choices had turned him into someone he didn't want to be.

Too late now. He must live, and be happy, and forget what might have been.

* * * *

On the Nile, Egypt—Ash Wednesday, February 9th, AD 1250

Michel awoke, a scream strangling in his sore throat. He lay on something hard and narrow, smothered by a stomach-curdling reek of vomit, stale urine, rotting flesh, and the burned-meat stench of cautery. The windowless room was lit by suspended, swaying oil lamps. The walls and ceilings were of wood, and everything creaked and moved.

"You're awake!" Aumery slipped a hand behind Michel's neck and raised his aching head. Carefully, he brought a cup to Michel's lips.

He swallowed watered wine and coughed. "Where—?"

"On board the *St. Sebastian*. You're being evacuated to Damietta." Aumery lowered Michel onto the pillow. "You've been senseless all night. The surgeon was angry to hear that you'd been given syrup of poppies, and feared you might not awaken."

Michel remembered a courtyard full of dead men, and Brother Peter, with a crossbow bolt in his chest. "The others?"

"All dead." Aumery stopped, and his voice broke. "Almost three hundred knight-brothers."

Michel closed his eyes, trying to summon the words of the Paternoster, but his mind was blank with disbelief. "What of the Comte d'Artois?"

"Also dead. Some say that he earned a martyr's death in a house in the town, his sword in hand; but Salisbury's men claim that he abandoned the city and fled, drowning in the Nile."

The arrival of a sergeant-brother interrupted Aumery. "Ah, praise God, you've regained your senses," he said, with a heavy Greek accent.

"My lord, this is Brother Olivier, the Infirmarer," said Aumery.

"And if you call me 'damn you!' as most of the brothers do," the Infirmarer said solemnly, "fear not. I have a standing dispensation."

Michel tried to smile at the jest but it hurt too much.

"Hold his hands still for a moment, squire. I must check Brother Michel's bandages now."

Aumery clasped Michel's uninjured hand. "I'm sorry, my lord."

Brother Olivier loosened a clever web of cords holding Michel's leg in traction, and pain obliterated every thought as the shattered bones grated against one another. When he could see and hear again, Aumery was shaking out his whitened fingers.

The Infirmarer chuckled grimly. "At least we know your lungs are clear, Brother Michel," he said, tying off the rope end.

"W—when will I be fit to fight again?" Michel croaked.

"Not for a long while, if ever."

Michel winced. "Why?"

"Your right arm and two of your ribs were fractured, but they should heal cleanly. You can thank God your skull was not broken, though it's just as well that your leg must be kept immobile for fifty days." Brother Olivier sighed. "Your leg—hit by a spiked mace?"

Michel strained to remember, but couldn't.

"Well, whatever it was, it broke your thighbone and left deep puncture wounds. It was a dangerous thing to have administered syrup of poppies for a head injury, but it was probably a mercy while the surgeon set the bone. The problem is that bits of cloth and broken rings from your armor were driven deep into your flesh by the blow. Though the surgeon extracted as much as he could, making an incision here—" he didn't quite touch the top of Michel's leg, "and

here—" indicating nearer his knee, "—fragments remain. He didn't dare cut further lest you bleed to death. He may yet have to amputate."

"No. No!" Michel cried hoarsely. "I'd rather be dead!"

"Suicide is a sin," Brother Olivier said, frowning sternly. "As is despair. Your wounds are serious, Brother Michel, and if your leg rots, you will surely die."

"Cleanse the wound with myrrh dissolved in wine," Michel pleaded. "Wait and see if it heals before you cut it off!"

"Hmmm..." Brother Olivier considered. "Myrrh is an ancient remedy, but too Saracen for most of your fellows. Well, we can try it, but if red lines appear in your flesh..."

"Thank you, Brother!"

The Infirmarer left for a short while. When he returned, with a foaming beaker of myrrh-laced wine, he poured it directly onto the bandages above Michel's wounds.

Michel groaned as the mixture burned. His leg felt like a raw joint of meat hanging in a butcher's stall. He turned his face away as Brother Olivier told Aumery to hold a basin under his elevated leg. There was a new, sharp sting as a tiny knife sliced into Michel's ankle to let out the evil humors there.

I should have died with the others. Michel's awareness began to seep away with the blood dripping into the basin. My heart is finished, not even remembering yesterday...

Chapter Fourteen

"The death of es-Salih Ayyub had not yet been publicly announced: the service of the sultan was performed as usual: his officers prepared his table as if he had been alive, and every order was given in his name. The sultana governed the kingdom, and found, in her own mind, resources for all."—Makrisi, *The Road to Knowledge of the Return of Kings*

Al Mansurah Egypt—Wednesday, 5th of the moon Thul qi'dah, 647 AH (February 9th, AD 1250)

Roland had expected Dominic to storm off in search of Michel as soon as victory was proclaimed. Instead, the other djinn sent a messenger to the Sultan, then retired to his chambers. Too weary to wait any longer, Roland left the rooftop where he had been keeping vigil with his thoughts, gave Fatimah orders to notify him if Dominic prepared to leave the House, then went to his bed for a few hours.

To Roland's surprise, Abdulaziz woke Roland mid-morning. He dressed hurriedly, broke his fast from a jug of sheep's blood, and went to Dominic's chamber. There he found the older djinn, richly attired with a jeweled sword belted to his side. He was holding Artois's blue surcote and a stained linen sack.

Roland smelled the rusty scent of dried blood, glanced at the round shape of the object in the sack, then looked away. "Where are you going?"

"To search for your cousin." The older djinn appeared cool and controlled, as if yesterday's scuffle in the courtyard had not happened.

"With the Comte d'Artois's head?" Roland replied. What was Dominic playing at?

"No, that's a present for the Sultana. If you want to come along, get dressed. In your best robes and turban, if you please."

It was all done very quickly, but he felt Dominic's impatience as Abdulaziz fastened the Damascus-steel sword Sharibet had given him to his belt and fetched his shoes.

The two djinni strode through the crowded streets. Dominic looked neither to the left nor the right until he stopped near the gates of the house temporarily serving as the sultan's palace. "Here." He thrust the surcote and bloodstained sack at Roland.

A series of injunctions, quickly conveyed mind-to-mind, accompanied the gruesome burden: how deeply to bow, what phrases to speak in greeting, when to present the gift Roland was now carrying.

—And keep silent while I make my petition to the Sultana,—Dominic added.

Roland considered protesting, then reconsidered. He must not show himself in opposition to Dominic or the House in this. Not if he wanted to succeed in protecting Michel.

The Sultan's "palace" was a well-to-do-house of dressed stone made into a fortress by a guard of fierce-looking Mamluks. The wrinkled vizier at the door gave a deep bow upon hearing Dominic's name and house. He accepted the

bribe proffered by Dominic without any haggling at all, and let them in.

The palace's interior disappointed Roland. Although heavily decorated with elegant carvings, it was much less beautiful than Sharibet's houses, lacking the lovely paintings that graced her walls.

They were ushered into the *mandarah*, a huge two-level audience hall. In the lower section a colorful tile fountain burbled in counterpoint to the murmuring courtiers surrounding it. More armored Mamluks guarded the higher area.

On the elaborately cushioned divan sat the emirs, the commanders of the Mamluks. And Roland was amazed to see a woman in the central position, wearing silken robes embroidered with pearls. A thin veil covered but did not conceal curly dark brown hair. She was not beautiful, having a long face and a decided nose, but her aura shone more intense than those of the men around her.

The old vizier took off his shoes before ascending the six-inch step to the higher level. As Roland removed his own footwear, he noticed that the old man's bow to the woman was only a fraction deeper than his bow to Dominic had been.

Roland whispered, "Is that the Sultana, then?"

Dominic's mental voice was quelling.—Yes: Shajar ad Durr, the Sultan's favorite wife. For all intents and purposes, she *is* the Sultan until her stepson Turan-shah arrives.—

"Whom have you brought before us, Ibrahim ben Lokman?" asked the Sultana, her voice resonant and, to

Roland's surprise, heavily accented. *Armenian*, according to a quick search of his grafted memories.

"Great lady, I beg to present the esteemed Munir al-Warda, the Protector of the esteemed and benevolent House of the Rose."

The woman's attention focused on them, and Roland suddenly understood why she was at the center of the room. Intense blue-green eyes passed over him and fixed on Dominic. She nodded, as if receiving the ambassador of another ruler. "Welcome to you, most honored Munir. I hope the Great Lady of the House of the Rose remains in her customary good health."

Dominic's bow was courteous but not deferential. "The mother of the Rose remains in bloom. And your husband, the illustrious heir of Salah-ed-din?"

"It appears unlikely that his health will change at this date, but we thank you for your inquiry." Her brilliant eyes lowered momentarily—amused? Sorrowful? Then she looked up again, all business. "What matter brings you to the court of the Sultan?"

Dominic bowed politely and silently ordered Roland to do likewise. Before Roland had straightened, Dominic was saying smoothly, "I bear greetings from the House of the Rose to the court of the Sultan of Egypt, and congratulations on your victory against the Franj invaders."

"It was a costly victory," Shajar ad Durr said bleakly. "For our general Fakr-ed-Din was killed, and too many others, defending our city. Even now, our soldiers attack the camp of

the Franj king. Have you come to offer the aid of your House?"

Dominic half-smiled. "We have already eliminated some of your enemies." He held out his hand and Roland gladly relinquished his burden. "May I present to you these small tokens, taken from the body of the King's brother Robert, Comte D'Artois?" He handed over the bloody sack to the vizier, then shook out Artois's surcote, embroidered with gold fleur-de-lys.

The emir next to Shajar ad Durr sprang up, seizing the ruined garment. "*Walah!* You have killed the king of the Franj! Praise God!" The room erupted with shouts of triumph.

Shajar ad Durr frowned at his back, as if she might correct his mistaken impression, then looked thoughtful. When the noise lessened, she said, "Take the news of this great victory to our people." As the emir hurried from the room, she said to Dominic. "What reward do you wish for such a service?"

"For that trifling assistance, we require no recompense. In this case your enemies, Great Lady, were our enemies. But I do have a favor to ask of you today, after I present to you the new Protector of the House of the Rose—"

Roland recognized his cue, and bowed.

"—Roland abd al-Warda ibn Ulrich al-Azinkoor, who also represents a small victory against the invaders, having lately been of their number."

The blue-green eyes studied him suspiciously. "God is great. Is he really the beardless youth he appears, or is he an ageless djinn like yourself?"

Dominic smiled. "If you must ask the question, what matters the answer?"

"Surely he should bear a fairer name," Shajar ad Durr murmured. "Has not the Prophet—praise be unto him!—said 'You will be called by your names and your fathers' names on the Day of Judgment—so give graceful names to your children.' Therefore let him be called Arjumand, 'dear and noble' rather than after a dead Franj defeated in battle."

"It shall be as you say," Dominic said gracefully.

Roland swallowed anger at hearing his namesake, Charlemagne's warrior, dismissed as a vanquished enemy. He could not let this insult pass!

But Dominic's sharp mental command came instantly:—If you say anything, you'll wait weeks for your tongue to grow back.—

Roland—Arjumand now—silently scoffed at Dominic's threat, but he had lost his opportunity to protest.

The Sultana smiled brilliantly. "Do you see, my emirs? Here are two great beings not weakened by obedience to a woman. Would that all men were so strong! Tell me, honored Munir," she said to Dominic. "We are in need of a general to replace Fakr-ed-Din. In victory, we would find many ways to be thankful."

"Alas, great lady, I shall not be in Egypt long. I must be about my mistress' business." Dominic's face was expressionless, but Arjumand could tell he was pleased by the Sultana's oblique request.

"Then what is the favor you seek?"

"Great lady, I seek one among the Franj who owes me a great debt. I beg your leave to examine the captives and the bodies of the dead to discover him."

"If I say yes, will you give me your counsel?"

Dominic bowed. "My counsel shall be a gift to you."

"I want the invaders driven from my land!"

"That, I fear, is beyond my power." Dominic paused, then smiled coldly. "However, if you keep them from their provisions and promote disease within their camp, they will not have the strength to resist your attacks."

Shajar ad Durr rubbed the arched bridge of her nose with one finger. "Easy enough to say, but how shall I go about this, when they hold all the positions on the Nile between us and their coastal depot?"

"If your ships cannot pass theirs on the river, then send the ships by another route."

"It would take many weeks to send them down the branch of the Nile via Alexandria." Shajar ad Durr was frowning now, her eyes hunting between Dominic and the thousand and one thoughts that had obviously been spurred by his words.

"If you send them by water, yes." Dominic smiled at her as if at a clever pupil. "But that is not what I am suggesting."

The Sultana leaned forward. "What other route shall we send these ships by? Air?"

Dominic had the attention of every man in the room, including Arjumand.

"Send them by land."

"Ships on land!" The Sultana's advisors exploded with scornful laughter, though she remained watchful.

When the mandarah had fallen quiet again, Dominic said, "Great lady, summon shipwrights who can take your vessels apart. Load the broken ships on camels, and send them around the Franj position. Rebuild the ships, and blockade the Franj until they surrender."

Clapping her hands together, Shajar ad Durr exclaimed, "Surely your wisdom is a princely gift! We accept your advice and will provide the Sultan's permission to search for the one you seek. What is his name?"

"Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne."

"Great lady, what if he finds this Mikhael already your captive?" asked one of the emirs. "What of his ransom?"

"We remit it. No better advice has come from the mouth of any man here. If you find your debtor, you may keep any proceeds that he brings," she said to Dominic. "And may he earn you treasure at least as great as what you have given us today. Our secretary will issue your permit."

Dominic and Arjumand bowed a final time. They retreated from the royal presence, reclaimed their shoes, and waited a short time for a sheet of parchment with the fresh signature of the dead Sultan. Then they backtracked through the palace.

When they reached the street, Arjumand asked, "Has she really been acting for the Sultan since November? She's the one who's been fighting King Louis all along?"

Dominic didn't reply. He was in a hurry.

Arjumand followed closely behind, certain that the search would result only in unhappiness, whether Dominic found Michel or not.

* * * *

The Mamluks who guarded the wretched prisoners gave Dominic their wary respect after he flashed the Sultana's permit. They started to harass Arjumand for his youth and fairness, but he advised them guilelessly that he was also a Protector of the House of the Rose. They grew silent and permitted them both to search unmolested.

None of the captured footsoldiers or camp followers that they questioned knew of Michel. Or if they did, no was one willing to speak to apostates receiving the punctilious cooperation of the Sultan's guards. Some prisoners spat at Dominic and Arjumand and offered detailed predictions as to their ultimate posthumous destination.

As the sun set like a bloody eye closing for the night, Dominic said, "We shall search the camps of the Frankish king."

Arjumand kept the Templar camp firmly out of his mind. He was not going to make this easy for Dominic.

Not yet reconciled to the concept of flight under his own power despite his lessons, Arjumand was also apprehensive about exposing himself to his former companions. In the dark, with scarves over their faces to mask the gleam of their skin, their swords likewise wrapped to prevent any reflections from fires or torches, the two djinn hovered at an indecent height above the camps.

They passed far over the tents of the Templars, Dominic paying them little heed. He was intent on reaching the Duke of Burgundy's camp. But Arjumand scanned them anxiously.

Their numbers seemed to consist wholly of the dark-robed commoner men-at-arms now. He saw no white-mantled knight-brothers anywhere. Dread was a cold weight in his stomach that only increased after they finished scanning the second Crusader camp.

"Where is he?" Dominic muttered.

It was a rhetorical question, but Arjumand chose to answer. "Maybe he went back to Damietta." For Michel's sake, he hoped against hope that his cousin had gotten away.

"We have to go closer."

Arjumand swallowed heavily, afraid of what they might find, but he followed Dominic's instructions to create a glamour of invisibility.

They walked through the camps unnoticed. In the darkest hour of the night they examined every sleeping knight, soldier, servant, and camp follower. Dominic finally gave up just before dawn, when the servants began to wake.

The two djinn flew home through the cool, still air before dawn, landing on the flat rooftop of the house. Shaheed, the watchman there, greeted them politely. After all, Sharibet's kin were accustomed to magic. But Arjumand caught Shaheed grinning behind his hand as Dominic descended the ladder.

"Everything all right?" Arjumand asked.

"Yes, lord. It's just that I have not—I am new to the House. I had only heard of ... *this*," Shaheed replied with the utter delight of a man witnessing a fairy tale come to life.

Arjumand smiled politely, and wished he wasn't living a nightmare.

"You don't have to come with me today," Dominic said, sensing to Arjumand's turmoil. "You're the Protector of the House now. You have other duties."

"He's my cousin. I'll come." Even though his eyelids felt like lead, and his body too heavy to move, he must protect Michel. Arjumand would shadow Dominic until Michel was found or they both dropped dead of fatigue.

* * * *

Yesterday, they had searched among the living. Today, in daylight, they sought Michel among the dead.

Although many corpses had already been hauled away, casualties lay stacked like market-stall fish in the streets and the courtyards. There were so many that Arjumand recognized! He wanted to retch, but the scent of blood was sweeter to him now than perfume.

It was harrowing to watch Dominic examine each knight's corpse with dreadful hope, then turn away only to begin again with the next body, and the next.

By noon, the magnitude of the slaughter was clear to both of them, so Dominic called upon Sharibet's kin to help.

"How shall we know this Mikhael?" asked Fatimah's eldest son when the group arrived, out of breath, in the Street of the Spice Vendors.

"He looks like Arjumand," Dominic said. That was all the instruction they needed.

Hours passed. Messengers reported in at regular intervals to Dominic, charting the progress of the search. No one of Sir Michel's description had been captured or sold by slave

dealers; nor had anyone come into the eunuch-makers' hands. Representatives of the Bedouin and the Beni Hassan reluctantly admitted (for five bezants each) that they hadn't seen Sir Michel; and the Mamluk Commander assured them that no one of Sir Michel's description had been forcibly inducted into their ranks.

By late afternoon, Dominic and Arjumand were inspecting the bloated and sometimes limbless corpses pulled from the river.

When night fell, they returned to the House in a grim mood.

Arjumand wanted to rest, or to tie Dominic down so he could rest until morning. But even a polite request elicited only contempt from Dominic.

"I don't feel tired. You can sleep if you like."

Dominic gulped his goblet of blood and was nearly out the door before Arjumand could force himself to rise and follow. He was annoyed at himself for panting, "But where will you search next?"

"We haven't yet examined the Mamluks' spoils."

"But if they have Michel's things..."

"At least we'll know he's dead."

Dominic, well known to the Mamluks by now, accepted an offer of a slave to carry a torch while they searched the storehouse.

The light flickered, lost before reaching the ceiling of the tall, windowless building. Shadows jumped over jumbled piles of armor, weapons, saddles, hawking furniture, and clothes.

While Dominic rummaged through nests of torn and bloody surcotes, Arjumand wandered into a darker area of the storehouse. He studied the bundles of captured swords, many of them unsheathed and still bloody. If the swords' wielders had been better swordsmen, they would have had the opportunity to clean their blades.

Then Arjumand found it: Michel's sword, set with Baltic amber in the pommel. While Arjumand stared at it, not thinking, trying not to feel, he heard Dominic groan.

Automatically, Arjumand picked up the sword and retraced his path at a run. The slave stood immobile, prudently looking elsewhere as Dominic clutched a slashed and stained surcote, still bearing the vestiges of Michel's falcon device.

The desolation in Dominic's eyes made Arjumand uneasy. "I found his sword, too," he said tentatively.

With precise motions, Dominic folded Michel's surcote into a neat square. "At least we know."

Arjumand nodded, but something about the objects they had found bothered him.

Handing him the parcel, Dominic stalked towards the door. The Mamluks on guard stepped back from him as he exited. Arjumand told them, "We have found what we sought."

The guards gave their permission to take the items away, and the slave returned with visible relief to his other duties.

Arjumand hurried to catch up with Dominic, but he had already disappeared down the street. After that Arjumand walked slowly in the tangerine twilight, carrying the remnants of Michel's pitifully brief life. Not much to send home to

Mathilde ... if he was allowed to correspond with Michel's family. Perhaps Sharibet would permit an anonymous letter?

Dominic's presence ahead of him bled grief and self-recrimination, and passed the house, headed nowhere in particular.

Arjumand had done what he must to protect Michel. But had his actions cost his cousin's life? He tried to turn his mind away from the persistent, unwanted image of Dominic kissing Michel as a man might kiss a woman.

How he hated these alien memories infecting him!

He slumped against a plastered wall, breathing in rapid gasps. He would not allow Dominic's memories to become his memories. He was Roland d'Agincourt, now named Arjumand abd al-Warda, a knight, a man of two-and-twenty years who found himself far from home.

Except that he was no longer exactly a knight, nor even, strictly speaking, a man...

Head spinning, he buried his face in Michou's surcote, seeking a last reminder of a too-short existence. But the persistent feeling of something-not-quite-right prodded at him. His eyes kept falling closed. He badly needed to sleep ... and perhaps dream of Michel as Arjumand had last seen him, in a stained white Templar mantle.

His hands shaking, Arjumand unfolded the soiled surcote, looking for the embroidered device that Mathilde had labored over. His fatigued mind strained to make sense of what he saw.

The stitching was frayed, as if someone had tried to unpick it. Blinking, he realized that only someone who didn't want to be confused with Michel would do that.

Michel had joined the Templars, whose Marshal could make a gift of the belongings brought by a new member of the Order to any Christian knight.

Hope rekindled. This was no longer Michel's surcote. They had not found him among the living, but neither had they found him among the dead.

He breathed a silent prayer to the Virgin, refolded the surcote, and resumed his walk back to the House, still thinking.

Michel had taken part in the battle in the city, but had not been killed within the walls, because they had examined all those corpses. He must have escaped the slaughter ... but then what? Had he drowned in the Nile like countless others? Or...

Michel might be still alive. The thought wracked him. If he said nothing, and Dominic gave up his hunt, then Arjumand could never again relax the guard over his thoughts to any of the djinni, not even Sharibet.

He considered the effort he had already spent to close his mind. It was far better not to say anything. Not now, not ever. No one of the House of the Rose must ever know that he had worked against the recovery of an Apkallu.

When Arjumand finally arrived back at the House of the Rose, he heard that Lord Dominic had not yet returned. He gave swift orders to cancel any further search and to let the searchers still engaged in their task return home. Then, still

holding Michel's things, he waited on the divan, slipping in and out of a dreamless doze, until Dominic finally came in after dawn.

The older djinn looked no different. Grief had not ravaged his features. The white streak through his dark hair was no wider. He stared, expressionless, through the latticed screens at the brightening day.

"I'm sorry," Arjumand said to break the silence.

"Don't be. 'A man's fate is written by God,'" Dominic quoted ironically. His fingers hooked into the lattice holes. "I'll find him again, someday, when he—or she—returns from the Underworld."

Arjumand shivered.

He listened to Dominic's harsh breathing with his head bowed, glad and sorry at the same time. What he hoped, what he feared, would never come to pass. Michel would be spared this fate. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

He carried the last tangibles of Michel's life away with him to his room. Calling Abdulaziz for a bag, he stuffed the items into it, just as he buried his memories and his dangerous knowledge. Michel must be dead to him. Arjumand was the House of the Rose's Protector. For now. Maybe forever.

He hid the bag away, certain he had everything fully under control, and was surprised when he began to weep.

Chapter Fifteen

"Things come into being [not] by change in the nature of the element, but by the separation of the opposites which the eternal motion causes."—Anaximander, Fragments from *On Nature* ca. 560 BC

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem-February-March, AD 1250

The Templar fortress guarding Acre's harbor had been built for impregnability rather than comfort, with stone-walled rooms surrounding a central courtyard. In the infirmary chamber where Michel lay, charcoal braziers did little to combat the damp chill entering through the high, unglazed windows.

At first Michel slept a great deal, despite the cold and the groans of the injured or delirious men around him. But as the days dragged on, and the sergeant-brothers and Turcopoles who had also been evacuated from Egypt either died or healed, it seemed to him that the infirmary was colder and emptier every time he woke.

He thanked God for Aumery's constant attendance. Without his squire's assistance in feeding him and cleaning him, the agony of Michel's situation—sentenced to bed with his leg splinted and in traction for fifty days—would have been unbearable. And on good days, Aumery shared Michel's relief that his wounds proved to be mending with little infection.

Aumery was also a lively source of information on the progress of the Crusade. When the next ship from Egypt arrived, he regaled the whole ward with the news of how

Marshal Renaud, voted in by the surviving brothers, had succeeded Guillaume de Sonnac as Master of the Order. The old Master had lost one eye in Mansurah, but had still fought in the next battle, which occurred on the first Friday in Lent. There, he had lost his life but gained a martyr's crown.

As the weeks passed, a rainy Outremer winter turned into the balmy sunshine of spring. Michel regained some of his strength, but pain, boredom, and melancholy were constant companions.

The recovering Templars in the infirmary whiled away the hours in endless speculation. Messengers still sailed to and from Damietta, but weeks passed with no word from King Louis or from Master Renaud.

Without hard news, the ward, indeed the whole city, lived on gossip and rumor. Michel worried about his cousin Robert. He tried to summon gratitude for being safely ensconced in Acre, 'healing very nicely' according to the Infirmarer. He wanted to be back in Egypt, aiding his brother Templars.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Wednesday, 4th of the moon Thul hijjah, 647 AH (March 9th, AD 1250)

Roland—Arjumand now, he reminded himself—had always wanted to return home a victor in battle, bedecked with flowers and kisses from pretty girls. Of course, he had always imagined coming home to Agincourt ... he closed his mind on that thought.

There wasn't exactly a crowd of welcoming faces beyond the Rosetta gate, but a brisk wind off the Mediterranean

fluttered flags and banners of all colors above the flat-topped roofs. In the confines of the straight way, the air was close and pungent. At least the faces of those gathered to greet Arjumand's party were smiling.

Once they arrived at the House, there were even more smiles, a chaste kiss from Ayesha, the old Mistress of the House, and some more daring kisses from her younger daughters. He caught coy glances from Nadira, but bold though she was, she did not kiss him. And then he came to Sharibet's hall, her *mandarah*.

He bowed to her, hands respectfully covered by his sleeves. Dominic, who had been silent for days except for the absolute necessities of speech, waved him forward to report.

"Lady Sharibet," Arjumand said, the remembered taste of her blood hot on his tongue. "We bring you greetings from your House in Al Mansurah, and your children there, who all survived the recent battle."

Sharibet's serene expression did not change, but she nodded, far more regal than Shajar ad Durr.

"Alas, we bring sad tidings as well. One of the Lost Apkallu, Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, whom Lord Dominic identified as Honoria-who-was, refused our invitation and is lost again." *And if it please God, he will never be found.*

Knowing that his cousin had been a woman in a past life still unsettled Arjumand. Not that it didn't shed light on some of Michel's quirks and Dominic's obsession. But still ... He continued quickly. "And though we failed to capture the

greater treasure, the lesser treasure we bring home to you. Our spoils amount to over five hundred bezants."

Along with a half-dozen of the Frankish destriers, worth more than that, if Arjumand could only get them to Outremer—Acre or perhaps Sidon—or even back to France...

Now Sharibet smiled. "You have done very well, *mon coeur*. As for the Lost one..." She bowed her head. "May we meet again."

"May we meet again," murmured the family members who had gathered to hear the news.

The formalities concluded, Arjumand approached Sharibet for her homecoming kiss, trying to stop thinking about Michel.

"I am glad to see you again," she said softly, as he breathed in her fragrance, like being showered by flowers.

"I'd like to supervise bedding the horses down in your stable," Arjumand said quickly. "Sir Jean will want—" he couldn't for the life of him think of what Sir Jean, that capable horseman, would want, only that Arjumand wanted to be anywhere but here while he regained control of his thoughts. He must not betray Michel to Sharibet. "I'll just—" He dropped a hasty kiss on her outstretched hand, and and fled.

* * * *

The stables were cool, steeped in scents of leather, straw, and horses. Arjumand found Sir Jean clucking like a proud mother over one of the massive destriers. "This was Sir Michel's horse, wasn't it?" he said, stroking the gray stallion's soft nose. Its chest was still scabbed but none of the wounds looked inflamed.

Fishing a dried fig from his pouch, Arjumand offered it to the horse. The stallion snorted and jerked away.

However, when Sir Jean tried, the fickle animal gobbled it right up and snuffled for more.

"He'll let me ride him," Arjumand said mournfully. "But why won't he eat from my hand?"

"It's often that way, Lord Arjumand," replied Sir Jean—Yohannon now. Everybody had so many names!

"Horses can tell a djinn from a mortal?" After six months, the altered circumstances of Arjumand's new life were more often strange and uncomfortable than they were familiar and right.

"Not in general," Yohannon explained, scratching the horse behind the ears. "But this big fellow knew you before. Yes, you did, didn't you?" he crooned to the horse. Then he turned his attention back to Arjumand. "You're different now, lord."

As if he didn't know that!

"I'll wager you're glad that Lady Cecilia's coming so soon for your Raising and Naming, aren't you?" Yohannon continued.

Arjumand did not reply. How could he keep his secrets when his soul would be laid bare by magic?

His stomach clenched. How could Dominic live with the sensation of always being watched? No wonder he was so surly! "Well, they haven't, ah, told me much about Raising and Naming."

"Then it's not for me to tell you, lord," Yohannon said unhelpfully. "But I will say, you'll be surprised. I was." He shook his head, plainly still in awe of his experience.

"And you'd do it again?" Arjumand asked cautiously.

"Oh, yes." Yohannon grinned. His broken teeth had been repaired by Sharibet, using an art that Arjumand had not yet learned. "Over and over. May I find my way home again!"

"But what is it like?" Arjumand persisted.

As Yohannon paused, either reliving the experience or trying to put it into words, Arjumand began to brush the destrier's dusty coat, moving carefully to avoid the injuries. When one of the stable-boys dashed in, ready to help, Arjumand frowned at him. He wanted no interruptions. The boy promptly disappeared.

At last Yohannon's focus returned to the here-and-now. "Do you remember when you were still a virgin, wondering about girls? What they felt like, down there? Whether sex was as good as all the tales you'd heard?" He grinned again. "And afterward, whether it was good or not, above and beyond wanting to do it again, knowing that at last the mystery was solved.

"I remember not knowing who I was, then Lord Dominic opening the gates of my memory. And then I knew everything. Who I am. Who I've been. What I've lost." His hand rested for a moment on a flat belly, and the grin disappeared. "My True Name. My share of the House's burden." He turned clear brown eyes on Arjumand. "And that doesn't begin to tell you what it's like."

Arjumand rested his hand on the horse's shoulder, feeling the rough scab of a healing wound under his fingers. The destrier's skin shivered and rippled as if trying to shake off flies.

"You'll see for yourself." Yohannon smiled again.

* * * *

Returning to his old room, to the routine of Hisham's care, almost shocked Dominic out of his despondency. Almost ... but the sight of his clothes, his books, the 'oud standing mute in its frame, also reminded him that he was returning to a life alone.

Menelaos's memories held the recollection of other chambers, overflowing with candlelight and laughter, scrolls, books, bits of rock and plants, and drawings of everything that caught Honoria's eye. If Dominic closed his eyes, he could see that world through the window of his returned memories: cold and static, like a perfect image etched on glass.

And another memory, more recent, bittersweet: a lesson in hieroglyphs, a drugged kiss, Michel keenly attentive as Dominic told him of Galen and Hippocrates.

Dominic clenched his fist, desiring, more than anything, to destroy what stood between him and this desired union. Having touched the fire of longing and love for however brief a moment, he could not imagine living without it. Death and its amnesia were as abhorrent to him now as to a mortal man.

But what he wanted didn't matter. He was not a god, to order the world according to his whim.

The hardest thing in the world to do was wait. But that was his task now. Wait, and seek ... he caught himself, like a cripple trying to walk on an amputated leg. He had no Eyes to

see. He could search to the end of eternity, and never find another Lost Apkallu, unless he tasted their blood.

Stony-faced, he sat and brooded over his impotence, his loneliness, and his failures until the sun set and it was time for supper.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Monday, 9th of the moon Thul hijjah, 647 AH (March 14th, AD 1250)

Arjumand usually never remembered dreaming. But tonight he woke into the scented night with a gasp, like a fish leaping from water into air just ahead of a bigger fish's jaws. He panted, accustomizing himself to a new element: wakefulness.

Sharibet's eyes, bright with the reflection of their auras, watched him. He was in her bed, sheltered in a space made private as only djinni could make it. She smiled reassuringly, and her warm fingers smoothed his forehead.

"Did you see it?" he asked, annoyed at the shakiness of his voice.—Did you see what was chasing me?—No, *mon coeur*. I was not in link with you.—But you felt it?—I felt your ... fear.—

He felt her bewilderment that he—a djinn—should fear anything. Gathering Sharibet into his arms, he kissed her.—Cecilia will be here soon?—he asked.

Her lips caressed his eyelids.—Oh, yes. And once you're Raised and Named, you'll have all your memories again.—

But how many of his memories would Cecilia see, as she opened the way to his former lives? Would she see the way

Mathilde's creamy skin had bloomed like rose petals everywhere he kissed her? Would Cecilia see Michel in his Templar mantle?

How could he evade her searching eye? How could a small fish evade a larger one?

As Sharibet moved, and pleasure leaped between them, he knew she would not answer him, if he even dared to broach the matter. And there was only one other to ask.

In the morning, he would go to Dominic for another lesson.

* * * *

Arjumand discovered Dominic feeding melon to the greedy parrot Humairah. "So, what's she like, this Cecilia?"

Dominic was as reserved as he had been since departing Al-Mansurah. "Surely you've seen her in Sharibet's blood."

As I've seen her in yours, he thought, images of the black-haired djinniah at love teasing his lower self. "Are all, ah, djinniah, so ... so free with their favors?"

"Cecilia, I believe, enjoys sexual congress," Dominic said tonelessly. "And why not? She cannot quicken, she cannot take any ill, and she can kill with a word anyone who might try to harm her. Nor is she any man's chattel. She is the first among the Apkallu, the Undying, the eldest of us all. You don't remember now, but—"

At Arjumand's grimace, Dominic's hard façade cracked a little. A muscle in his jaw jumped, then he said, "The urge to love and be loved is very strong. Why should she not avail herself of such comfort, where she can find it?"

"Well, will she want to—during—that is...?" Arjumand's question disintegrated, but Dominic took his meaning anyway.

"For the Raising and Naming, she need only drink your blood, to establish a link between you. Although she will probably want more, she will take only what you are willing to grant her. I trust that assuages most of your fears?"

Arjumand expected an arch glance to accompany that last taunt, but Dominic was completely absorbed in scratching the bird's impossibly tilted head. He had only meant it as a dismissal, then. Sighing, Arjumand thanked the older djinn for his time and counsel, and took his leave. Nothing more to be gained there.

No bridges mended, either.

The image from his nightmare came to him again, of a fish leaping desperately for refuge in the sky.

* * * *

On board the *St. Barnabas*—Monday, March 14th, AD 1250
(9th of the moon Thul hijjah, 647 AH)

Cecilia sat quietly on the owner's deck under a red-and-white striped canopy. Overhead a pregnant sail sped the great Venetian galley through the cobalt-blue waves. The rowers, who were kin and voyage shareholders alike, relaxed at their stations, dicing away their profits.

She straightened her tight-fitting sleeve and felt the wind tug at her securely pinned headdress. Three weeks from the lagoon of Venice to Crete via Corfu, then Methoni. Two weeks

waiting for Basil and Leila to arrive from Constantinople.
Another week across the sea to Alexandria.

Six weeks, out of forty years, nine months, five days since Béziers. And yet these weeks had dragged like crippled children's feet.

Ahead, towering cloud masses marching across the horizon announced the transition of sea to land. She half-closed her eyes against the sunlit brilliance of the water.

They would arrive today.

She adjusted again the sleeve of her undergown with its many decorative buttons, and checked for spots on the diamond-patterned overgown. She wanted to look her best—at least as well as she could in a beltless gown designed for child-bearing cows. She clicked her teeth and reminded herself that the fashions would soon turn again.

In the meantime, she had other worries. The most recent of Sharibet's letters had reached her while she waited in Crete. It had been full of warnings:

Written in Alexandria by my own hand. Great Lady, I send you loving and respectful greetings. My House eagerly awaits your arrival for Arjumand's Appointing at the vernal equinox. He himself is looking forward to his Raising and Naming.

However, I regret to tell you that one of the Lost Apkallu, Honoria-who-was, died at the battle in Al Mansurah. As Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne he fought with the Crusaders and perished there, with many hundreds of his comrades. For which the nation gave thanks to the Omnipotent, rather than to Shajar ad Durr, to whom belongs the rightful praise...

On the mast overhead, the Rose banner snapped in the wind. The shore seemed no nearer, although the water began to be tinged with brown sediment from the vast Nile delta. The rest of the letter scrolled before Cecilia's memory:

Dominic's heart broke when he discovered proof of this young knight's death. Although I consider his ability to form new emotional bonds a hopeful sign, I am worried about the violence of his reaction. I fear it will prove to be another obstacle to his returning usefulness to the House.

Be assured, for the love I bear you, I will care for him for as long as you wish, despite the dislike he has conceived for me, or if you so decide, speed him to the Underworld.

Your will, in this as in all things, shall be done.

If you decide to make Arjumand your consort, I beg you to let me explain to him. In the short time since his Transformation his affection for me has approached the bond I shared with Marcus. After the drought with Dominic, Arjumand's love has been like water in the desert.

It will be a great joy to see you again, my dearest Lady, Until then, I remain your faithful and devoted servant.

Cecilia unclenched her fists. Faithful and devoted! Even after all these years, Sharibet still believed that flattery might sway her! *Ereshkigal, Undying, we sing your praises!*

And the hurried codicil to the measured letter:

They fought! I have just had word from Fatimah in Al Mansurah—late, but she had to pry it from the witnesses—Arjumand and Dominic fought in the House! Dominic would have left the House in the heat of battle to search for Michel, and Arjumand must needs restrain him. With violence. And

neither of them thought to tell me! Nor have I seen the incident in Arjumand's blood. Oh, Great Lady, hasten, I beg you. My children cower when the great ones fight amongst themselves like stallions in springtime.

I promise you, I did everything I could to restore Dominic.

Everything you dared, Cecilia thought bitterly. Leaving me to pick up the pieces. Again.

The ship lurched as the clouds loomed closer, throwing shadows across the water. The sunlight faded, and the wind now carried spats of rain.

Cecilia knew she should get up, go to the cabin she shared with Basil and Leila. But the wind was so clean, and the rain was pure. She wished wind and rain had the power to wash her hands, her heart. Throughout the ages, she had protected and guided the Apkallu, trying to save them from repeating mistakes made in the time before memory.

My beloved ones. Tears threatened, but she quashed them savagely. She had too much at stake to weep. Two Apkallu, one broken, the other untested and learning already to hide his heart. She hoped that she could save at least one.

The air cooled off suddenly, as the ship passed fully into cloud shadow. As the spats became a downpour, she stood. She would return to the cabin. Without haste. Everything in the proper time. Once she was a little cleansed. If only on the surface of her heart.

* * * *

New Harbor, Alexandria, Egypt—Monday, 9th of the moon
Thul hijjah, 647 AH (March 14th, AD 1250)

Like a great swan, the *St. Barnabas* glided into the 'new' harbor, lowered an anchor, and came to rest.

Dominic, bobbing in the House of the Rose's lighter fifty yards away, shaded his eyes and waited impatiently, watching as the port authorities' small boat drew up to the stern of the larger vessel. The boatswain caught a thrown rope and tied it off, then the customs agent proceeded to verify the information, previously relayed by carrier pigeon from the first inspector's visit beyond the harbor, regarding the ship's port of origin, cargo, passengers, and crew.

"We are the *St. Barnabas*, out of Constantinople, owned and operated by the Dar al-Warda," the captain called down. "I'm Muzaffar al Warda, and we carry passengers come for a wedding, thirty-three boards of oak, two hundred amphorae of olive oil, one hundred pounds of wax and honey, and fifty bales of Venetian brocades. Our crew are kinsmen and bonded contractors."

The customs agent scowled and shouted, "You must pay a port tax of eighteen percent before anything comes off this ship!"

Dominic was only half listening as he scanned the railings looking in vain for any sign of a familiar face. But hearing the agent's extortion attempt, his blood boiled. He stood and let loose his rage. It was easy to whip the water into foam with mighty beats of his unseen aura; a little trickier to shape a water-spout and aim it toward the customs boat; and hardest of all to catch the eye of Captain Muzaffar.

But the screams that followed the Captain's warning shout: "Beware the djinn behind you!" were music to his ears.

The spout was not large, only fifteen feet or so, but it was headed directly for the customs boat.

"Last I heard," called Muzaffar, "the port tax was only ten percent and owed on departure."

The customs agent nodded frantically. "Y-y-yes—of course! T-t-t-ten percent!"

Cecilia stepped gracefully to the rail, swept out her arm, and commanded in clarion tones, "Djinn, begone!"

The spout collapsed in a spray of diamond-bright drops, raining onto the customs agent and his terrified crew.

Muzaffar leaned over the rail. "Are you all right down there?"

The customs agent nodded feebly, and ordered his vessel to be untied. His rowers' oars took deep bites of water, speeding his boat back to the quay.

When the lighter pulled alongside, the Captain saluted Dominic. "That was a well-timed bit of magic, my lord. Especially because he forgot to impound our sails and rudder."

Leaping for the net ladder, Dominic clambered aboard.

Cecilia, Basil and Leila looked the same as his returned memories pictured them last, save for the clothes they wore. And Cecilia's smoldering anger.

He stepped forward, hoping to disarm her with frankness. "It was a foolish gesture, to be sure, but how could I let that self-important barnacle—"

"It is good to meet again," she said icily. "I will not dispute the Law with you here, Menelaos," she continued in a freezing

whisper. "You jeopardize us all when you display your power for no good reason."

"It is good to meet again," he said, bowing slightly to the others, refusing to admit her criticisms stung. "Leila, you're looking beautiful as ever."

Leila smiled. "You look so much better than—" Basil nudged her and she stopped in dismay. "Not that you—that I—"

Dominic leaned forward to kiss her. "The sooner we're all in the boat, the sooner we'll all be on shore. After you, little sister."

Cecilia stalked past them and descended the net ladder as if it had been a gilded staircase. Leila, too.

"It is good to meet again," Basil whispered, before he climbed over the rail. "It was an impressive display, but did you think about it before you did it?" He clapped Dominic on the shoulder, then was gone over the side.

"Captain Muzaffar," Dominic acknowledged.

"My lord. You'll have one more passenger for this first run." The Captain's head inclined toward an older kinsman, standing near the mountain of Leila's luggage.

It took Dominic several moments to place him. "Simon, isn't it?" He had aged a lifetime since they had last seen one another.

"Yes, my lord. They call me Simon Major, now." His hair might have gone iron-gray, and his skin weathered, but the cheeky grin was still the same as when he was a tree-climbing young spy in Béziers.

"It is good to meet again," was all Dominic could say.

"Indeed, my lord." Simon did not hide the flash of pity in his eyes. He climbed down to the waiting boat, much more gingerly than the others.

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt

"She's here! She's here!"

Whispers filled the reception hall like eddies of perfume. Arjumand, standing to the left and slightly behind Sharibet's carved chair, seethed with impatience, and—if truth be told—terror. He knew he should stamp it out as he would crush a venomous snake. There was no room in a djinn's heart for any kind of weakness. But he felt it.

"Great Lady! Great Lady! It is so good to meet again!" Ayesha's voice came from the courtyard. "Welcome!"

He stirred, trying to peer through the doorway from where he stood. But the light was too bright outside. The *mandarah* was dim in contrast, cool, filled with flowers, cleaned to shining perfection.

As they were all clean-scrubbed, who waited here for inspection.

Even Sharibet was tense, though she tried to conceal it behind a serene mask. Her hands lay loose on the carved arms of the chair, but the arching of her feet betrayed her.

He reached down and briefly covered her hand with his.

"Great Lady, be welcome to Alexandria," warbled Ayesha as a small group entered.

His Seer's Eyes, opened involuntarily by the power of their presences, were nearly blinded by a brilliance that cast no

shadows. He squinted, and the effort to see two disparate things at once dizzied him. On one level, Lady Cecilia, a pretty dark-haired woman, walked toward him, followed by a kinswoman of Sharibet's and a rather ordinary-looking, barrel-chested man. These must be Leila and Basil. Dominic, familiar and saturnine, brought up the rear.

On another level, Cecilia's radiant wings filled the chamber almost to its height. Her two followers' wings were small, tinged with gold, scarlet, and blue. And then Dominic—his bronze wings much larger than Sharibet's, but scarred and dark.

"Lady Cecilia." Sharibet stood and let the sleeves of her robe cover her hands. She bowed deeply and let Cecilia kiss her cheek, then stood aside to offer her chair to Cecilia.

Arjumand felt the ground teeter under his feet. They had told him and told him that Cecilia was the eldest of the djinn—but somehow, from seeing her in Dominic's memories, he'd expected her to be ... less intimidating.

God and the Holy Virgin help me. His heart knocked.

"It is good to meet again," Cecilia said to all of the assembled kin. Underneath all the luminescence of her aura, she looked weary. And worried.

"Welcome, my daughter," Sharibet said to Leila, whose dark onyx eyes sparkled with amber highlights.

"Mother Sharibet," Leila said, kneeling. Sharibet raised her up and they shared a fond embrace.

"How beautiful you remain," Sharibet murmured, stroking Leila's cheek. She offered her cheek to Basil for a kiss.

"As do you," Basil said, a smile flashing in his neat, dark beard.

Sharibet turned, and held her hand out for Arjumand.

She said, "Lady Cecilia, the House rejoices to present to you one of the Apkallu, called Arjumand abd al-Warda in this life."

"It is good to meet again," Cecilia said.

"It is good to meet—" his voice choked on the 'again.'

Sharibet said, "Lady, Arjumand has passed his probation, mastered his djinn powers, and proved himself a true Protector of the House in battle against the invading Franj. We beg you to Raise and Name him so that he may remember who he was."

"I remember you. Lost one, you are now Found," Cecilia said. "You are Apkallu, and my kinsman. I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?"

Now his knees were knocking. But this was his only chance. "Lady, I will not."

Cecilia did not appear to be as surprised as the rest of the family, including Sharibet. A hubbub arose as the import of his words was understood.

"Are you certain?" Cecilia asked when the noise had died down. Her voice was tired. "I can only Raise you if you consent."

He was counting on it. "Lady, I am glad to meet you, and honored that you have traveled so far. But as to this Raising and Naming—I do not consent to it."

Now Cecilia pushed herself up a little in the carved chair. "I will not ask you for the third time until we have had some

converse on this subject. But you should know that you will be forfeiting a great power. No, don't say anything," she added, quickly, raising a slender white hand. "We will talk about it somewhere more comfortable. Sharibet!" she snapped, as if to an errant maidservant, "Find us a room."

"Yes, Lady," Sharibet murmured, and at a gesture, her kin leaped to obey.

Arjumand firmed up his quaking spine, and prepared to go where he was led.

Chapter Sixteen

"Friendship lasts a day. Kinship endures forever."—
Sumerian proverb

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Monday, 9th of the
moon Thul hijjah, 647 AH

They went to the office where the parrot lived. Humairah, contrary to her usual custom, did not greet Arjumand with a soft "Hello," when they entered. Instead, the gray-and-white parrot stared at them silently. Then, her head-feathers flattened, she shuffled nervously to the far corner of her cage.

Cecilia looked coldly at the bird and clapped her hands. "Take that creature away," she commanded when one of Ayesha's granddaughters appeared.

"As you wish, Lady Cecilia."

Two young men carried European-style chairs for Arjumand and Cecilia to sit in. They put the chairs down, close, but not too close together. Then they picked up the heavy wrought-iron cage and bore it away.

Contrary to her usual habit when deprived of company, Humairah neither fluttered nor squawked indignantly. She cowered on the floor of her cage, her gaze never wavering from Cecilia.

Arjumand found himself standing in front of the seed-strewn table where the cage had been, staring at the gaudy painted birds in the wall-mural. He couldn't look at Cecilia without remembering the things she had done with Dominic.

"It is—hard—to see you this way," she said in a soft, sweet voice, after the silence had worn thin.

"Why?" he asked, because it was his turn to say something.

She tilted her head, thinking. "Because I remember who you really are. Who you were."

He turned to face her and almost bent to comfort her as a single tear ran down her cheek. But he couldn't make himself draw closer to her, even though his borrowed memories informed him of the silken texture of her skin, the warmth of her mouth, the taste of her blood.

He gestured towards the chairs with the courtly grace taught to him by his years as a page and squire in the household of his Uncle Jan.

She sat. "I will not say that Raising and Naming is a small thing, but there is nothing to fear from it. I know you don't remember me, but you *could*." Her tone was calm, but her hands were busy smoothing the folds of the Venetian gown that flowed over her lap in a fall of costly brocaded fabric.

"Lady, it's not that I don't remember you." As he lowered himself into the other chair, he was dismayed to find that he could not match her calm tone. "It's that I remember all too well, and—"

"What do you remember?" she asked, her eyes black and deep.

Unable to look away, he felt as if he might topple into their dark depths. "I remember when Dominic was your consort." His ears burned. "He taught me by making me drink his blood. But *I* don't know you." *And I don't want to.* He had

opened his heart, his mind, to let Sharibet in, and there wasn't any more room.

"Oh, Dominic! So it was his bungling of a memory transfer that gave you this dread of Raising and Naming?"

Still unable to look away, Arjumand nodded, though her statement was not precisely the truth.

"But it's not the same thing at all! You won't be given anyone else's memories, only access to your own." She sounded sweetly reasonable. But there was real desperation emanating from her, pressing against his mind like sunlight against a shuttered window.

Arjumand blinked, and shifted in his chair, drawing the tiniest degree away from her *need*.

She stared at him and an odd thrill went through him, knowing he faced an opponent who had the skill and strength to kill him.

Her eyes, he realized, were dark blue now, not black. But they had been black as night just a moment ago ... Tiny cold feet walked down his spine. He tried to think. She *ought* to want him alive. Alive, and strong to protect the House. Everything that Sharibet and Dominic had told him pointed in that direction.

"Lady, I—" Oh, God, what should he say?

He could blame it on Dominic, and deflect her attention. But Dominic was weak, easy prey. Arjumand would not stoop to use him as a shield. "I don't think it's Dominic's fault. It's more—"

She bit her lip, as if forcing herself to keep quiet and listen to him.

He decided to tell her the truth. Part of the truth, anyway.
"I don't want to be ... not-me."

"Oh, but you'll be more than—"

"Yes, I know. I've heard all about it from Sharibet, and Dominic, and Yohannon."

She raised her eyebrows in aristocratic inquiry.

"Yohannon is Utusagila-that-was."

"Found? How good it will be to meet again," she said with perfunctory politeness. "But hearing the tale from someone else is one thing. Knowing for yourself—don't you want to know?" She sounded like a lover whose gift has been rejected.

"I know enough," he said, flatly. "More than I ever wanted to. I can fulfill my obligations as a Protector of the House just as I am. Haven't I done so already?" He leaned forward. "I don't need anything else. I don't want to be Raised and Named—not now, anyway."

"But you must—"

"Why? Because it's tradition? Isn't it true that Marcus 'knew everything' and died anyway?" He stared at her with conscious wide-eyed naiveté, hoping she would take his bait. He wasn't sure he could come up with anything else.

"You poor thing," she cooed, to his relief. "You're frightened of remembering that horrible, horrible death." She let her voice trail off, and a crystal tear fell. "My brother. I should have realized you couldn't bear..."

He looked away from her, as artlessly as he dared. *Please God, please God ...* "It's not that I'm afraid! I'm not af—" He must give only a hint of choking, swallowing. Clenching his

teeth. Looking away again. *Don't overdo it. Don't spill over into Sharibet's thoughts. Don't breathe. Don't twitch...*

"My dearest Enlil." She rose swiftly from her chair, and enshrouded him in sandalwood-scented brocade, pulling him forward to rest his forehead against her knife-edged shoulder. He fought the urge to stiffen. "My dear. Your grief does you honor, but you should know by now that death is not the end for us. You are living proof. And you could *know* this..."

He pulled away, far more gently than he wished. "I've refused my consent." He took a deep breath. Sandalwood clogged his lungs, making him feel short of breath. Now was the real test. "I do not wish to be Raised and Named at this time."

"But you *need*—"

"No. I know it's tradition. But why can't we make a new tradition?"

As she stepped away, frowning now, he felt something change in the air around him and reflexively opened his Seer's eyes. Her aura flared bright as the sun, and her wings swept toward him, passing through his with a sensation like swimming in two different currents, warm and cold, silken and electric, full of sensual promise far beyond any carnal relations—

When had he closed his eyes? He opened them, and saw his own aura encircling his body like armor. What had she tried to do? Had he stopped her? What might she try again? He had to make it clear to her.

"No, Cecilia." *And you can't force me*, he thought savagely. *Not and preserve your pretty protestations of love.* "Perhaps I'll be ready for it in a year, or a decade, or ... But not now."

God's Nails, but he had a talent for mummery! The tears that rose and burned his eyes, blurring his vision, had been too easy to conjure. And the sob that hitched his breath was far too genuine.

She stroked his hair, crooning sympathy and frustration. "My poor Enlil," she said again.

Oh, yes, please underestimate me. He closed his eyes and willed away the treacherous tears. "Give me time," he begged, drawing upon Dominic's lessons in negotiation. *Time for Michel to live a normal lifetime. Time for Mathilde's child to grow up.* "It doesn't have to be done *now*, does it? I mean, I won't turn into a toad if I'm not Raised and Named for this ceremony?" He took a sharp breath and disengaged from her. Please let her think that she had moved him from outright refusal to a promise of yielding at a future date.

"No, of course not." She gave a self-conscious laugh. "It would just make things easier for you."

He stared at the slipper toes. "If I really thought that it would endanger the House for me to not be Raised and Named, I wouldn't ask for this reprieve. But I think it would be better for the House to delay. B-because I'll go mad if I—"

"I can see you truly think that," she said, sounding weary now. "But you *do* know that you're risking your life?"

He hadn't, but when wasn't he risking his life? He nodded.

"Very well." She sighed. "It's certainly going to set Sharibet's kin on their ears."

He sagged in relief. Victory!

But then she draped herself in his lap, all soft curves and hard bones.

"What are you—"

She lifted her face for a kiss. "If I can't Raise and Name you, then I still want to know you, Arjumand-who-was-Enlil."

"I don't want anyone but Sharibet."

Her fingers walked up his chest to his neck, raising an odd shiver in him. "Yet you slept with Nadira."

"That was different. That was for the House." How did she know about that? Sharibet must have told her—Why did his loose robes feel so constricting all of a sudden?

"This is for the House." The echoes he heard in her voice made him recall the stair-girdled temples in Sharibet's blood.

"But I've pledged my heart to Sharibet."

"Who said anything about your heart?" She smiled, but all he could see were her sharp teeth.

He pulled back from her. "My lady, you are very beautiful, but I will not rut with you." At the rage that crimsoned her aura, he asked quickly, "Will you kill me for it?" He tensed.

"No, of course not!" she growled, her eyes downcast as she drew a deep breath and her wings faded from scarlet back to snowy.

She resumed her sweetly reasonable tone. "But if we made love, I would have a better understanding of you—"

"If I am truly Enlil-who-was, then you have known me forever, Lady Cecilia." He stood, gently putting her on her feet and towering over her, deliberately using his height. Her face tightened. He had won.

"But perhaps we can discuss this again in a few years," he said, gently. "Be welcome to the House in Alexandria, Lady Cecilia. I'll send one of the kin to see if you need anything." He bowed, and walked away, amazed he had survived the interview.

* * * *

Two days later, the street musicians' crescendo woke Dominic from a recurring nightmare: Burning days and freezing nights pass as he sits on his heels, guarding a huge black door.

Dominic rolled off the divan, washed his face, and dried his hands, feeling hollow-headed and irritable. At least he still had his room to himself. The rest of the house hummed with a multitude of guests.

For days now, Sharibet's kin had been arriving by sea and by land from all over Egypt and North Africa, from Constantinople, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Greece, Italy, France, and as far west as Granada. At least one representative couple had come from each of the Houses, excluding those in the Spice Islands or in Hind, too far away to get the news in time to arrive.

No one wanted to miss the Appointing of a djinn who had not been Raised and Named.

The past week had been consumed by the wedding rituals that masked the true nature of the celebration. There had been the witnessing of the marriage contract for a subdued Nadira, who had failed to become pregnant by Arjumand. Her

betrothed, chosen by Sharibet, was Jamal, one of Fatimah's sons.

There had been processions of the richly adorned bride with numerous attendants ululating happily until the neighborhood rang with their shrill cries; a procession of the groom and his attendants and musicians to the mosque with wedding torches dispersing the darkness. Feasts within the house every night, and, outside, much dancing and revelry by the hired Ghawazee entertainers, and all the house and gardens lit by Solomon's Seal lanterns and hung with colored flags.

Tonight, Arjumand would make his formal vows as Protector to the House.

It was hard not to make comparisons with that last disastrous Appointing.

Fist pressed to forehead, Dominic returned to his divan and lay on the soft cushions until it was time to dress, vainly trying not to think of that last night with Honoria.

Having given his valet Hisham leave to make his own preparations for the party, Dominic donned the Garment of Divine Kingship and combed his hair and beard.

He didn't want to go. Arjumand—with no memory of his previous lives—would be overawed by the ceremony. More disquieting was the thought that even if Menelaos had done it all before, this was Dominic's first time, too.

The ground floor was nearly deserted when he came down the stairs. The sky above the courtyard glowed Tyrian purple and gold, and soon the first full moon since the spring equinox would rise.

Outside, the Ghawazee musicians and dancers gave loud thanks as the women of Sharibet's house completed their customary distribution of food to them. Muezzins across the city began the Maghreb prayer, and the women retreated from the street. The last one to enter the house shot the bolt. Bowing silently, they scurried by him, disappearing into the *harim*.

He went up to Sharibet's room, soft with twilight shadows and thick with the scent of jasmine and musk. There, she sat with Arjumand, who was attempting to soothe her anxieties.

"He'll be all right," Dominic said astringently, usurping Arjumand's consolations.

Arjumand crossed his arms over his chest. "I've told her that twice over. I know what I'm supposed to do and say."

"And we've told him what the outcome might be tonight." Sharibet bit her lip. "Well, it's too late now." But she did not stop her nervous stroking of his arm, his hair.

"Whatever happens," Arjumand took her face in his hands, and Dominic looked away from the intensity of the gaze he shared with Sharibet. "It's my choice."

Their lips met. Dominic heard Sharibet's sigh, then a knock on the door.

Cecilia entered with Leila, followed by Basil.

Sharibet jumped up. "Oh, is it time already?"

"It is good to meet again, my lord," Leila said to Arjumand, kissing him like a lover.

The Egyptian custom of segregating the sexes during the wedding celebrations had not allowed the djinn and djinniah much time to mix together.

Arjumand did not seem to know what to say, or what to do with his arms. As Leila stepped away, he eyed Basil, clearly worried about how her husband would take his wife's passionate greeting.

But Basil, graceful with centuries of practice, was prostrating himself in the full *proskynesis* of a Byzantine subject to the reigning Emperor.

As Arjumand gaped, Cecilia snapped, "Get up, get up, or your pretty politeness will go to his head!"

Basil rose obediently, but murmured, "He is the Lord of the Apkallu. It is his due."

Before Cecilia could react, Dominic grabbed Basil by one brawny arm and said quickly, "It's time for us to withdraw for Arjumand's attiring. Until the ceremony." He bowed, and with a 'come-along' glance toward Arjumand, retreated. Arjumand followed in their wakes.

As soon as they were in a chamber lit by several lamps, Arjumand demanded. "What are you *wearing*?"

Dominic adjusted the long fringed linen shawl. "It's called the Divine Garment of Kingship."

He noticed Basil looked expectant, then quickly averted his gaze. *What was the matter?* Ah. Menelaos would have given a brisk lecture on the history and usage of the garment. Dominic didn't care to. Instead, he gestured to Basil, who stepped forward and began to help Arjumand out of his outer clothes, then escorted him to the bath.

Basil returned shortly. "He said he wanted *privacy*." He frowned at this concept, so alien to the djinni. "He'll survive his Appointing, won't he?"

"I believe so. He was strong enough to face down Cecilia."
Strong enough to have defeated me. The memory still stung.

Basil rubbed his bare arm, intricately tattooed in the ancient Thracian style. "It's going to be strange with so few of us ... And whom do you suppose Lady Cecilia will choose for her consort? I'm hoping it won't be me."

Looking closely, Dominic noticed lines of strain graven into Basil's ageless features. "You've borne a heavy burden this last half-century. I begged Sharibet for leave to help you during the floods in Baghdad last year, but she..."

Basil shook his head. "You were injured. That's—" His hand chopped down, terminating further sentiment. "Though I won't deny I've been stretched a bit thin."

Arjumand, still damp and trailed by a harried Abdulaziz, returned shortly, clutching a towel around his hips, and grumbling, "Do I really have to wear that? It's got no sleeves, or ties! It'll fall off!"

Recognizing Arjumand's nerves, Dominic said soothingly, "It's not that much different from a toga. Very dignified. You'll get used to it quickly."

"We're told the djinni have worn these garments since the Flood," Basil added.

Dominic continued: "And it was woven especially to your measure. You'll disappoint the House's most skilled weavers if you refuse it."

Yielding reluctantly, Arjumand released the towel around his loins.

For a moment, Dominic appreciated his golden beauty, less intense than Michel's, but with his own perfection of form and

proportion. The string of cheap faience beads around Arjumand's neck brought out the blue of his eyes. Arjumand stood still as Dominic and Basil wrapped the linen garment around his body and over one shoulder, leaving his right arm bare.

Basil stepped back. "Hold your arm in tight until you get the feel of it" he advised. "And remember to move slowly."

Taking experimental steps, Arjumand gave a nervous laugh. "It still feels like it's slipping. I wouldn't want it to fall off during the ceremony."

Abdulaziz had the temerity to grin at the mental picture thus presented. Still smiling, he said, "We can pin it, lord Arjumand. Let me find a fibula."

While the valet pawed through the contents of a small jewelry casket on the ornamental shelf, Arjumand tugged the heavy cloth up, then turned to Basil. "Why did you bow like that to me?"

Taken aback, Basil said, "Well, because I am djinn, but not Apkallu like you."

"Enlil, Lord of the Air," Dominic said softly. "He honored you."

"And I have great cause to thank you," Basil chimed in, apparently reminded that Arjumand couldn't remember. "My wife Leila, when still a mortal woman about nine-hundred years ago, possessed Seer's Eyes. She recognized you as Marcus, and your sister Honoria, and thereby earned her crown of service. And because she found the both of you, she was granted the boon of Transforming me, though I was at

that time only very newly of the House. Therefore, I owe my immortality to you." He began to sink to his knees again.

"No, don't, please," Arjumand begged.

"You would have known all this if you were Raised and Named," Dominic said pointedly.

Arjumand grimaced, as if swallowing sour wine. "So you've all told me!" Then his expression turned ironic. "Just think how I'll make merry, matching your tales to my memories—if and when I do agree to have them returned." And then another thought made him frown. "Marcus's sister. Honoria?"

Basil nodded.

"Your wife?" Arjumand stared at Dominic.

"Yes."

"The one you claim Michel was?"

"If you looked at his aura, when you had the felicity of seeing him in Al-Mansurah," Dominic said through gritted teeth, "then you can compare them to my memories of Honoria's aura, and tell for yourself."

Arjumand shivered. As Dominic had said, he was able to match the memories. Honoria's golden aura was the same as Michel's. "Is that how you recognized us, Michel and me?"

"No." Dominic admitted. "I cannot see auras anymore."

"Then how did you—?" Arjumand worked through that thought. "You drank his blood! And mine!"

Arjumand sank down to the cushion of the divan, trying ineffectually to keep his Garment of Divine Kingship completely wrapped around his body. Abdulaziz, having found a matched pair of plain silver fibulae at last, knelt to pin the heavy linen folds.

"Well, you haven't changed much since you were Marcus," Basil said, smiling. "I am glad that you have returned to us."

"The kin await." Dominic said curtly. He didn't watch as Basil and Arjumand scrambled to follow him to the door.

* * * *

The unlit stairway led down into the earth, deep depressions worn in the middle of the stone treads. Arjumand recognized it. He had been shown the giant underground room the day after his Transformation, and Sharibet's memories included a time when it had still been above ground.

Tonight the dark opening was a mouth, ready to swallow him.

Djinni surrounded him. Cecilia and Sharibet first, then himself, with Leila, Basil, and Dominic bringing up the rearguard. They began to descend.

On the wall side of the stairs, paint flaked away under his trailing fingertips in sandy grains. Roman masonry arched overhead, smelling faintly of ancient mildew. Across an unseen but perceptible space a bricked-up window had once let in sunlight and the scent of roses, before passing years had raised the level of the ground outside. Now this room was completely buried under the present-day house, a secret chamber known only to Sharibet's kin, who waited in the dark below.

Silently, the djinni took their places. Then Sharibet said in ringing tones, "Let there be light!"

Arjumand crushed a fist of air, as he had been taught, and aimed it for the tip of the torch on the wall above. He raised a spark, but it was off-center. He squeezed again, sweating with the effort. Finally the torch flared.

When he looked up, the rest of the torches were already burning. Sharibet stood on a purple-draped dais.

"Mother!" cried her kin in voices like thunder. "MOTHER!"

She wore a garment similar to his—white, and fringed, but draped differently. How beautiful she was, with her hair rippling free of its usual confines.

The kin lit dozens of tiny oil lamps from the torches, distributing them to the assembled kinsmen, until every face was framed by light, just as every head was crowned by an aura's flame. Music began, deep soul-stirring drums, and flutes wailing through the cathedral-like space.

He didn't enjoy the music—it was too foreign, too strange—although he recognized its power. But the kin listened, entranced, and when it was done Sharibet spoke in the ancient, guttural language she had taught him through her blood.

"My children," she said, holding up her hands for silence. "It is good to meet again!" She took a breath, and he could feel her nervousness for him through their link. "We are gathered tonight to celebrate the Finding of one of the Apkallu, and to appoint him anew as a Protector of the House."

The response from the assembled crowd was deafening. At Cecilia's subtle signal, Arjumand stepped forward.

"My children. My children—" Sharibet's voice cut through the clamor, stilling it. "Will you accept him?"

Old Ayesha approached the foot of the dais. "Most gracious mother, I am called Ayesha bint Khalil in this lifetime, but my True Name is Zinyal-la, 'The Living.' All of us, born into the House or adopted, trust in your loving care, for you have rescued your children from the forgetfulness of the Underworld for sixty-eight and a half centuries."

Arjumand's jaw dropped. Had he heard right? *God's Nails!*

Ayesha waited until his attention returned to her. "We rejoice that this Lost One has been found, for too many of the Apkallu are still Lost, having sacrificed their lives for us. But we must ask you: How shall this one prove he is true?"

Sharibet answered, "He is called Arjumand abd al-Warda in this life. But know this: by his own wish his memories have not been opened. He does not recall his True Name, or the promises he has made before."

The crowd muttered, the sound rising and falling like the choppy waves of a storm-troubled sea. Ayesha raised her hands for silence. Achieving it, she said, "This has not happened before, but we all know that time changes everything. Lady Cecilia, what can you tell us?"

Cecilia stepped up to the dais, next to Sharibet. "He refused to allow me to Raise and Name him." Although her voice was toneless and her face expressionless, Arjumand could tell she was highly displeased. "But by his aura I recognize him. In his last life, he was Marcus of Lugdunum, who died protecting the House in Béziers. I witness that

Arjumand's True Name is Enlil. He must answer your other questions himself."

Some members of the crowd started to cheer, but others shushed them. The mood in the great hall was tense, expectant.

Ayesha asked: "Why have you refused the gift of Raising and Naming, Lord Arjumand? Do you wish to forget us?"

Arjumand swallowed. Standing at his side was Simon dalle Rose of Venice, armed with an axe and waiting for the people of the House to decide whether Arjumand should live.

"It's not that I wish to forget you. Rather, I—I want to know who you are *now*. Who I am now. Not who I was before. The past is behind us. If it's true that I died saving some of you then let this be my reward: don't make me remember my f-failure."

"Children of Sharibet, what say you?" Ayesha called out.

Hasty, whispered discussions reverberated through the crowd. One raised voice proclaimed, "He has already shown us his worth as a Protector. Let it be as he asks."

"Why should he be spared the evils of the past, when we must endure them?" countered a woman.

"He is refusing to remember us!" But those voices were shouted down. In a short time, most of the kin present were shouting, "Let it be as he asks!"

"Are we agreed, then?" Ayesha called for confirmation when the din receded.

"We are agreed," the crowd responded.

Sharibet's aura lost its tense blue shade, and out of the corner of his eye, Arjumand saw Simon dalle Rose loosen his

grip on the axe. Arjumand bowed his thanks, and willed his heart to slow down.

"So you shall make these promises to us as though they were never spoken before," Ayesha said solemnly. "Do you swear that you will protect us to the limits of your cunning and strength against any enemies?"

"I swear it." Arjumand said, as strongly as he could.

"Do you swear that you will not rest until you have avenged any injury suffered by those of our House who were beyond the limits of your protection?"

"I swear it."

"Do you swear that you will hold all the members of the House as your children in your heart, treating us with a father's tender care, suffering your hunger to be sated with what we willingly give to you, and taking nothing more?"

"I swear it!"

A mother carrying a sleeping baby came to stand next to Ayesha. Another woman bore a vase made of pale stone. The djinni ranked themselves on either side of Arjumand, facing the assembly.

The young mother dipped a red-tipped brush in the vase and drew it in a ragged line across Arjumand's lips. He flinched just a little. The pigment smelled like blood.

He reflexively raised his hand to wipe his mouth, and Dominic gripped it, hard enough to grind the bones together—Don't. They might take it as a repudiation of your promise.—

He released his grip.

Arjumand's hand shot to his side and stayed there as the mouths of the rest of the djinni were painted, their faces taking on a bizarre and frightening aspect.

"As you have sworn, so we bind you by the earth which receives us all, male and female, young and old. As you protect us, so we shall protect you. As you serve us, so shall we serve you. And as you remember us, so shall we remember you."

"I will remember you," the djinni, including Arjumand, chorused.

The young mother returned the brush to the stone jar, and withdrew. Ayesha said, "We accept your promises, Arjumand. Be as faithful to us as we are to you."

Then there was more of the ear-splitting music, and then it was time for his ordeal.

Nadira swayed through the crowd, carrying a gold-trimmed blue goblet. She glanced at him once, then cast her gaze demurely down. His prick tingled at the memory of the nights he had spent with her, but his heart had never been moved. He nodded at her. Smiling might crack the drying pigment across his lips.

"Beloved Mother." Nadira's voice was thready with nerves, and she spoke the ancient tongue with a decidedly modern accent. "We thank you always for your gift of life. In return for your loving kindness, we offer Arjumand the safety of our House, the power of our Names, and the service of our lives in turn. We shall remember him as he remembers us."

There was a brief space of turmoil as onlookers queued up in front of each djinn. Arjumand was grateful that Dominic

had warned him what would happen. The sight of them offering their fingers to the sharp teeth of the other djinni, and then dripping their blood into the bowl of the blue goblet would otherwise have made his flesh creep.

It seemed to take a long time for everyone to make their offering, but the blood in the cup was still liquid when Nadira brought it to him, and its fragrance was headier by far than the pigment on his face.

He had had lamb's blood, and chicken blood, and calf's blood in the months since Sharibet had transformed him. But the scent tonight ... it was like honey and sweetmeats; venison and apples; pudding, ham, and fresh warm bread. Enticing. He inhaled deeply. He *wanted* it.

Nadira shifted the blue stone cup to her left hand, extending her right to him. "Remember me, my lord."

He took her hand. He felt Dominic and Basil at his back, and saw, peripherally, Sharibet, Cecilia, and Leila supporting Nadira. He felt the kin waiting for his next action. Simon dalle Rose waited, too, once more gripping his axe.

Arjumand conveyed Nadira's hand to his mouth, pierced her proffered forefinger with one sharp tooth. A drop of blood welled from the tiny cut, and he saw: *the confusion of a child in the House, waiting to discover the result of her older sister's initiation—and then Amina's return, almost a different person: distant, preoccupied, and full of new skills and memories. Where had they all come from? Nadira's own Raising and Naming: the humiliation of discovering she had never belonged to the House before. Her nights with Roland: hot slick lovemaking and impersonal kindness ... failing to*

capture his heart, or his child. Sharibet's order that she wed Jamal and bear children for the House. Fierce hope that perhaps her obedience would bring her what she sought...

Arjumand shuddered, inextricably linked to the girl, and the taste of human blood brought his body to ecstatic fulfillment. The doors to Nadira's soul stood open, her ambition boiling like clouds of acrid steam. He wanted to slam shut those doors against knowing how much she envied Leila and how deeply she longed to become a djinn herself. *Never to die again...*

He threw himself away from her, trapped in that pit of thwarted ambition. trusting the djinni at his back would catch him.

He couldn't tell what was happening beyond his closed eyes as the last convulsions of mingled pleasure and revulsion tore through his body. He knew there was a man with an ax somewhere, and he should be afraid.

How would he ever dare to touch another mortal?

Nadira whispered, shakily. "As you remember us, so shall we remember you."

It was his turn to speak. He was grateful that Dominic and Basil were holding him upright. Arjumand shuddered and tried to recall the reply he was supposed to make. "I will remember you." He coughed, but the taste of Nadira's blood stayed on his tongue like vinegar and rust.

Someone placed something heavy in his hand. His fingers curled around it, and he smelled blood, no longer tantalizing.

He eyed the goblet with deep suspicion. If only a drop of Nadira's blood could shatter his composure, what would an entire draught do to him?

But he had to drink it. It was expected.

He shuddered again, and drank the cup off in deep gulps, to get it over with as soon as possible. But the blood in the cup was delicious, and as devoid of soul-connection as sheep's blood. Thank God and all the saints.

The stone goblet slipped from his nerveless fingers. Someone caught it before it shattered on the tile floor.

There was damnable music shrilling and pounding away again. Incrementally Arjumand returned to standing upright under his own power. He became aware of a screaming headache, and linen that was ... too embarrassing to contemplate. The kin were watching him closely, so he forced a bleary smile. Simon dalle Rose bowed elaborately, and covered the head of his ceremonial ax in cloth.

Arjumand felt Sharibet's emotions, shuttling back and forth between joyful relief and the need to display her confidence in him to the assembled family. He could feel Dominic's resentful irritation, his unwillingness to be there in the midst of djinn and kin. And through Sharibet he could sense Cecilia, Basil, and Leila. When had she had time to share blood with them—and more! He could see the carnal images—in all the hectic activity of the last week? He felt a stab of jealousy at the proof of Sharibet sharing her favors so freely.

Cecilia's presence towered like a thundercloud, girt with lightnings. Basil, as much as he was grateful to see another shoulder brought to the wheel of his responsibilities, also

feared the changes that would come from Arjumand's arrival. And Leila—he had thought Sharibet and Cecilia lascivious—!

And as he saw into their hearts, they could see his. As if in a mirror, he saw reflections of himself in their minds: He was Enlil, Zayoos, Marcus, Roland, Arjumand—no, he was Arjumand abd al-Warda, and only Arjumand.

As if one being, they released the repugnant vision and became separate again, living within the boundaries of their own skins.

Arjumand heaved a sigh. He had been right. He didn't need his memories opened. He didn't *want* them opened.

A clashing of cymbals and bells made his ears ring and his head throb. People were calling for something. What language were they speaking? Finally he understood the words, and the world slid into better focus. "The crowns! The crowns!"

God's Nails! The ceremony was not yet over.

He took a deep breath, and prepared to endure the rest of his Appointing.

Chapter Seventeen

"For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps."—*Deuteronomy 32:32-33*

The sight of the twelve horned Crowns of Divinity, especially Honoria's, oppressed Dominic. He did not want to be part of this ceremony, to hear the Lost named, the Cursed One Forgotten.

He restrained impatience through Sharibet's recitation of the Flood legend, but found amusement in Arjumand's appalled expression as he heard the story for the first time.

After Arjumand put on his crown, Sharibet, Basil, and Leila assumed their electrum and gold crowns. Then it was his turn. He stalked, stiff-legged, while most of the kin called out "Menelaos!" and others, from Houses he had recently visited with Arjumand, shouted "Dominic!"

He paused before his ancient crown, horror eating at him. He could not touch it. He could not bear its weight.

He turned to face the assembled kin. They gave him silence almost instantly. "You have known me as Menelaos of Pergamon for..." he faltered.

"Sixteen centuries," Ayesha supplied.

So much time—and so little. "Time alters everything save the bonds we share together. Pergamon is gone! Menelaos—" he touched his fingers to his forehead and bowed slightly, "—likewise is no more. Henceforth call me Dominic, but

remember: my True Name is Ninshubur, and my crown is the crown of the Tree of Truth."

"The Tree of Truth! Ninshubur! Queen of the East! We sing your praises! Dominic!"

He waited until the cheering died down, holding his hand over his crown. "This is my crown," he repeated, realizing at last what he wanted to say. "But I will not wear it."

The family, poised to cheer and clap, froze. This was truly an Appointing like no other, Dominic thought wryly, before he forced his attention back to his audience.

"Too many of the Apkallu are still lost. I will not, I cannot wear my crown until they are found. May we meet again."

"May we meet again," the kin replied raggedly.

Cecilia walked the line of bearers, picked up her crown, and held it. Her face was expressionless, but the set of her shoulders communicated her displeasure to Dominic. She spoke, returning to the traditional litany: "Time alters everything save the bonds we share together. Call me Cecilia le Byzantine in this age, but remember my True Name: Ereshkigal. My crown is the Crown of the Underworld."

"Ereshkigal Undying!" the crowd murmured. "Queen of the Underworld! We sing your praises!"

Cecilia inclined her head in acknowledgment, then added "As Dominic says, too many of the Apkallu still are Lost. The Crown of Earth and Water, the Crown of the Mountain, the Crown of the Sun, the Crown of the Fields, the Crown of the Moon, the Crown of the Bull, the Crown of Fire, the Crown of the Shepherd, and the Crown of the Vines await their

wearers. I will not rest until they are found. May we meet again."

"May we meet again," the kin echoed.

Dominic, feeling both vindicated and bereft, watched as Sharibet came forward with Captain Muzaffar, who carried the black and broken crown. The kin gasped, as if they had never seen it before.

Sharibet proclaimed: "This is the shattered crown, which once was the crown of Heaven! The crown of the Cursed One! Let her be forgotten!"

"LET HER BE FORGOTTEN!"

Muzaffar bowed low, his face averted.

Sharibet continued, "Whosoever shall find one of the Lost Apkallu and bring him home again shall gain a crown of service and everlasting life. Whosoever aids the Cursed One shall share the same damnation."

The profound silence was broken by music only after Sharibet replaced the shattered crown's cloth covering. The assembled crowd sang a plaintive chorus, their voices echoing in the high-ceilinged hall as if their words mingled with the singers of another age.

The djinn returned their crowns to the bearers, who covered them and departed.

When the last note died, Sharibet called out, "It is good to meet again!" and the clan's response: "May we meet again!" resounded.

As the musicians played a bright and cheerful tune, women climbed the stairs, returning with cushions, trays of food and the stands that turned each tray into its own table. Hundreds

of conversations broke out as the kin sank down onto comfortable pillows, and settled in to the serious business of eating, drinking and gossiping.

Dominic retired with the rest of the djinni to a small room nearby to clean up and change clothes. Since Cecilia was ignoring him, no one else dared to speak with him, although Leila gave him a tentative smile. And Arjumand was still dazed. But Dominic didn't mind. He did not want to converse. He did not want to attend the banquet. He did not want to pretend he was enjoying himself.

He did not want the people of the House to pity him, and compare him to the djinn he used to be.

Dressed again, he sketched a bow in the direction of the other djinni, and returned to the hall. Some of the young people were already dancing and flirting, eager to begin the next generation of the House.

He wove around the outer edge of the crowd. He had to pause every few feet to acknowledge greetings and well-wishes, enduring with difficulty the need of some family members to touch him to ensure his solidity, his well-being.

The family deserved their celebration.

But eventually he reached the stairs. He bowed in the direction of the kin and said politely but not loudly, "May we meet again."

Sharibet and Cecilia, just now emerging from the robing room, looked in his direction, but did not bespeak him.

As he climbed the stairs, the joyful sounds of the banquet continued without him.

* * * *

Dominic's room had the advantage of being quiet, and orderly, and solitary. He fell to the divan, massaging his aching forehead. He was halfway into a merciful stupor when a timid scratching at his door brought him to alertness. What now? "Enter!"

He recognized the woman who entered, though he had not seen her for years. Hala of Baghdad was no longer young, but still lovely, with long unveiled hair. Dominic exhaled sharply when he saw that she wore a simple undyed Mosul-cloth gown, recognizing what her attire meant. "Why?"

She came into the room, set down a lamp, and closed the door. "Lord Men—I mean D-Dominic," she said, her gaze cast down. "Sharibet has given me leave to beg from you the Final Gift."

He jumped up, and put his arm around her shaking shoulders. "Surely you're too young to claim such a gift, and on such a happy night?"

Her hand came up to clench the edge of his kaftan in a desperate grip. "Ah—" Tears brimmed over in eyes already inflamed from ceaseless weeping.

"Hush. Hush!" he said helplessly, pulling her into a gentle embrace. "Here, come sit beside me." He drew her down beside him on the divan, and waited until her sobs subsided.

"Why?" he asked softly.

"I want to forget." She tried to speak calmly but hiccups overcame her, and she gasped out, "They—my h-husband, my sons—" She forced her fingers to let go of his robe.

"Sharibet gave me leave to come to you, to give my memory into your keeping. Please don't deny—"

—Sharibet! Damn you for sending her to me.—Hala asked for you,—Sharibet replied sharply, the music of the banquet loud in her ears.—She would not listen to my words of life, though I mustered all my arguments this past year. I had to grant her request for release, or she would have found her own way—She closed her link, her presence vanishing from his mind.

"You request this gift of your own will?" he asked the ritual question reluctantly.

"I do. I have said my good-byes. Those who might have mourned my passing instead await me in the Underworld. Release me from this pain."

"I will release you."

She relaxed. "Thank you." She wept some more, nestling in his arms like an over-tired child. After a while she ran down and sighed into the damp spot on his chest. "When I was little, when you lived with Sharibet in Baghdad, I thought you were the most wonderful man in the world. The way I followed you around—you must have thought me an obnoxious girl."

"No," he assured her with a pang. "Bright, willful, eager to learn—"

She sighed again. "You remember how you used to let me tag along to the Booksellers Market when you went there to buy books? It was completely d-destroyed in the f-flood—"

He stroked her hair. "I tried very hard to obtain leave from Sharibet to go help Basil, but with the Crusaders here..."

"I'm just glad," she said, "that your healing is complete." Before he could say anything else, she swept her hair back from her face and neck. In the same movement, she caressed his cheek. She kissed him, her mouth trembling. "Please. I do not want to see the dawn. I do not want to hear the Fajr prayers. Don't wait."

"I am your servant," he said. "You shall not suffer in the dawn." He kissed her on the forehead, then commanded her with the voice of coercion, "Feel no pain."

For a moment he regarded her closed eyes, the damp lashes trembling slightly. She lay quiet, trusting, in his arms. Then he bit down into her artery, finding the life beneath her skin.

It burned like vinegar on wounds he had thought healed. Images assailed him: Water laps at the second-story of the Dar al-Warda in Baghdad, and the building quivers on its already damaged foundation. Her beloved husband and her handsome young sons load bales into a boat moored to the rooftop. Nearby, brown river water pours into the high arched windows of the ar-Rayhaniyin palace. Across the city, only the tallest buildings emerge like islands out of a broad sea. As the family begins boarding, another boat appears, full of mercenaries turned pirate. They slay, they steal, they rape, they throw her, headlong, fighting for breath, into the crimson water...

Earlier: the first sight of her husband-to-be in his wedding finery; and earlier: intoxicating scents of ink and parchment entice her deeper into the Booksellers' domain; and earlier: the House, scrubbed and spotless, awaiting the arrival of

Mother Sharibet; Sharibet's companion, Menelaos, handsome but hesitant, his speech a little slurred, moving with a hitch in his gait...

He swallowed, drowning in her scorching blood. Memories spun earlier. The eyes in the bronze mirror shine amber bright. Cecilia's dry voice says, "I have Raised her up, and Name this woman, whom you know as Deema bint Fatteh, Nannarmena-who-once-was. Moon's diadem, you are remembered, and returned to the House of the Rose. We rejoice that you are Found."

On a hot July morning in Béziers, her foot slides out from under her, but he catches her with his inhuman speed, even as sixty perfume vials shatter on the stone flags, releasing the overpowering scent of attar of roses ... The attackers batter down the thick oaken doors at the front of the church and push into the jammed, cacophonous cathedral ... She screams until death comes as a welcome release from intolerable pain and terror. Her last prayer is, "Remember me! I am Named Nannarmena!"

Brilliance overwhelmed him as he broke her soul's bond to life. His body convulsed in a barren climax, and in the exquisite agony, he lost his own identity.

Her body was already cooling when he came back to himself, physically euphoric but sick at heart.

He closed her amber eyes, now unfocused. "I will remember you, Nannarmena," he said sadly, and kissed her tranquil lips.

He backed away from the corpse.

—It is done,—he advised Sharibet, who still presided over the feast.

Shortly, kin came to the door and removed all traces of death. He accepted a steaming hot towel, and wiped his face of tears he did not remember shedding. Hisham helped him wash, and change his clothes, and then Dominic was alone again, with Hala's life-energy flowing wild and hot through his body.

Through his link with Sharibet, he heard her address the revelers in the underground hall. "My children! Your sister, Hala bint Ghalib of Baghdad, whose True Name, Nannarmena, is written in the Book of Life, requested the Final Gift tonight. Mourn for your sister, who found the burden of memory too great. And may we meet again!"

"May we meet again!" the clan responded.

—What's this 'Final Gift?'—Arjumand, not quite sober, demanded.

At Sharibet's explanation he grew outraged.

—I'm sorry. I'll deal with him,—Sharibet said quickly to Dominic.—You have my thanks for giving her peace.—Then she was gone.

He brooded until another scratch came at his door.

Without waiting for his answer, Leila's head appeared around the jamb. "Do you need company?"

"No," he said baldly. "But come in anyway. We've hardly had a chance to speak since you arrived."

She entered. "Are you well?"

"Well enough," he said gruffly. "And you?" She sat close to him, her breasts brushing his arm. Despite his low spirits, his body responded to her nearness.

"Business has been very good lately, from all the Crusade traffic. And I'm so glad to be off that wretched galley. Say what you like about passenger accommodations being 'spacious' these days, I still say they're nothing but floating coffins."

"Not enough room for your wardrobe?" He was pleased when she smiled at the old jest. "And what do you think of our new boy?"

"Beautiful. I'm jealous of Sharibet. And of you? No? I'm sorry to hear it." She laughed merrily. "Will I have to wait, too?"

"You may. I, on the other hand, am unlikely ever to have a chance with him."

"Oh. He's young, and Christian. Well, time will bring him new opportunities, yes?" She nuzzled his ear.

He surprised himself by saying, "No, don't." Because, after all, he did want her despite the pain that joining with another djinn brought him.

She fell back and covered her mouth with her hand.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean—" he began.

"No, I understand," she said, patting his hand. "I just came by to offer—that is, to see if—but if you don't, or I'm not the right distraction..." She stood and headed for the door. Before she exited, she paused and said, "It is very good to see you alive. Come to me if you need anything I can

provide." She smiled provocatively, hip tilted, then straightened abruptly.

"Get you gone, girl," Cecilia said from the corridor. Leila vanished.

He knew he should rise to greet Cecilia, but he sat against the wall, hands on his knees. Unbidden, words of the Qur'an he had transmitted to Arjumand floated to Dominic's mind, "Every soul shall taste death. We will prove you all with evil and with good." With that thought, he knew Cecilia's purpose in visiting him must be to decide whether he should live.

"My lady, enter," he said as she hesitated at the door.

She came in, dressed Egyptian-style in loose silk trousers worn under a long buttoned vest of blue velvet embroidered with pearls and vines of gold thread. Hala's lamp, still burning, gilded her unbound, knee-length hair. Her palms and fingertips had been dyed red-orange with henna, and her sandalwood perfume mingled with the ever-present roses.

Desire, rampant and fierce, filled his body with the ecstasy of Hala's blood. Cecilia might be here to kill him. Fine. But he would kill them both with pleasure first.

When she was close enough, he seized her hand, and pulled her slight body down to his lap. She came gracefully, and when his lips covered hers, her mouth opened greedily. Their tongues met, retreated, touched sharp teeth, and met again, mingling blood and souls.

He flinched a little, in anticipation of the bolt of pain that usually withered his ardor during djinni lovemaking. But, miraculously, it didn't appear. It might matter later, but for now, only her touch was important. Because, for the first time

in decades, he was free to join in a complete union with another djinn, mind-to-mind, body-to-body, aura-to-aura.

Her mouth trailed kisses along his jaw, down his throat as he tangled his hands in her hair, holding her captive against him. Her teeth opened a vein, deepening the contact between them. She shuddered as she tapped Hala's life-energy surging within him and he shared it with her fully.

Desperate with long-suppressed need, he pushed her back on the divan. Sliding silk, cool and smooth, parted to admit him, hot urgency seeking sleek heat. He rode her hard, their bond informing him when to pause, when to dive deep, when to skim shallow, when a caress needed to continue, when it need not shift to avoid turning into pain. He shared each sensation of his own with her as well, as she mirrored his need to fill/to be filled, to clench tight/to be clenched, and let go.

Thoughts vanished. No words choked him, no memories overpowered the sensations they shared. If he slowed to steal back breath, and missed Honoria's presence, Cecilia merely kissed him harder, touched him more cleverly, and reveled in his honesty.

Long-unsatisfied desire, stroked and coaxed, rose ever higher. Joined bodies shuddered together, and joined minds ignited in a pyre of self-annihilation, all boundaries broken, mixed inextricably.

But the mixture separated out, finally, though their limbs remained entwined. He opened his eyes, to find Cecilia's eyes, shadow-dark, staring at him.

She touched his throat, his lips. "That was a masterful performance," she said matter-of-factly. "Now tell me why I should not speak the Word of Death to you."

"Speak it if you like," he returned, not quite as indifferently as he wished. "How could I stop you?"

The pressure of her aura enveloped him. He couldn't see it, he couldn't really feel it, but every hackle raised along his skin. Between his hands, her ribcage seemed as fragile as a flower; but he would never have the opportunity to crush it, to take her with him into death. He forced himself to relax, to kiss her again, feeling desire even at the point of death. Or because of being at that ultimate point. He did not want to die, but the rapture of death tempted him.

Cecilia, with access to his every thought, laughed low and caressed his throat. She snuggled against him.

The sparkling pressure surrounding him faded away, and he breathed again.

"So you would be willing to be my consort?" Cecilia said, as if continuing a business negotiation after a pause for refreshments.

"Until Honoria is found again, and successfully Appointed," he replied. No need to think of his requirements.

"Sharibet indicated you were having ... more difficulty completing the act of love than you showed tonight."

"Sharibet developed the bad habit of laughing at me," he returned. "A less-than-endearing trait, and not conducive to—" he slipped his thumb across her soft nipple, sending ripples of pleasure through both their bodies.

"She also tells me that you fought Arjumand when you were supposed to be fighting the enemy."

All reverberations of pleasure vanished. "He sought to keep me from Michel-who-was-Honorio. I would have killed him for that. But he is stronger than I am."

"Did you want to kill him ... afterward?"

"What would that have accomplished? Michel was gone by then."

"You upset the House."

He snorted. "I promised to protect them, not coddle them."

"You broke with Tradition tonight, when you refused your crown." But she was less annoyed than she had appeared earlier.

"Tradition is unimportant. What I want is to find our Lost, just as you do."

She smiled. "You don't sound like the Menelaos I remember." Her fingers lightly skimmed his forehead, where the crossbow bolt had left no visible scar.

He stopped her hand, holding it flat against his bearded cheek. "I'm not Menelaos. Don't mistake me for him. I may wear his flesh and hold his memories, but I'm barely older than Arjumand. Menelaos died in Béziers, just as Honorio did. If you can live with that, I'll be yours until Honorio returns."

"I can live with that."

And so could he. He moved to kiss her again, but after a moment she disengaged, saying, "We should return to the feast. I'd like to make the announcement."

"Basil will be relieved." He grinned. Life. Hope. The chance to find his beloved ... "He was afraid you would choose him for your consort."

"It might serve him right if I did." She smiled back, but a shadow remained in her eyes. "So, we will be together again, but not like it was before. New."

He turned his face and kissed her palm. Then they drew apart and redonned their clothing.

Dominic blew out Hala's lamp before he left his room. He had taken her pain into himself, but it was a negligible weight now. He had faced far worse. And now he had hope. *Honorio. Michel.*

Not now, but, someday...

* * * *

The rest of the feast passed with more liveliness. He felt almost giddy, relieved and frightened at the same time.

He was going to live.

He smiled and laughed and listened to jokes and stories, accepted congratulations on his recovery, kissed the kinswomen, shared the heartfelt embraces of kinsmen, ignored Arjumand's smoldering condemnation, drank wine, and even danced. No one offered him condolences on Hala's death. No one mentioned her.

But eventually, approaching dawn cut short the celebration. The Fajr prayers rang out across the city, recalling them all to the present time and place.

The musicians packed away their instruments, and those revelers still awake departed for their pillows.

Dominic, weaving a little with wine and fatigue, lightheaded and prone to laugh at inappropriate moments, found himself being propped up and guided back to his bedchamber by Leila, who was giggling, too.

She closed and latched his door behind her, and proceeded to scatter their clothing across the floor, blending laughter and kisses.

But her merriment—and his—vanished as soon as they joined. To his shame, her attempt to join her mind with his made him convulse and break away from her. He curled up, clutching his head to keep it from shattering like an overheated clay pot, and panted, trying to keep from moaning. He had thought himself cured! Why?

Leila fluttered, trying to soothe him with kisses and light touches that were more maternal than lover-like, and finally departed regretfully when he commanded her to go.

As the dawn's light conquered the oil lamps, Dominic slept, and dreamed of death, over and over again. Michel's death as it must have been, hacked to pieces by the defenders of Al-Mansurah. He even dreamed a death he couldn't remember: *Water and mud rush in to fill the underground space as the world shudders. Screams counterpoint a deep song of the earth, both beautiful and catastrophic...*

When Dominic awoke, he felt out-of-sorts, both jumpy and relaxed, replete yet sick to his stomach. Reverberating through the air outside the House, the Dhuhr prayer announced noon. Niggling in the back of his mind was the conviction that he had done something, last night, that he ought not to have done.

Of all his various insanities last night, he only regretted not being able to please Leila. He had wanted to, gods knew, if only to prove to himself that he was truly cured of his agonizing impotence. But he had been tired by then, all of Hala's wild vitality drained away.

A horrible suspicion began to form, black and bottomless as his stirring hunger. Hala's blood, and death. His volcanic passion for Cecilia...

He shied away from the ramifications of that thought. His pleasure with Cecilia had been fierce, and then he had had too much wine, leaving him nothing to give Leila. That was all.

He got up from the divan and went to pour out some water to wash his face.

He would be spending the next part of his life with Cecilia. Granted, he would never feel for her what he had felt for Michel. But Michel was dead, and until Dominic found his next incarnation, he must make do with lesser pleasures, lesser loves.

He felt a twinge of hunger, and, guessing Hisham was still recovering from after-effects of the feast, dressed himself and went to look for what breakfast the House might have prepared for him. It was time to be up and about, anyway. He had much to do, to prepare for his departure for Venice.

* * * *

His duties over the next days left him little time for dalliance as he arranged for all the goods that Cecilia wanted to transport. He exchanged heated kisses with her, his hunger

surging every time, but she played the game of anticipation, postponing further delights until they reached Venice.

* * * *

Alexandria Egypt—Monday, the 23rd of the moon Thul hijjah, 647 AH

It was a fine bright morning, the first day of the *Khamsin* season, with a hot wind blowing toward the sea. Captain Muzaffar had sent his compliments before dawn, very politely requesting the djinni to present themselves at the quay to board the *St. Barnabas* as soon as possible to catch the favorable wind.

Dominic's own belongings had been packed for a week. He had been ready—more than ready—to depart for years.

The djinni were escorted to the harbor by the whole of Sharibet's household, including most of the visitors. The sun bleached the colors from sand, sea, and flesh, but the blush on Ayesha's cheeks was rosy red as she said, "Lord Dominic, I remember when you came to us, so confused and ill. I am glad you have returned to your duties. Remember me." She took his hand and held it briefly to her forehead.

"I will always remember your kindness," he replied, and kissed her wrinkled cheek, which made her daughters giggle.

Ayesha blushed again, and hid half her face behind her veil, exactly as when he had first seen her at sixteen.

Nearby, other kin made similar farewells to Cecilia. Basil and Leila were surrounded by their own well-wishers.

On the ship, sailors were loading the last boxes of fine goods. Captain Muzaffar was shouting, "Don't drop it! Don't drop it! You fools, that's worth more than the whole ship!"

Through the link that would bind them for seven more years Dominic felt Sharibet's sorrow at the djinni's departure. Arjumand stood impassively next to her litter. That suited him. He had taught the younger djinn what he needed to know to survive and to meet his obligations to the House. Anything else Sharibet wanted Arjumand to learn, she could teach him herself.

"Cargo's loaded!" called the captain. "Passengers next."

It was time to go.

Dominic ducked into the curtained litter, and knelt.

Sharibet didn't look at him, only offered her hand. He touched it to his forehead, then, surprising them both, lightly kissed her palm.

Leaving her hand against his mouth, she said, "Be good to Cecilia. I'm sorry you couldn't recover Mich—"

He pulled away from her, stung.

She added quickly, "You know I'll send word if I find *any* of the Lost."

"I wish you had let us take Nadira." A pair of Seer's Eyes to find what he himself could not see.

"And take her from her new husband? I want children from her, hopefully with her talent."

"You won't know whether they have it for at least fifteen years."

Her mouth tightened. "I have been waiting for centuries for this particular ability to arise again. I won't jeopardize its

flowering for your impatience." She caressed his cheek. "But I do sympathize."

Through their link he felt her motherly urge to pepper him with good advice.

He grimaced. "You need not worry for me. I have a change of clean hosen, and I know never to trust Genovese money-changers."

She smiled in return. "Muzaffar is the finest captain of his generation, and today's weather is the most favorable we've seen for months. You should have a safe voyage." She paused, then continued in a rush, not quite looking at him, "Thank you for finding Arjumand. And thank you for going with Cecilia so I could keep him."

He started to leave the litter, but she flung herself against him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I wasn't going to make a scene. But, oh, I'm going to miss you."

Unsure how to react, he stroked her shaking shoulders. "Farewell, Sharibet. Until we meet again."

She sniffed, nodded, and then he was out, and free. Clapping Arjumand on the shoulder he said, "Take good care of her. Or you'll answer to me."

"You and what army?" Arjumand grinned. He held out his hand in the Roman fashion, copying Basil's gesture, and clasped Dominic's forearm with firm pressure. But his next words were less friendly, spoken quietly in *langue d'oïl*. "If you find Michel's next incarnation and use him ill—it will not go well with you when we meet again."

"If we meet again," Dominic countered.

"May we meet again!" the kinsmen near them echoed.
"Remember us!"

The djinni climbed into the House's lighter. They sat in state, Leila waving graciously, as the stevedores rowed them out to the galley. Then they scrambled up the ship's rope ladder. Sailors heaved the ship's anchor on board. Rowers pulled mightily, and the ship lumbered out of Alexandria's harbor. White walls and palm trees receded into blue distance, but the taste of Sharibet's tears, like Hala's cold kiss, stayed with him.

* * * *

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem—Monday, March 28th, AD 1250

The day finally came when Michel's leg could be released from traction.

The splint had long since been removed from his forearm. The first sight of his pale, shriveled limb had disgusted him, but Brother Olivier had pronounced himself satisfied despite Michel's misgivings. He provided a soft ball of rags to squeeze and a daily regimen of strengthening exercises with which to rebuild the muscles.

Michel had obediently performed the exercises, and his wasted arm slowly regained its strength. But the days dragged on because his leg was still immobilized, imprisoning Michel in his bed. He pestered Brother Olivier with endless questions whenever he appeared.

Olivier must have said something to his superiors, for Michel began receiving visits every afternoon from a half-

Saracen turcopole named Dabliz le Habelie, who tutored him in Arabic and the Venetian dialect. The lessons were a Godsend to Michel's convalescence, engaging his mind, which felt as atrophied as his arm.

He was also asked to dictate an account of the battle of Mansurah, so that a report on the disaster could be sent to the Templars in Europe. He had done so, but it only emphasized the gaps in his disjointed memory.

Now, on a soft spring afternoon, with scents of seaweed and salt drifting on the breeze, Brother Olivier, together with an Infirmarer assistant and Aumery, began to unwind the spider's web of ropes and bandages that had held Michel captive for nearly two months.

As his leg descended toward the bed Michel began to sweat, and the closer it approached the horizontal, the harder he breathed. He had learned to endure—and even ignore—the dull, constant gnawing of his injuries. This was different, as if rats were chewing through the bone.

His heel touched the bed. He screamed once, then panted through clenched teeth. He shuddered, but that made his leg feel like it was shaking apart, so he tried to hold utterly still.

Brother Olivier shook his head sadly, then propped Michel's head up to administer an all-too-familiar draught of syrup of poppies. Once the drug took effect, the Infirmarer pressed and tugged—but he stopped short of twisting.

Michel hazily heard Olivier telling Aumery, "It's as I feared. The bone is not healing well due to the inclusions. We may still have to amputate."

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

"No," Michel growled, battling the floating feeling induced by the poppy syrup. "No. I'll need my leg ... to fight again."

"Rest, my lord," Aumery said soothingly. "Get well first. Then think of fighting."

I'm fighting now, Michel thought, before he passed out.

Chapter Eighteen

"As for violent personal sufferings, he will carry them off as well as he can; if they overpass his endurance, they will carry him off."—*True Happiness*, by Plotinus, AD 205-270

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem—April, AD 1250

Easter passed and April was half-gone when Brother Olivier brought stout olivewood crutches and made Michel rise from his bed. It was impossible to put any weight at all on his injured leg but since the alternative was further confinement to an invalid's bed, Michel gritted his teeth and persevered until he could walk after a fashion. The day he managed to visit the garderobe unaided was a victory. If it pleased God, someday he would be able to mount a horse again and ride as befit a knight.

After a week of persistent effort, some of the stiffness in his good leg disappeared, but the pain from his injured thigh did not lessen.

To force his leg to regain full function, he went exploring, room by painful room. The effort only cast his spirits down further, for the fortress was huge, and the few Templars remaining in it—healthy or otherwise—rattled around like a handful of peas in a cauldron.

With the place so empty, it wasn't hard to hear a commotion, late in the afternoon on the Feast of St. George.

Michel hobbled as fast as he could toward the source of the sound. The crutches cut cruelly into his underarms, and a bump to his bad leg blinded him with pain. He halted at the

spiral staircase. He dared not negotiate the steep and uneven steps.

Michel cursed his weakness. What was happening?

Aumery came running up the stairs, panting. "The King has been captured! Our galleys were burned by Saracen ships that appeared—by magic—downstream of the army. Those who attempted retreat were all captured. Half the army is dead of disease and Damietta is being held as surety for the King's ransom. All is lost. The Crusade has failed."

"Oh, God," Michel whispered.

Aumery sank onto the steps, weeping brokenly.

Michel stumbled back from him, wishing he could find the same relief from overwhelming emotion. The foundations of his faith trembled. How could God let such a thing happen?

Unwillingly, he remembered Dominic's words in the temple: *Magic is as real as Alexander*. Magic.

And if anyone could do magic, it was Sir Dominic—oh, God. Was this disaster Michel's fault? All his great fault?

Leaving Aumery weeping, Michel turned away.

His ascent up the stone stairs inside the guard tower was agonizing and slow. When he emerged onto the roof, breathing hard, Michel crossed to the outside wall-walk and leaned out between the crenellations.

The walls of the fortress rose high above the harbor. Two or three big-bellied ships approached, great sails furled, rowers moving in unison, riding low in the water, laden with cargo. At the base of the walls, low waves beat themselves to white foam.

Michel leaned out a little farther, resting his weight on his forearms, fascinated by the sheer drop.

The sea beyond the waves was so clear that he could see the individual shapes of submerged rocks. Entranced by the ebb and flow, he had a sudden vivid daydream of flying from these high walls, supported by an invisible hand. He would go far, far away, where the brightness of sky and sea merged into one everlasting brilliance and the persistent knowledge of his guilt would fade into insignificance.

A seabird's mocking cry woke him to danger. He was hanging half over the wall, staring straight down. Could he propel himself far enough out so that the water would receive his body? Or would the rocks break him?

The thought produced an odd flutter in his stomach. He couldn't look away from the restless water, so far below ... so very near...

"Brother Michel! Brother Michel!" Aumery called desperately.

Michel started upright, staggering as his weight came to rest on his injured leg. When his vision cleared, he saw his squire's tear-stained face, pale as milk.

"Oh, God. Oh, thank God!" Aumery collapsed against the stone battlement.

Michel turned his back on the water and leaned next to Aumery, offering wordless comfort in an arm around his squire's shoulders.

Across the miles and months, Sir Dominic still had the power to work his evil magic, bringing Michel to the brink of

self-murder. Only God's hand, in the person of Michel's loyal squire, had preserved him.

Michel crossed himself. Unworthy he would always be, but he would strive to deserve God's notice and protection.

He spat in the direction of the sea. "Help me to the chapel," he said to Aumery. "We must pray for the souls of our departed brothers in Christ."

* * * *

The Venetian Lagoon—Tuesday, April 26th, AD 1250

The westering sun struck a momentary spark of gold at the horizon, probably from the distant roof of the Campanile. Then it was gone again as the galley dipped to the motion of the oars.

Dominic stood at the rail, staring at the flat margins of greenery that bordered the gray-green Adriatic Sea.

Venice. Home to the sailors, strange new territory for him. He should have been excited, but he was dreading his arrival. He wished Basil were here, but they had parted ways in Crete.

The brisk sea air curled around his calves in their scratchy woolen hosen, ruffled the hem of his short gown, and chilled his bare face, denuded of beard for the first time in his conscious life. His hair, no longer hidden by a turban, moved to the breeze too. He felt naked and vulnerable dressed as a European. Menelaos remembered wearing such clothes, being comfortable in them. Dominic did not.

And everyone—even Cecilia—expected him to arrive in Venice and immediately take up Menelaos's place.

He closed his eyes, hoping he would succeed in his quest and find Michel's new incarnation soon. In the meantime he had duties to perform, and a consort to please.

* * * *

The galley, flying the rose banner and the Venetian Lion of St. Mark, was admitted past the two forts of the Lido into the lagoon. After a cursory greeting from Venetian customs, who knew all the House of the Rose ships well, it made its stately way toward the floating city, passing all manner of other sea traffic.

Dominic stared at the splendid façade of the Doge's palace, and the twin columns at the entrance to the plaza. It all seemed unreal, and his feelings of disassociation only grew worse as they approached the pastel-colored palazzo that was the Ca' dalle Rose, the House of the Rose in Venice.

The galley came to rest against the House's private dock and Cecilia, eyes shining, said, "My dear, we're home."

He took care to assist her down the gangplank.

The kin were overjoyed to see them, yet wasted no time in an elaborate welcome. They hurried to unload the galley into the huge storerooms on the ground floor of the Ca' dalle Rose, leaving Cecilia and Dominic to follow one of the maids to the djinni's suite.

This was a set of beautifully furnished rooms on the second story. One chamber had been set aside for Cecilia, and the other room was for him, graced with fresh spring flowers in welcome, with more flowers frescoed on the freshly plastered wall.

The maid, a pretty sixteen-year-old, her pale skin and hazel eyes showing some outbreeding in her lineage, curtseyed and said, "My lord, remember me. I am called Cosima, but my True Name is Anki-namnar. If you need anything, please let me know."

"Do you know of a kinsman willing to serve me as valet?" Dominic asked. Hisham, who had served Dominic for nearly thirty years, had stayed behind in Alexandria, grateful not to be reft from his family at his age. At the moment, Dominic felt much sympathy for him.

"Certainly, Lord Dominic. Is there anything I may do for you now?"

"No, thank you." He coughed at Cecilia's silent prompting. "But Lady Cecilia is hungry and would like a bath. As soon as it's convenient."

"Yes, lord," Cosima bobbed again. "The bath may be an hour or so. Everyone's helping to unload."

Dominic squared his shoulders. Something he could do! "Indeed not everyone," he said. "I shall lend my strength." He winked at Cosima, who blinked rapidly. "Lead the way, if you please, Cosima." He thought he remembered how to get to the storeroom, but he didn't care to take the chance of getting lost. Not when he was supposed to remember.

Menelaos's memories seemed very dim and irrelevant as he traversed his new home.

The kin welcomed him with surprised glances, but allowed him to shoulder his share of the galley's cargo. It took slightly more than an hour, and the end was lit by rush-light. Dominic felt well-served to have met almost everyone: Simon Major's

wife, Maryam; their adult sons Simon Minor and Marco; the cousins who were housekeeper and butler; and the various apprentices and maids, fostered from Houses all over Europe, that were the usual complement to a house of this size. Simon Major's mother, Ginevra, a dried berry of a woman who walked with the aid of a cane, was too elderly to participate in the physical labor, but she was on hand to offer plenty of genial advice.

Dominic worked hard, as he lifted and carried, to fit all their current names to their True Names and associated histories. Menelaos had known all these people in their previous lives. Dominic would have to get to know them anew.

Amid the joking and banter while the kin worked to unload cargo, Simon Minor and Marco did their best to brief Dominic on the current social and political situations in the city, identifying both friends and enemies of the House. Dominic would receive a more complete picture later, when the Master of the House, Simon Major, let Dominic taste his blood.

He was the Protector of the House. And suddenly, it was very good to be home.

* * * *

Ca' dalle Rose, on the Grand Canal, Venice—Wednesday,
April 27th, AD 1250

Cecilia, in the business office of the House, paused in her review of the account books and watched the patterned reflections of water against the whitewashed wall with half-closed eyes. Dominic was avoiding her.

Absently, she found an error and made a note. It wasn't large, but carried forward would give a false picture of their expenditures for beeswax.

She closed the account book irritably and straightened her headdress and the barbe that chafed under her jaw. She was tired of being confined indoors. She would go for a walk in the courtyard. She would inspect the house. She would—

Cosima appeared at the doorway to the counting room, curtseying hurriedly.

"Yes?"

"Lady Cecilia. Signore Contarini is here to see you."

Cecilia sighed. How tiresome. But there was no help for it. "Show him in, please."

The maid gave a bob and disappeared.

Booted feet clumped down the hallway. Piero Contarini, appeared, looking well-fed, well-dressed, and worried.

"Bellissima Cecilia," he said, effusively.

She wished she had a trapdoor in the middle of the floor to flush him into the canal with the rest of the waste. But she curled an artful smile and prepared to inquire after his health.

But as soon as the maid closed the office door, he strode toward her, seized her hands, and covered them with damp kisses. "Is it true, then?" he demanded, holding her knuckles to his broad, soft cheek. "Did you really find him, this long-missing *husband* of yours? Tell me it's not true, Cecilia *mia!*"

She left her hands limp in his grasp. "It's true." Well, true enough to explain Dominic's arrival. She had carefully not given her supposed husband a name when she had first come

to Venice, knowing she might eventually consort with one of the djinn.

"Why couldn't he stay lost at sea?"

She permitted herself a frown of displeasure, and he dropped her hands, gazing at her with kicked-puppy eyes.

"Don't tell me that you're *happy*? I thought you cared for me."

Mentally she translated: I thought you and your fortune would be available for me to marry.

She didn't regret having been his lover. He had been a healthy youth and reasonably clean, an affectation which she had reinforced when it was warranted. Since Horst's heroic and useless death in the massacre in Béziers, she had had to make do with a series of mortal lovers. Piero had been wonderfully constant for the last five years, content to wait for her to be officially declared a widow.

"Cecilia?" He bleated like a starving kid and, reluctantly, she returned her attention to him.

"You *must* love him! I have never seen you like this. Does he know what we have done together? I would not be the cause of your dishonor, *madonna*."

She trotted out the time-honored script and said with as much kindness as she could muster, "Piero, what we had together is over, for I am no widow now, but a wife."

After a moment Piero revived enough to say, "You know, if after so many years away he cannot ... satisfy you as I can," he smirked weakly, "you have only to call upon me. I would give my life for you, Cecilia."

"I know you would." She thought of another true thing she could say. "Your love has given me life these last five years. Let us not mar the beauty we had with an ugly farewell."

He seized her hand again, leaving behind more damp kisses. "I do not want to leave you," he protested, and for that, she took back all her unkind thoughts.

"I will always remember you," she promised, stroking his face, committing his soul to her immortal memory. If she ever met him again, in another life, she would grant him the opportunity of joining the House.

He kissed her palm and then asked, "Is your new husband, er, a jealous man? Should I leave the city for a while?"

"I don't think that will be necessary." Cecilia smiled wryly. Dominic was unlikely to care. She had no illusions regarding the nature of their alliance.

* * * *

Dominic had successfully eluded her for most of the day, but when darkness fell, she found him.

Now, as the newborn morning crept in through cracks in the shutters, Cecilia sat on her big bed, combing her hair, feeling its silky slither against her bare skin.

Stroke, tug, stroke.

She combed her hair because she did not know what else to do. Dominic's scent permeated the tumbled sheets and pillows. His burnt-offering taste lingered on her tongue. Her hands, her hair, every inch of her body smelled of him, too. He had been attentive, thorough, skilled, and—ultimately—unsatisfying.

It hurt, that he was so changed, that he was still broken after forty years of healing. Even his blood had altered, tasting more like the smoke of a burning dwelling than the sweet incense she remembered.

Stroke, stroke, stroke.

He was up and about already. She could touch his thoughts if she wanted to tap that font of suffering, knowing that it only caused him additional misery.

Stroke, tug, stroke.

He had tried so hard. And so long as they were only flesh-to-flesh, he had been capable. But when they joined mind-to-mind, aura-to-aura...

A sudden chill prickled her bare arms. Had his injury altered him, so that the embrace of minds somehow triggered the *geas* implanted in all the Apkallu? She dismissed the speculation. If the *geas* had truly been invoked, he would be dead by now. She alone had the skills to Raise and Name an Apkallu djinn without touching the forbidden memories that the *geas* guarded.

No, this disability of Dominic's was something different, affecting only his virility.

She flung down her dull-toothed ivory comb, but before it could crash and break, she caught it with a hand of air and brought it back to her physical hands. She set to work, taming her temper as she did the strands of her hair, reminding herself that disappointment was not fatal, though arrogance could be.

She understood Dominic's distress at losing Michel—who better? He had turned aside her offered words of solace. He

knew as well as she did the odds against finding loved ones again—or keeping them safe, once found.

Stroke, stroke.

Hard practicality said it was not too late to repent of having saved Menelaos's—Dominic's—life. Bitter as it was to contemplate, she had been prepared, in Egypt, to return him to the Underworld if he proved incapable. But the ranks of the Apkallu had been dangerously thinned by Béziers, and too few of those lost in the massacre had been found again. What should she do? Could she endure being Dominic's consort knowing that he could only offer her the union of mere flesh?

And yet—Dominic *had* been capable of fully joining with her, that night of the ceremony—

After Hala had given him her blood, her life.

The house rocked on its wood-piling foundations as she sought breath. If what she feared were true—there was a way Dominic could be made potent again. A dangerous way, to be sure, for him and for the House.

She would have to test it.

She closed her eyes against the brightness of the morning. He might hate her, afterwards. He might thank her. He might become a danger to the House. But they both would *know*.

She sat perfectly still, holding her wretchedness at bay until the mercantile commotion from the Grand Canal outside penetrated her self-imposed cocoon. Then she shrugged away millennial grief, and rang for Cosima. She would dress, and see what household tasks needed doing or supervising.

Soon she would perform her test. Soon, but not today.

* * * *

That afternoon, Simon Major invited Dominic to accompany him to the Rialto, which was the commercial center of Venice. Even aided by the knowledge from Simon Major's blood, Dominic still needed to learn a great deal, and quickly, to serve effectively as Protector here.

On the short trip down the Grand Canal, he studied the passing scene and almost succeeded in forgetting last night's humiliating failure with Cecilia. There had been many changes in the city since Menelaos' last visit nearly a century ago. More palaces lined the waterway, competing with gorgeous arched facades. And the traffic had increased. The *Ca' dalle Rose's* gondola, painted deep red and accented with bronze hippocampi, was no longer the most lavish vessel on the canal.

Dominic and Simon-Major disembarked at a quay near the Rialto, emerging into a throng of men from every city around the Mediterranean. Lining the Rialto Bridge itself and the narrow street beyond were shops selling spices, patterned brocades, precious stones, perfumes, ivory, exotic birds, and a hundred other kinds of luxury goods. Unlike the Alexandrian market, where each transaction was conducted with passionate dispute, commerce here was muted to a low hum.

From all sides, sharp glances noted their arrival. Simon Major murmured names as they passed stalls, aware that Dominic would recall them perfectly. He led Dominic to a cluster of Venetian noblemen gathered under an arcade, performed an introduction, then, claiming a prior appointment, departed gracefully.

Dominic exchanged greetings with a Morosini (grandson to the present Doge), a Zorzi, two Donas, an Orio (son of the owner of the quarter), a Sanudo, several Contarinis (one of whom flushed and thus identified himself as Cecilia's paramour) and a Michiel.

He quelled inappropriate distress at that last introduction. The archangel's name was popular among Christians, although using it as a family surname was unique to Venetians. And it wasn't the man's fault that he had blond hair nearly the same shade as Michel de La-Roche-en-Ardenne.

"You'll forgive us, I hope, if we seem amazed to meet you, Ser Domenico," said Michiel, after exchanging the conventional courtesies. "We had heard you were lost at sea, and the sea so seldom returns what she has swallowed."

"I was kept longer than expected in Saracen hands."

"How much were you ransomed for?" the younger Dona asked.

"Forty years of service," Dominic answered with a straight face. He was rewarded with laughter from the other men.

Dona senior, the eldest mortal present, cuffed the younger with rough affection. "Don't ask impertinent questions, boy. He's still a bit wet behind the ears," he apologized to Dominic.

Dominic nodded graciously. "Your son?"

"Indeed, and fourteen this Nativity. He should know better." The youth ducked his head, self-consciously. Was his name Piero, too, the same as the Contarini? Dominic called his wayward wits to order. This was important, meeting these men whose families ruled Venice.

The group started moving along the street, following Michiel, whose given name was Antonio.

"I saw some decent timber here the other day," Michiel explained. "You've been recently in Egypt, Ser Domenico. Are the Sultan's officials still hungry for lumber? Or has good King Louis crushed the infidel and delivered Jerusalem?"

"I fear the latest news is not in the King's favor," Dominic replied. "The Egyptians mounted a blockade on the Nile, halting the King's supply ships. His army also suffered grievous losses in Mansurah at Shrovetide."

"May God have mercy!" The Venetians crossed themselves, and Dominic did likewise.

"Blockade?" Morosini asked. "But King Louis' fleet ruled the river. My father sold the Franks those ships!"

"I was in Cyprus a few weeks ago," said Zorzi. "And heard rumors that the Egyptians summoned a demon to make their ships invisible."

Dominic suppressed a smile.

"Invisible ships? I wonder what the Arsenal would pay for that secret?" Orio mused, referring to the huge shipyard on twin islands east of the city, that could turn out a fully-armed warship a day.

"You landlords! Always wanting to make easy money," Morosini teased.

"Well, if there *were* such a thing..." Orio defended himself.

"I'm just telling you what I heard. They probably sent the ships through Alexandria. The old Sultan died, you know. His son Turan-shah rules now," added Zorzi.

"At any rate, it sounds pretty bad for the Frankish king," said the Morosini. "It's good he paid for his ships in advance, eh?" Hard laughter sounded all around.

They reached a warehouse called a *fondaco*, and entered. High windows allowed diffuse light into the large, crowded storeroom.

"Here's the wood I was talking about," Antonio Michiel said, pointing at the stacked logs of Dalmatian fir that filled the air with a peppery turpentine scent. "Ser Dominic, the Egyptians haven't raised the import taxes because of the Crusade, have they?"

"They were trying to before I left," Dominic replied. "And it's likely they'll keep trying, given Turan-shah's reputation."

"Ah, well."

Antonio accompanied Dominic as the group split up to inspect the wood more closely. Once they were around a corner from the others, he asked in a low voice, "So ... we know old Simon and his sons—their pedigree's as noble as anybody's. But you came out of nowhere, and Simon dalle Rose bows to you."

Dominic pondered how he could make truth serve him. "I married in. I am a Protector of the House, for I have some skill at arms."

"But can you make money?" Antonio's crooked grin disappeared as quickly as the coins scattered at the Doge's coronation. "Here's the thing. There are ... rumors."

Dominic contemplated the possibilities. The implied threat made his heart beat, as if Antonio had raised a sword against

him. He drew a slow breath. "There are always rumors. It's the way of the world."

Antonio coughed as if embarrassed. "The thing is, people are talking about your wife and Piero Contarini ... these things happen, we all know. And, you see, Contarini wants to be one of the investors in this *colleganza*. If you intend to challenge him to a duel or start a vendetta—well, we'd like very much to invite you to join our enterprise, but..."

"Ah. How much is my honor worth?" Dominic asked coolly, relieved that the rumors had nothing to do with the supernatural.

Antonio said stiffly, "You must rule your affairs as you see fit. I only mention this to discover if I must find a replacement for Contarini—or you—before money changes hands."

Dominic considered the options available to him in Christian Venice: Kill the wife. Kill the lover. Beat the lover. Beat the wife. Do nothing. Kill the messenger...

Which should he choose, to appear to the best advantage in this place?

"Having been gone so long, I hardly know my wife," he admitted finally, hoping he was choosing the right course. "I will take up with her any misconduct she has been guilty of—if, in fact, she has done anything wrong."

"Oh, indeed, indeed." Antonio rubbed his hands together. "So you'll, ah, agree to go in with us? And Contarini?"

"He'll be safe, so long as he remains polite. And discreet." Dominic said. "How much are we talking about?"

"De Legno is selling the entire lot of fir for seventy-five piccoli. We can turn it around in Alexandria for about seven hundred fifty. If we each pitch in seven and a half, we'll make seventy-five per colleague—less taxes and customs duties, of course. Not a bad return, at all. And nobody loses too much if the ship goes down."

Dominic thought about the *St. Barnabas*, waiting to load cargo for its return trip. Seven and a half piccoli was a trifling amount. Seven hundred fifty piccoli would be a handsome annual income for a single trader. Seventy five piccoli was well within the House's budget. And with the House's connections in Alexandria, they might sell the lumber for possibly up to eight, or even nine hundred piccoli.

"I'm honored that you offered me a stake in your *colleganza*," he said politely.

"But it's not a big enough profit." Antonio was disappointed, but not surprised. He leaned forward, confidentially, his pale brows arching in appeal. "How would you like to buy in for nothing, if you provide the shipping? Everybody knows pirates won't bother ships flying the rose banner."

"Because we protect our own." Dominic said mildly.

"Of course. Of course. So?"

"How soon do you need an answer?"

"No later than tomorrow morning. If a buyer with a fat purse gets wind of this..."

"Indeed." Dominic nodded. "I do appreciate the information." He bowed politely, and departed, energized.

Back through the *fondaco's* door into the chaos of the Rialto, he waited impatiently for Simon Major to reappear. He could make an impressive profit for the House and show Cecilia he was not wholly useless.

When the old man returned, Dominic demanded, "Where can De Legno of Dalmatia be found? Do you know him?"

"Indeed, Lord. We've done business with him before."

"I want to see him."

"Yes, lord. Now?"

"Immediately."

Simon Major led him back into the *fondaco*, and they went upstairs. The doorkeeper conducted them through a warren of furnished rooms with traders in noisy residence, and vacant rooms whose occupants were away traveling. They stopped at a sunny corner room with windows opening onto the canal.

The merchant Dominic sought, tall and broad as the trees he sold for a living, was hunched over scribbled parchments on a table covered by a bright-patterned Persian carpet.

After introductions had been exchanged, Dominic said bluntly, "I wish to buy your entire shipment of timber."

"All? Good. But I wait for final bid from Antonio Michiel," the Dalmatian said in heavily accented Venetian. "If you make better bid, I happy to—"

From the corner of his eye Dominic saw Simon Major's dismay. In the sign language of the House, the old man said, "Put him to sleep. I must speak to you."

Dominic stared, affronted, at his impudence.

Simon Major did not back down.

After a moment, the merchant stopped speaking, bewildered.

"*Sleep until I tell you to wake,*" Dominic said in the voice of coercion. Coldly, he asked Simon Major, "What do you wish to say to me?"

"Lord, I thought you were going to observe today, meet people, get acquainted. Now you're negotiating—"

"To buy his wood. That should be obvious."

"Yes, lord. What is not obvious to me is *why*."

Dominic scowled. "To profit the House. Why else?"

Simon Major's panicked expression reminded Dominic of that hideous afternoon in Béziers. "Lord, I thought Ser Michiel wanted you to join his *colleganza*. Did he not invite you? Are you now going behind his back?"

"Why not? I foresee a significant profit to the House."

"On a short-term basis, perhaps!" Simon Major countered.

"I made no promises to Ser Michiel."

"You must not do this, lord. If you break faith with them, no Venetian will trade with us for generations. You put at risk relationships I've spent lifetimes building here." The old man's frown recruited all of the lines that fifty-five years had graven on his face.

"We sealed no bargain. I wish to purchase this wood." Dominic found himself wanting to hurt these smug Venetians, especially Piero Contarini for being able to satisfy Cecilia where Dominic could not.

"I will not permit the expenditure of the House's funds."

"You—*won't permit?*" Scalding rage burned through Dominic, and he took a menacing step toward Simon Major.

The old man stood firm, though his face drained of color. "Lord, I will serve you as Mother Sharibet commands, but I cannot let you endanger the House's standing in this city. If I let you cause harm to the House, my Name would be Forgotten." His voice dropped. "So, too, would yours."

Dominic laughed mirthlessly. "What isn't known, can't be Forgotten."

Simon Major's eyebrows rose in shock. "What isn't known? How can you say that? Haven't I been your faithful servant since you yourself Named me Ninshubur-bani?"

Menelaos's memories showed: a clever young man from the mountains east of the plain of Shinar, dressed up in a fringed white kilt and wide gold arm bands, eager to marry into the prosperous House of the Rose. Since that day, four thousand years ago, Ninshubur-bani had repaid Ninshubur's sponsorship many times over.

"You make my point," Dominic said. "I am no longer that Queen of the East, nor am I Menelaos, though I still wear his face."

"Lord, your injury was grievous," Simon Major said soothingly. "Of course it changed you. 'No one ascends from the Underworld unmarked,'" he quoted in the ancient language of the House. "But your spirit is still the same—unless—" The old man's voice broke, quavering. "In your dance with Death, have you become a changeling? Are you a wandering spirit, claiming a life that is not rightfully yours?" His hand moved abortively, as if to cast a protective spell, knowing it was useless.

Dominic grimaced. "Sometimes I feel that way."

"But Mother Sharibet acknowledged you, and Lady Cecilia, too," Simon Major said thoughtfully, pulling himself together. "I think you are still grieving for the past, which cannot be changed. But you must not take your ill-temper out on those who do not deserve it."

"Such as whom?" Dominic tilted his head ironically.

"Such as those young men you are trying to cheat! If you have forgotten, I have not. Apostle Paul said it as well as any man, 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' We cannot tell, with our blind mortal eyes, who may be Lost of the House, so we must treat all we meet with the courtesies due our kin. And I had heard that you no longer possess a Seer's Eyes..."

"It's true." He looked away before his face could betray his thoughts. Simon Major was correct. He had not considered that his action here might be detrimental to the House of the Rose or those still Lost.

"I bow to your experience." He turned to De Legno and commanded him, "Forget that I asked to buy your wood. Continue holding it for Antonio Michiel, just as you agreed. Now wake."

Radiating relief, Simon Major smoothly stepped in, asking the dazed merchant about possible markets for the House's perfumes in Dalmatia, while Dominic brooded.

Buying the wood had been a good idea, but not perfect, he acknowledged unwillingly, unless he *wanted* to destroy the House.

Chapter Nineteen

"Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things; for example, death is nothing terrible, for if it were, it would have seemed so to Socrates; because the opinion about death that it is terrible, is the terrible thing."—Epictetus, c. AD 55-135

Ca' dalle Rose, on the Grand Canal, Venice—Feast of Saints Philip and James, Sunday, May 1st, AD 1250

Cecilia sat under the south-facing window of the grand floor, embroidering something suitably ornate on a piece of linen destined to become an altar-cloth for the Ca' dalle Rose's parish church—if she ever finished it. Which, given her hatred of embroidery, would be never.

Dominic, Simon Major, and the other men of the household were entertaining after-Mass visitors from the noble families of the city—all male, of course. Venetian women would visit only in private.

Eyeing the screen separating the women's section of the hall and the men's, Cecilia sighed. The conversation on the women's side had a tendency to become obsessively obstetric. Her memories of being a goddess made her confinement to the women's sphere nearly unbearable. The rest of the Apkallu ought to be grateful they couldn't remember the golden millennia of divinity before Inanna had destroyed everything.

She took refuge in her thoughts as the women around her entered into a discussion of the perils of breast-feeding.

Dominic seemed to be settling in well enough. Although Simon Major had reported their contretemps over the lumber deal, Dominic, understandably enough, had not. He had not been lying when he told her that Menelaos was gone.

Last night, he had tried again to give her the union she craved. And failed. In the weeks since Arjumand's Appointing, he had not been able to complete the act of love at all.

She sighed. It was time to conduct her experiment.

* * * *

"Simon Major, come walk with me," she said, later that afternoon. Dinner had been eaten in state by the men of the house and their visitors, in seclusion by the women, and digested for some hours by all.

"Lady." The old man bowed gallantly.

She took his arm and they proceeded to the relative privacy of the second-floor loggia overlooking the canal. The tide must have changed, for the air was sweet.

"Lady, you wished to speak to me?" he asked, tentatively.

"Simon Major, does your mother seem ... frail these days?"

"She cannot move as quickly as she used to, but her wind is good—as you must know, hearing her give orders." His smile disappeared as he considered why she might be asking. "Have you seen a perturbation in her aura, Lady? Some hidden illness?"

"Not at all," said Cecilia. "There is nothing wrong with your mother that I know of." Yet. And probably would not be, if he thought her so vigorous.

"Maryam is all right? And my sons?"

Cecilia waved her hand, brushing away his concerns. "They are well. I was but inquiring—"

"Lady, you know you have but to speak, and your will shall be done."

But not happily, if she read his countenance correctly. Too bad she couldn't just say she was wondering whether anyone in the House wanted to ask for the Final Gift.

Well, and why not? she thought. "Simon Major, are you willing to die for the House?"

"Of course. I have done so many times." He sounded bewildered, but not frightened.

"I mean now. This month."

He blanched. "If it is your will, Lady. May I be granted the boon of knowing what—?"

She glared at him, tight-lipped, and he fell silent.

"You will feel very little pain, that I promise you." She wrapped him in one wing of her aura, holding his much taller body steady. The other wing she passed through his groin, finding the small gland above his stones, and stroking it with heat until it inflamed. And when that was done, she brought his hand to her mouth, made a slight cut to raise his blood, and found the memories of the last five minutes. A pass of her aura, and they were gone.

"Lady Cecilia, what was it you wished of me?" asked Simon-Major, blinking a little.

"Merely the pleasure of your company," she replied, trying to look demure.

He smiled, then made a subtle adjustment of his pelvis, as if trying to ease some discomfort. "Forgive me. I must take

my leave of you." He bowed, and rushed away in the direction of the latrine.

She sighed. He had been a good and faithful servant, and she would miss him, until he—or she—returned again.

The test had begun.

* * * *

Venice—Sunday May 8th, AD 1250

It had been a busy day, and Dominic was tired.

The Sunday after Ascension Day was set aside for La Sensa, Venice's marriage to the sea, a day of solemn ritual, feasting, and celebration. The entire city dressed in its best, gaudy with bright velvets and gold chains, streaming flags, flowers, and laughter. Members of various guilds wore their liveries. Other groups, such as devotional societies from the churches, had their own decorated boats. Everyone was prepared to have a wonderful time, except Simon Major, who had left Mass before its end, complaining of pain in his back.

Dominic and Simon Minor had stepped in to substitute for him. The House's gondola was canopied with cloth-of-gold, and held the notable dalle Roses. The rest of the family crowded into a large gondola rented for the day. Every person who could manage to get into a boat was in one for this festival.

They had rowed out beyond the Lido, and watched as the Doge, a rather imbecilic Morisini, had thrown the engraved ring into the water, and mumbled the famous marriage vow, designed to subdue the sea as a man hoped to become a woman's master: by marrying her.

Dominic had snorted. Rather like a man trying to master a djinniah by marrying her. And wouldn't his life be easier if a ring would subdue Cecilia!

She met him as he returned to the House that evening, after the ceremony and the day-long fair that followed. She walked with him back to their suite, companionably clasping his arm and listening as he recounted the petty incidents of a long afternoon spent guarding the Ca' dalle Rose fair booth in the Piazza San Marco, while Simon Minor, Marco, and their cousins sold all manner of rose perfumes and spices.

Once they arrived at her chamber, Cecilia made Dominic comfortable, lighting candles, disrobing him, seating him on a chair with pillows, and massaging his neck and shoulders. Far from relaxing under her touch, he grew tense. He feared disappointing her again.

But he realized something else made Cecilia resonate like the plucked string of a lyre. He stopped her hand, holding it fast to his chest. "What's wrong?"

She was standing behind him. He felt her eyelashes flutter on his neck as she closed her eyes, then her forehead rested cool against his ear. "Simon Major is ill unto death."

"Dying? That tough old man? How did this happen so quickly?"

"He hasn't been able to pass water for three days. I—helped him earlier today, but it was painful—until I eased it—and his urine was brownish-orange." She sighed. "He also has fever."

Dominic understood. This was a disease of men, a swift and brutal killer. "Has he lost appetite? Vomited?"

Her nod trembled against his cheek. "I told him I could ease his pain, but he has been a physician himself in previous lifetimes. He knows what comes next."

So did Dominic. Fever, delirium, unconsciousness—then merciful death.

"He's saying his good-byes now."

The house held the tense expectancy of anticipated grief. If Cecilia listened sharply enough, she could hear children crying in their nursery, but the rest of the inhabitants, if they spoke, or wept, did it in hushed whispers.

"I'll go to—" Dominic made an abortive effort to stand, but Cecilia kept him seated.

"You won't need to," she said, her voice cool. "He'll come to you."

"To me—!" The memory of Hala in her simple undyed muslin overwhelmed him.

"Ninshubur-bani is one of your own. It's proper that he should." She stroked his shoulder and began to weep as silently as she sang.

He held her hand, and tried not to think, until a scratching at the door restored his ability to move.

Simon Minor and Marco supported Simon Major, who could barely walk. The old man had bathed and dressed in the traditional undyed gown, which stretched tight across his disease-distended abdomen. Behind him, his wife and mother carried oil lamps. Maryam was red-eyed, but tearless now, and proud. Ginevra shook with disbelieving grief. Cosima's face showed tear-tracks.

"Lord Dominic," said Simon Major, his voice weak. "I have come to beg from you the Final Gift." His bloated features were made dreadfully young again by his illness.

"You request this gift of your own will?" Dominic asked, holding to the ancient formula as to a lifeline.

"I do. I have said my good-byes. Or most of them." He clenched the strong young hands of his sons.

"Do not mourn my passing into the Underworld," he said to his loved ones. "You have made my life as Simon dalle Rose a joy. So shall my passing be, released from pain. Shining Ones, into your keeping I commit the memory of my True Name, Ninshubur-bani: Ninshubur Made Me. May you remember me when I am born again."

"I will remember you," Dominic said, echoed by Cecilia.

"I love you. May we meet again," he said, over and over, to all the kin present, as they wept and kissed him. "My wife, mother of my sons," he said before she caressed his face, then stood aside for him to say farewell to his mother. "I'm sorry to depart before you. So rude of me, I know. You taught me better," he said against her gray hair, as she leaned upon his chest, trembling so she could not speak.

Ginevra whispered. "You were a good boy. The best son! May we meet again!"

"Marco, my son. Do well in your life, whether you go to sea, as I know you wish, or stay here to aid your brother. I leave you with my blessing, and the blessing of the House. And Simon—" Simon Major's voice cracked.

Dominic sympathized as Simon Major raised his chin, straightened his shoulders, and said strongly, "Simon, my

son. You are now the Master of the House in Venice. Send my last greetings to our Mother Sharibet, and protect and increase our House to your last breath, as I have done—and, gods willing, will do again."

"Father. May we meet again." Simon Minor said, barely holding onto his composure. "I'll miss you! Come back soon!" He added, in a tone more suited to his youth.

"I'll do my best," Simon Major promised.

"Come to my womb from the Underworld," Cosima spoke up unexpectedly. "Your grandchild already grows here." Her face flushing, she placed her hand on her belly, and shot a triumphant glance at Simon Minor.

Simon Major grinned. "Oho! So you'd be my new mother, pretty one? Come here, then." He kissed her forehead when she approached, and stroked her abdomen with swollen fingers. "Wish me the luck of the Underworld!"

"Luck!" Cosima whispered.

The old man's legs began to tremble. He seemed so imminently in danger of falling that Dominic swept his aura forward to catch him—and felt the supremely uncanny sensation of his aura moving through the same space as Cecilia's. He made the mistake of trying to open his Seer's Eyes, and saw nothing but circling stars before pain struck between his eyebrows.

Cecilia carried Simon Major into the room and laid him down upon the high bed where Dominic slept. She kissed Simon Major, spoke a few soft words in his ear, then, with a sharp glance at Dominic, left the chamber, taking Simon's family with her.

Dominic went over to the bed, and found it had already been prepared with an oilcloth cover and thick towels. He wanted to shudder. Everything so neatly laid out and prepared! Everything ... except for him. He glanced at Simon Major and caught the old man looking at him.

"So. I did not think we would come to this ... so quickly," Simon Major said with an ironic smile.

"I did not think we would come to this at all." Dominic crooked his arm around one of the bedposts and let the dark carved wood hold him steady.

As Dominic stood, gathering his courage, Simon Major closed his eyes and his poor bloated body seemed to shrink. "Are you gloating?"

"No. I'm terrified," Dominic answered.

Gray eyebrows rose. "Of my brackish blood?" His expression held a certain wry sympathy.

"No. Of your damned honest soul. I—"

"Who's the one dying here?" Simon Major grumbled.

"Who's the one who'll have to live forever with your memory?" Dominic shot back. Hala's death still unsettled him.

Simon Major wriggled, trying to find a more comfortable position. "As if we haven't done this before. In Uruk, and Tyre, and Rome once or twice." He sighed.

"Those are Menelaos's memories. Not mine," Dominic said stiffly.

The old man's next exhalation was more a laugh than a sigh. "His memories are your memories."

"His memories ... are unbearable," Dominic whispered.

"No memories are unbearable!" Simon Major retorted. "No truth is unbearable. You taught me that. Only lies are unbearable, being compounded of truth and untruth; they weigh on our spirits, and ultimately crush us. Truth may be distasteful, or horrible, and we may not want to remember what we've done or how we've failed. But if we hold to the truth..." his voice trailed off, as if coaxing a lesson from a student.

"If we hold to the truth, which weighs no more than an image in a glass, we shall never be crushed. The fruit of the Tree of Truth may be bitter, but without it the fruit of the Tree of Life is a poison that will send you mad.' Yes, I remember now." Dominic rubbed his throbbing forehead. "What is your truth, Simon Major?"

"That this body is dying. Release me from it, before I am sent mad. I don't want to go—there's so much to do, and it breaks my heart that Maryam will need to arrange a wedding before my funeral." With a mercurial change he leered cheerfully. "But that little wench Cosima. May she increase the House." His twisted smile faded quickly. "Please don't wait, my lord. Set me free. I'm already ... seeing things."

Dominic let interrogative silence settle between them.

"I see you, Lord, like a hawk with a broken wing. Wounded. Sullen." The old man closed his eyes tight. "Shining One, you were so bright! Remember me!" His eyes hunted back and forth under the taut lids, and he began to pant. "Remember me. I am Named Ninshubur-bani. Remember me. I am Named ... Maryam! Ama! Ama, it hurts. It's not supposed to hurt." He started to thrash weakly.

Pity overcame reluctance. Dominic stilled the feeble writhing with swift coercion, "Feel no pain."

He took hold of Simon's damp face, turned it away to expose the neck. Reluctantly, Dominic brought his teeth close to that taut skin, and bit, drinking a cup of bitterness so foul he wanted to spit it out. But he swallowed, and let Simon's memories take him: *"Lord, it's my House," he says as he faces death's scowling face; Maryam pants and groans and pushes forth from her body his perfect son ... hundreds of guests fill the great hall of Béziers, while jugglers in motley, performing with balls and knives and a very angry half-grown cat fascinate him with their antics; later, as he drowns in the children's quarters, cries of "An army at the gate!" stir everyone, and he is whisked into the air, carried on one shoulder of the giant djinn, Lord Horst. Delight and panic blend. He wants never to touch the ground, never to leave it again; an endless afternoon aboard the ship, hearing an occasional lament from Basil, Leila, and Sharibet, whose hearts are broken with every distant scene; sharing the collective grief as Cecilia, with a monstrously wounded Menelaos in her arms, descends from the star-filled sky...*

It was too much. As Simon's previous lifetimes raced through Dominic's mind, he recoiled. Too raw, too sad. Tears scalded him, he gulped a draft of impurity, as much as he could tolerate; when he gagged, before the fatal point had been reached, he stopped. By accident he looked into Simon's eyes, still conscious, begging for release.

He positioned his hands on Simon Major's head. With his aura steadying the body, Dominic broke the old man's neck in an easy twist.

Death's awful brilliance incinerated them both.

* * * *

The foul taste on Dominic's tongue brought him, unwilling, back to awareness. Wine. He needed wine. Or beer. Something to take away the tarnished-copper taste of Simon Major's polluted blood.

He staggered to his knees, and pushed himself away from the corpse lying on its stained sheets. He stumbled around his chamber, looking for something to drink, finding nothing. Frustrated, he leaned against the door. Where could he get—?

It hit him. Cecilia was right next door. She would have something for him—the sweetness of her uncorrupted blood.

He rattled the latch, fingers gone stupid, then he remembered how to work the mechanism.

Cecilia sat up in her bed, hair tumbling across her bare shoulders.

"I'm thirsty," Dominic told her. "You must—"

She looked him over and clicked her tongue in dismay. Dominic glanced down at himself and saw his garments were ruined by bloodstains. He carried his own stench with him. Frantically he ripped off the offending clothes, but that left him cold and shaking on Cecilia's gorgeous carpet.

She brought him one of the fur coverlets that draped her bed. She wrapped him in it, supple leopard skin, softer than silk. The texture of it gave pleasure to his skin, which tingled

even more when her skin, smoother than the fur, brushed against him.

He wanted ... he wanted something...

She drew him gently up the steps to her bed, and laid him, naked, onto the yielding mattress.

He was so thirsty...

She kissed him, and her kisses trailed across his temple to his ear. Her throat was at his lips.

He bit with a suddenness neither of them expected. Her blood was every bit as salty-sweet as he had imagined. He drank his fill, and she gave unstintingly.

She was soft. Warm. Naked.

He entered her, sheathing himself in her wet warmth.

"Yes!" she purred, opening her mind and embracing him with her aura.

No pain. Something was wrong. But the answer eluded him, and his cock didn't care. He moved, faster when her pleasure waned, slower when it crested. He lost track of his own identity, became the instrument of her ecstasy. Stroke. Stroke. Nothing else existed, until the delicious spasms of her climax broke them into separate beings again.

His own climax shattered him.

* * * *

He woke, still physically connected with Cecilia, although, for now, his thoughts were his own. He did not like what he was thinking. His worst fears had been confirmed.

He wanted to break away, but his slight movement caused Cecilia to murmur sleepily and wrap her arms around him.

Possibly her aura, too, if the thrilling—horribly painless—sensation he felt along his skin had any validity.

Tonight he had offered a sacrifice to the Underworld, and it had been accepted. He had earned his reward...

Sickened, he held himself very still, lest Cecilia wake, though he wanted to throw her from him and take a hot, purifying bath.

Because an ugly, weak part of him wanted to do it all again.

* * * *

The morning was far advanced when Cecilia woke. She stretched, feeling wonderfully warm and fully relaxed for the first time since leaving Alexandria. She was alone in the bed. At some point she had let Dominic go to begin his day's duties. She had fallen back to sleep—safe, serene, and untroubled.

She snuggled down into the bed again, but she was awake now.

And satisfied with the results of her test.

Well, perhaps not quite satisfied. The question was answered, but new problems arose from it: how could she keep both herself and Dominic in Venice if he needed to kill each time she wanted to join with him in the way of djinni? There were not enough family members in the world to feed that hunger of hers—nor would she wantonly use them up in such a fashion. Not only would Sharibet task her, but her own purposes and safety would be compromised, if the family turned against her.

It might be possible to find kinless folk, to feed her appetite—*Dominic's appetite*, she reminded herself. Slaves could be purchased, but a stream of purchases and disappearances would not go unnoticed for long in crowded and close-knit Venice. As for disposing of bodies, the sea swallowed everything. It might work for a while.

And if relations with their Venetian neighbors grew too strained, they could take a meandering trip through Europe, staying at the Houses stationed in various cities. Houses always needed Raising and Naming visits. And there would surely be bandits along the way ... except she had been diligent and untiring in the last forty years, keeping up the traditions of the House, Raising and Naming every child come to puberty. All the Houses in Europe were up-to-date.

She rolled over, and smoothed out the leopard-skin. Irregular black spots marched across a yellow plain. Her thoughts wandered.

Basil and Leila had been hard-pressed to maintain all the far-flung Houses of their area. There were Houses along the Silk Road that hadn't received a visitation in years. Sharibet had been complaining about it again in her last letter.

On the road, it would be simplicity itself to buy a slave or two in one city, and dispose of them before arriving at the next. And there were always bandits.

She and Dominic might have nights of passion under the open sky, or snuggled together in a tent ... on trade routes held by Mongols in Anatolia, Persia, and points East. Their mysterious and threatening envoys had even been in

Baghdad as recently as four years ago. The House required more information about these Mongols.

She stroked the leopard pelt again, sobered from her speculations. She had searched all across southern Europe for her lost Apkallu, and found none. Michel and Arjumand had come from Flanders. Shouldn't she go there first?

But what if she did find Ea's new incarnation there? Dominic had only promised to stay with her until Honoria—who-was had been Found again and appointed as a Protector. Cecilia rolled over, propping her chin on her hand.

Going East would mean a long journey, filled with danger and hardship. And love. Or as close to it as she was likely to get for now.

Perhaps Dominic would heal further on a steady diet of human blood and death. Perhaps they would find more Lost Apkallu, and she would have a better choice of consort. Perhaps it would all be a waste, and at the end, she might still have to send Dominic to the Underworld, and face the future alone.

She would take the chance, and make the best of what resulted. As she always did.

* * * *

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem—Pentecost Sunday, May 15th,
AD 1250

One afternoon while Michel sat in the courtyard, trying to decipher the flowing Arabic script covering a sheet of parchment spread across his lap, a sergeant-brother came up beside him.

"There's a knight here to see you, Brother Michel. Says he's your cousin."

"Roland—alive?" Michel straightened so quickly that the parchment slid from his lap. His damned leg objected to the movement, and he didn't actually hear the name Brother Odo gave.

"The Acting Commander gave permission for you to receive this visitor." Odo knelt to gather up the document that Michel had dropped. "Do you wish to see him?"

"Oh, yes!" Michel said. "May I offer him some refreshment as well, Brother Odo?"

"I'll ask the Commander of Victuals." The young sergeant-brother grinned. "He'll likely say yes. I'll bring it for you." He handed Michel his parchment, then hurried across the large, paved square and through the arched colonnade.

Pain and hope tied knots in Michel's gut. How had Roland survived? Was he well? What had happened?

When Brother Odo reappeared, he carried a laden tray. A tall, haggard, golden-haired man limped beside him.

Not Roland.

"Robert!" Michel levered himself up from the stone bench despite the agony to his thigh, and embraced his cousin with the kiss of peace. They supported one another, neither of them steady on their feet.

Robert's appearance dismayed Michel. He looked as if he had aged decades in the four months since Michel had last seen him. His hair, damp from a recent bath, had fallen out in patches, and pustules dotted his skin. His left hand was wrapped in bloodstained bandages.

"Robert, will you sit? Would you like a drink?" At his cousin's nod, Michel lifted the flagon and poured them both cups of cider. "It's good to see you again."

They drank.

"You look too good to be true, Michou." Robert's hearty voice sounded odd coming from this pitiful stranger. "I brought a letter from your sister. It came to me in Damietta, and I kept it—Here." He reached inside his tunic. Out came a grimy, folded sheet of parchment. "I'm sorry the seal's been broken, but your commander insisted on reading it first."

"It's the Rule." Michel shrugged, then eagerly unfolded the letter and began to read it out loud, for Robert's benefit.

Ypres, 2 October 1249

Dearest brother, I recommend me to you, desiring heartily to hear of your welfare, and blessed be God that you are safely arrived in Egypt.

I was sore grieved to receive your news of Roland's death; indeed I washed your letter with sorrowful tears. By my troth I never had so heavy a season as I had this autumn. My husband perished also, of the grippe. So that masses may be said for his and Roland's soul in perpetuum, I have endowed a sum to the church of St. Martin here in Ypres. My heart is yet in no ease, nor shall be until I know that you and our beloved cousin Robert have returned whole to us.

Michel looked up at Robert, but his cousin was rapt in concentration, and did not seem to appreciate the irony of Mathilde's wish. He went on:

My daughter brings me much joy, and does prosper. She was born after Easter last, and is fair, plump, and well-

formed. She cries but little, and has begun to smile and to take heed of the world around her. She was christened on the second Sunday in May, and named Blanche, after our aunt, and our good Queen, may God give her strength. My husband, may God rest him, had much joy of young Blanche for the short days of his life.

I have not had leisure to have written you a quarter so much as I would say to you if I might speak with you. But a good brother of the Templars awaits this letter without, and has promised to deliver it right speedily along with divers other correspondence which he bears to Egypt.

Almighty God have you in His keeping and send you health.

Your loving sister Mathilde, written by my own hand on the feast of the Holy Guardian Angels.

PS: God send you His blessing, and I pray you also that you be well dieted of meat and drink for that is the greatest help you may have to your healthward.

Michel laid aside Mathilde's letter and snorted. "Even a diet of nothing but meat will do me no good." He jerked his thumb at the crutches leaning against the stone bench next to him.

"Count your blessings, cousin," Robert reproved him. "Unlike most of our companions, we are both alive to praise God."

"I should have been there, in Egypt!" Michel exploded. "Instead, I was in bed, waiting for news like—like a woman!"

"Michou." Robert stared at the stone paving. "Be glad you were not with us. Too many earned their martyr's crown—"

He stopped, his throat working. His callused hand found Michel's, and he gripped hard, too overcome to speak.

Michel returned the clasp, and waited with the patience he had learned during his own months of Purgatory.

At last Robert said, "We starved for weeks before the King ordered retreat. I lost three teeth! See?" He opened his mouth to show the gaps. "When the Saracens captured our ships, they killed all those who were too weak from camp-sickness to stand and walk. I saw them. They just—cut—the throats of my friends, my squire, and my servant. Almighty God alone gave me the strength to rise.

"The Saracens took the lords away to pavilions," his face twisted but he continued his story without pause, "where they were fed and tended by physicians. They thrust each of us knights to our knees, and held knives to our throats, demanding whether anyone would pay a ransom." Robert swallowed. "I said—I said the King swore to ransom knights in his personal service, and they spared me. But the others—" He stopped speaking, his sunken eyes seeing only ghosts. "This was before we knew the King had sworn to ransom all."

Michel crossed himself and wondered how many of the surviving sergeant-brothers had perished at the hands of their captors. The Templars *never* ransomed members of the Order.

Robert kicked savagely at the grass growing up between the paving stones. "At least you were wounded honorably, in battle. To my eternal shame, I wasn't there to defend the King. And they cap—captured him." Tears rolled silently down his ravaged cheeks.

Michel kept hold of his cousin's hand, and they sat together as the sun shone and gulls called from the blue peaceful sky.

"I hear that the King's brothers plan to sail for home at the end of summer," Michel said, fumbling for something to say. "Will you go with them?"

"No—I—don't know. The King may stay in Acre for a while." Robert cleared his throat, and blew his nose in his sleeve. "I'll stay, too, while he needs me here. And what of you, cousin?"

"I don't know either," Michel replied. "I will go wherever the Order sends me."

"You have a vocation and honorable association. You'll be taken care of for the rest of your life. With your cleverness, you could end up Master one day."

"Not I," said Michel, squelching resentment. "I may never be able to sit a horse again. I can hardly walk, even yet."

Robert sat with him in silent commiseration for a while longer, then rose and embraced Michel one last time. "I'll be back when I have leave." Slowly he walked away across the courtyard.

Michel picked up Mathilde's letter and re-read her joyful description of his niece, Blanche. For his sins, he would never love a woman, never sire children.

It was right, and just.

* * * *

That night, he dreamed of the flood again. He drowned in deep brown waters, frantically searching for someone. And

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

woke in the lighted dormitory to Aumery's snuffling snores. Despite his weariness, he slept no more until dawn.

* * * *

It was not a complete surprise when Renaud de Vichiers, the Master of the Templars himself, came to see Michel the following day. That morning, the physician had given his final prognosis. Michel was crippled. No further healing could be expected.

"I have been informed that you are learning Arabic and Italian as fast as you can be taught," Master Renaud said, after an exchange of courtesies and heartfelt thanks to God for allowing them to meet again. "And the Draper's men tell me that you have read every book in our library. These are rare gifts in a knight-brother. The Order has need of them."

"But how?" Michel could not contain his bitterness.

"Have you thought of taking Holy Orders? We can always use Chaplains."

Michel thought of his unworthy hands, holding the body and blood of Christ. "No, Master. I would not—"

De Vichiers' grin split his beard. "Then how would you feel about learning the Venetian method of keeping accounts? The Draper asked for you, too."

"On behalf of God," Michel bowed his head, chilled to his soul. "I am glad to be of service." *My life as a knight is over.*

Chapter Twenty

"They seem to protect, But they imprison. They are your worst enemies. They make you afraid, Of living in emptiness."—From *Craftsmanship and Emptiness* by Jelaluddin Balkhi al Rumi, AD 1207-1273

Tashkent, Turkestan—Spring, 1254

"I seek a maidservant for my wife," Dominic said to the slave dealer, sipping a cup of strong black tea.

"What age girl do you want, honored sir?" The owner of the House of Rare Jewels, a middle-aged Turk, had prospered under the rule of the Mongols.

Genghis Khan had conquered Tashkent nearly thirty-five years ago, but unlike its neighboring cities Bokhara, Samarkand, and Merv, which had been razed and whose inhabitants had been slaughtered or enslaved, this city had surrendered quickly to its new masters, and survived. Dominic liked Tashkent's tan brick buildings with their curving walls and blue-glazed tile facades, and the clusters of domes creating a sinuous skyline.

"Young enough to be biddable." It didn't really matter, so long as she was healthy. His purchase would be a short-lived one, intended to satisfy Cecilia's hunger—and his own.

At first, he had resisted buying slaves for this purpose, but Cecilia had reminded him that the journey offered freedom from the House taboos against the drinking of human blood on other than ceremonial occasions. By now, he craved the

release that the blood and the kill brought him, although he had not been able to shake all his sense of guilt.

He and Cecilia had been traveling for four years now, stopping to visit the surviving Houses of the Rose along the length of the devastated Silk Road. Many of the kin had fled to Surat, where the djinni were known as *piriyan*. Aarthi Ghulabchand, a Crown of Service djinniah, served as Protector of the Ghulab-ka-Ghar, as the House was known in Hind. Dominic and Cecilia would visit them when they reached the Indus River, and consult with Aarthi as to what further revenge they might take against those who had harmed the House.

The slave dealer clapped his hands. He issued curt instructions when his plump, shaven-headed assistant appeared. There was an uncomfortable silence as they waited in the rug-strewn reception room. Dominic's grasp of Turkish, while adequate, did not lend itself to casual conversation.

Then the assistant appeared, leading a group of six girls.

"I'm sorry, my selection is so poor today, honored sir," said the dealer, while Dominic scanned them.

They were all young, as requested. Most were frightened and kept their eyes downcast, though one smiled at him nervously. With a pang of sudden compassion, Dominic decided to spare her. His eye lighted on a skinny girl, one of the youngest, her wrists scabbed from recent manacling. *Fresh stock*, thought Dominic, then felt an odd ripple pass through his aura as the girl raised her head and gave him a resentful stare from behind stringy black hair.

Take me, that unblinking dark blue gaze seemed to say. I don't care whether I live or die.

He smiled at the girl, who looked away with such vehemence that her entire body jerked.

"I'll take that one," he told the dealer, pointing.

The dealer looked mildly alarmed. "She's a wild girl from the hills. She won't behave."

"That one," said Dominic, more firmly.

The dealer opened his mouth to protest further, then he blinked and smiled. "Eight hundred dirhams," he said, naming an outrageous sum. "She's a virgin."

He gestured at his assistant, who took away all the girls except the one Dominic had chosen. She remained standing, scuffing her dirty feet against the scarlet-and-blue rug.

"Fifty dirhams," Dominic countered. "She's a wild girl."

He and the dealer settled in for the negotiation. The shaven-headed assistant returned several times to refill the cups of tea before the sale was finally concluded. By then, Dominic felt almost as exhausted as the girl looked. He rose, handed over nineteen gold coins in the amount of two hundred and fifty dirhams, and walked over to his new acquisition. He hoped that her blood would not taste diseased, as was all-too-often the case.

"Come," he said, reaching for the girl's bony arm.

He felt that slight shock to his aura again as they touched, then she was trying to scramble away from him, panting.

With djinn speed, Dominic caught hold of her. "Come," he said again, this time adding a touch of coercion. The girl's

resistance vanished, and she let him pull her to her feet, then followed him obediently.

He brought her to the rented room in a caravanserai several leagues away from the city. He and Cecilia had officially departed from Tashkent yesterday, and he had waited to purchase the girl to avoid offending the sensibilities of the local House of the Rose.

Since Cecilia was still in the bathhouse, readying herself for their tryst, Dominic ordered a cup of wine and a plate of mutton and rice for the girl and allowed her to sit cross-legged, without releasing the coercion that kept her quiet and calm.

The girl looked about the room with a worried frown. When she spotted Cecilia's clothes and cosmetics, she subtly relaxed.

Dominic could almost hear her thinking: *Perhaps I am to be a maid-servant after all!* Surprised at the sudden sense of connection with her, he wondered again if she were one of the Lost. The shock he had felt on meeting her ... it must mean *something*.

His regular indulgence in human blood had helped to heal more of the lingering injuries to his powers—confirmed by Cecilia, who reported that his aura was slowly losing its scarring. Had he regained some ability to recognize familiar souls?

There was a way to test her. Taking her hand despite her apprehensive glance, he lifted it to his mouth and bit a fingertip.

The doors of her memory opened to him with the ecstatic shock of tasting human blood ... cold, snowy night and horsemen galloping through her village. Screams and the smell of burning cloth. Being grabbed by her hair and thrown over the saddle ... Earlier: watching her mother at the loom, weaving bright cloth by firelight ... And further back, to her previous lifetime: standing at a tall writing desk in the House of the Rose in Constantinople, tasting the bitter ink of the pen she was chewing as she totted up monthly expenses for candles and spices in neat columns..and earlier: supported on the air above the Middle Sea by the slenderest of hopes, suspended beneath a kite her stranger kinswoman had promised would fly like a genie, watching the island castle drop away beneath her. The mainland shore is close. She has to make that shore, has to find the young genie, Lord Menelaos. But if she can't? 'Remember me, O gods if you exist, remember me. whoever I am ... !'

Dominic dropped her hand, his breath a little ragged from the pleasure of tasting her, and the shock of recognition. His intuition had been correct! Aura-blind though he might be, he could trust his instinct to find the Lost ... he could find Honoria's next incarnation...

He touched the girl's cheek, seeing bewilderment in her face. "Dearest one, it is good to meet again, for I remember you. I know your True Name."

Her eyes opened wide when he released his coercion. "My name is Tirgit!" she spat, then she realized what she had done, and flung herself at his feet, weeping.

Cecilia would be disappointed that her plans for tonight had changed, but he had found one of the Lost of the House, which should mollify her somewhat. Killing the girl now was absolutely out of the question.

"Home," she said, her words muffled by the carpet. "Oh please great lord, take me home."

"I will," he promised her, taking her into his arms and stroking her hair. "Lost one, you are found again."

* * * *

Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem—Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, Friday, December 21st, AD 1257 (13th of the Moon Zulhijjah, 655 AH)

Just after sunset, Arjumand reined in his mare, shifted wearily in his low saddle, and rearranged his robes, feeling dust and the grit of travel grinding unpleasantly against his skin. In other circumstances he would have admired the silhouette of the city, points of golden lamplight draped like a net of stars over the dark blocks of the buildings inside the walls. But not tonight. They had arrived several hours later than planned, and the city gates were already barred for the night.

Beside him, the camel bearing Sharibet and her chief handmaiden Nadira swayed to a stop, thin curtains billowing from the tent-like litter perched atop the camel's hump. If his hours astride had been arduous, at least he had had the comfort of breathing fresh air. Sharibet, enclosed in the stifling confines of the camel litter, had radiated silent misery for the whole journey.

The rest of their party, mounted on camels, horses, and mules, pulled up. No one said anything, but Arjumand felt the unspoken weight of "What do we do now?" pressing upon him.

He sighed, took a deep swallow of tepid water from the jug that hung from his saddle, and caught side of movement on the roof of the gatehouse.

He rode forward a few paces.

"Hello the city!" he called up in rusty langue d'oïl to a knight leaning from the small turret close beside the portcullis.

"What is your business, travelers?"

There was something familiar about that guard's voice. He even spoke with the accent of Arjumand's native Artois.

"I am Arj—" Arjumand hastily corrected himself in mid-reply. They were back in Christian territory. "I am Sir Roland d'Agincourt, traveling with my lady and servants via the Toron Road. We seek only the hospitality of our kinsmen in the Montmusard Quarter." Arjumand felt rather than heard Sharibet's tired sigh, and added: "We are sore wearied, Sir Knight—in God's name, let us in!"

The warden shouted angrily: "How dare you claim that name, you lying infidel? My brother Roland died nine years ago!"

Incredulous, Arjumand replied, "Ho, Robert, is that really you?" And belatedly, "But I'm not dead!"

"I am Sir Robert d'Agincourt. Why have you stolen my brother's name?"

Arjumand reached up to remove his helmet and traveling turban. The gentle breeze blowing from the harbor felt wonderfully cool against his sweaty scalp. "What proof do you want? Shall I tell everyone about the pies you stole from the pantry when you were ten years old—and what punishment our lady mother gave you?"

Behind him, Nadira was whispering urgently with Sharibet. Arjumand glanced back to see Nadira's hand emerge and point at the gatehouse. Sudden joy banished the weariness emanating through Sharibet's mental link with Arjumand.

—*Mon coeur*, Nadira told me that this gate guard is one of the Apkallu—and indeed, he is.—That can't be! He's my brother Robert,—Arjumand protested automatically, but he opened his Seer's Eyes and squinted at his brother's incandescent form, not sure whether to be overjoyed or dismayed.

—It is good to meet again! And if he's your brother,—Sharibet said,—so much the better. It will be easier to invite him to pay a call on us.—

"My lady?" Arjumand said in *langue d'oïl*. It wouldn't do to speak Arabic where the knights could hear.

"Will the Sir-Knight-your-brother let us in, or not?" Sharibet asked in the same tongue. "I want to wash the dust of the road out of my teeth."

"As you command, my lady," Arjumand bowed again, reluctantly. He was still coming to terms with the notion that Robert, of all people, was one of the Apkallu. He tried to imagine explaining the secrets of the House to his acerbic brother, and quailed at his probable reaction.

"Let us in, Robert!" he shouted up, concentrating on the immediate problem. "Don't keep my lady waiting, or she'll make it miserable for both of us."

"Your lady?" queried Robert.

"I'll explain all later!" Arjumand replied. "Come visit tomorrow."

"How do I know you're not some wandering demons?" Robert demanded, with a hint of his old dry humor.

Arjumand knew he was being tested. "Just because we're traveling at night? God's teeth, Robert, don't be more of a horse's ass than you used to be. Do I look like a demon? Would a demon know they were cherry pies?"

"Well..."

Another voice—a deep authoritarian one—sounded behind Robert. "Sir Robert, who are these people at the gate?"

"My lord, he says he's my brother, Sir Roland d'Agincourt, and his household."

"Well, is he or isn't he?"

"I thought he was dead! He hasn't been seen nor heard from since he disappeared during the last Crusade. But he knows things—"

"And now he shows up in this crowd of Saracens? I agree. It looks bad. Well, are they for Venice or Genoa?"

Arjumand shouted up helpfully, "We're en route to Constantinople." As far away from the Mongols about to besiege Baghdad as they could get.

"Venetian, then. Very well, Sir Robert, let them enter, whoever they are."

The portcullis began to rise, and the line of camels, horses, and wagons surged forward, impelled by drivers eager to reach home.

As Arjumand passed under the gate tower, he waved to his brother. "I want to see you! When do you get off watch?"

"At dawn!"

"Come to the House of the Rose tomorrow afternoon. My lady Sharibet also desires to meet you."

"You're with the House of the Rose?" Robert shouted, incredulous. "Roli, you bastard! We thought they'd killed you! I'll be there."

"Pie eater!" Arjumand called affectionately. He was smiling as he urged his mount forward, following Sharibet's camel over the plank bridge spanning the deep ditch between the inner and outer walls. Inside the second wall, the narrow streets were crowded with siege engines, the houses and churches scorched and scarred from recent skirmishes between Venetians and Genovese.

As they passed the large, flat-roofed cloister of the Friars Minor, Arjumand wondered if Baghdad had yet fallen to its besiegers. He was glad Sharibet had ordered her kin to remove from the House before the approaching Mongols arrived. The khans might not lay waste to prosperous Baghdad. They might realize the true source of wealth lay in taxation, not pillaging. But Arjumand hadn't thought it likely, and neither had Sharibet.

He scanned the line of weary travelers to be sure all were safe. All clear, for now.

* * * *

The next afternoon, gusty rain rattled the shuttered windows of the sumptuous audience room as Arjumand poured a second goblet of wine from a long-necked green glass decanter.

He could hardly bear to look at Robert. His brother, only three years Arjumand's senior, had not fared well since they had last seen each other. His hair had faded from gold to tarnished brass. There was less of it, too, framing features which had been baked and creased by the desert sun. Robert's left cheek was sunken where he had lost teeth. As he reached out for the wine, Arjumand noticed the stump of a missing finger.

Robert leaned back against the cushions of the divan, and tossed down his wine. He had earlier related how he had chosen to stay behind with a contingent of Frankish knights when King Louis departed the Kingdom of Jerusalem four years ago. Now he picked up the thread of his tale: "I thought I'd be fighting Saracens. But—God's teeth!—The only action in these parts is between the Venetians and Genovese. They're always at each other over something ... monastic properties, the spice trade, pirated ships—it never ends." He peered over the rim of his cup, a little flushed. "And what of you? You've been letting me do all the talking. Why don't we start with your miraculous return from the dead?" he asked sharply.

"Um. I wasn't really dead of course. Just, ah, captured by a knight in service to the House of the Rose. They offered me a choice—take an oath of fealty to Lady Sharibet, or, um.... "Arjumand shrugged. "There isn't much more than that." *That*

I can tell you, anyway. "She is beautiful. I saw her, and loved her, and became her sworn protector. They call me Arjumand abd al-Warda, now."

"Well, that's a mouthful! But your service to your lady seems to have done well for you," Robert acknowledged. "Despite the House's uncanny reputation."

Arjumand ignored his brother's disapproval, and told himself he should not care. "Lady Sharibet is the most wonderful woman in the world."

"She's the *richest* woman in the world, God knows." Robert refilled his cup and gulped it down without displaying the least appreciation for the vintage.

"That, too," agreed Arjumand, smiling determinedly.

"Maman always said you could fall in a manure pile and come up smelling of honey."

"How is everyone?" Arjumand asked. "I haven't had any news, since, ah since—"

"Since you disappeared from Damietta?" Robert smiled and a fine network of scars showed white against his taut lips.

"You should have sent us word! Perpetual Masses were endowed for the repose of your wicked soul."

"Um..." Arjumand shifted uncomfortably. Knowing that any correspondence to him would not be private, and fearing that his family might write him of Michel's survival, Arjumand had decided after Al-Mansurah to remain dead in the eyes of his family. "I'm sorry."

Robert took another swig of wine. "You'll have heard that Grandmere Eleanore died shortly after we left on Crusade, God rest her. Well, the splendid news is that our Olivier's

become the Bishop of Sens. And Cousin Mathilde is a rich widow now, with everybody wondering whether she'll marry off her girl Blanche—and her sizable dowry—to a merchant, or back into the nobility."

Mathilde, a widow! Free to remarry ... The hair stood up on the back of Arjumand's neck, and his skin prickled, as if he had been doused with icy water. He could return to France now. Did Mathilde still love him? What was her daughter like?

Blanche...

Arjumand raised his cup, trying to steady his shaking hand, and took a large mouthful of wine. He swallowed, and it burned his throat like unshed tears. A daughter, nearly of marriageable age! What color were her eyes? Was she a bold maiden, or a shy one?

He would never know. He had tied his fate to the House of the Rose. He must not think about what might have been. What could never be ... He must not think of these things where Sharibet could overhear him.

Robert was still talking, something about a feud between their father and his neighbor over fishing rights in a stream. He gave no sign of having noticed Arjumand's distress.

Arjumand refilled his cup, his hand steadier. Gradually, the coldness and shakiness passed, and the wine tasted sweet again.

Later, having related a detailed list of marriages, births, deaths, successful battles for precedence, and other family events, Robert said slyly, "But I'm surprised, Roli, that you haven't asked about Michou!"

Arjumand felt the words hit him like a blow to his chest, knocking the wind out of him. He took a deep, shaky breath. "I heard Michel was killed in the battle at Al-Mansurah, God rest his soul, just before King Louis was taken prisoner."

"Oh, he was sore wounded, but he survived. Though he'll never fight again." Robert's expression was suitably sympathetic for a moment as Arjumand's stomach churned. Then Robert continued, cheerfully, "Not to worry, though. He's been working his way up the ranks of the Order—did you know he became a Templar after you disappeared?"

"What?" Arjumand gasped, convincingly, he hoped, all too aware of the listening ears behind the carved screens at the other end of the room. "Michou, a monk? No women? Nothing but obedience and prayers? I can't believe it!"

Arjumand forced himself to maintain an expression of astonished joy at the news, and tried vainly to suppress his memories of that day in Al Mansurah. *The sounds of tiles crashing into bone and flesh, and the perfume of running blood...*

"He's the Marshal of the Pézenas Preceptory in the south of France now, and is going to be promoted again soon, though he doesn't know it yet. My friends in the Order here they tell me things. It's a pity he'll never be Master. Because of his leg, poor fellow. It never did heal properly. Has to walk with a staff." Robert was nodding over his cup, his eyes half closed.

"Alive ... God be praised," was all Arjumand could say. In spite of his manifold deceits, now Sharibet would know too ... and Dominic. He wished he had never met his brother again.

Robert yawned, then straightened to peer at Arjumand.
"So what were you doing in Baghdad, brother?"

"Living there," Arjumand replied. "My lady's properties are extensive."

"Why did you leave?"

"We had no confidence that Caliph Musta'sim could deal with the Mongols."

"Ah, you even talk like one of them now." Robert downed another cup.

Arjumand thought it better to steer the conversation away from those rocky waters. "Are you still in the King's service?"

"Fifteen years, this Christmas." Robert said with pride.

"Never was there a better liege. A godly man, a true Christian knight..." A spasm contorted his features, and he clutched his cup. "I'm going home after Epiphany."

"To Artois? What will you do there?"

"I've been granted a vacant knight's fee in our lord father's district. It's called Bellefleur. It has a manor house, and excellent pastures for breeding horses. I'll buy a few mares from Uncle Girard. And maybe I'll get married once I'm established as Robert de Bellefleur." He gave a watery chuckle. "Maman says the second daughter of the Sire de Douriez is of age, and her dower lands are just down the river from my new estate."

Sudden inspiration lit Robert's face. "Roli, come home with me! I've a tidy sum put away with the Templars here in Acre, if you can't afford the fare for a Venetian pilgrim galley. We could surprise Maman and our lord father. They'll be so happy to see you again."

"I—I can't." Arjumand squirmed. "I've sworn to serve my lady. And, and my blood's probably grown too thin for the winters back home—" He gave his brother a sheepish smile.

"Sworn to serve a Saracen!" Robert said. "You talk like them. You're even dressed like them. Do you bow toward Mecca now? What sort of hold does this woman have over you?"

He leaned forward, peering into Arjumand's face, tapping his knee emphatically. "You're what? Thirty? And you still have skin like a girl's—" Robert suddenly gasped. "Oh, God, brother! I didn't even think to ask! Lady Sharibet didn't—to get you in her service—cut you...?"

Arjumand stared blankly for a second. Then comprehension heated his cheeks. A eunuch! His brother actually thought—"God's Nails, no!"

"God and the Virgin and all the saints be praised!" Robert relaxed and thumped his wine cup down on the low table. "You still ought to come home with me."

The delicate scent of Sharibet's rose perfume wafted from behind the carved screen which allowed the ladies of the *harim* to observe visitors, unseen. Arjumand got the hint. Now was the time to broach the real reason for her invitation.

"Would you consider staying here, Robert? My lady needs another knight, someone who can be trusted. When I saw you, I thought that perhaps—" he cleared his throat self-consciously. "She has been very good to me, and life in her service is very ... interesting."

"You want me to dwell here forever among the paynim? How could I turn my back on my home ... my service to the blessed King? How could you even ask me that?"

"You wouldn't have to convert," Arjumand countered. "You would just have to be, um, a little circumspect."

"What—deny my faith? After fighting all these years to defend it?" Robert's wine-flushed cheeks darkened and Arjumand faintly saw his brother's aura-wings snapping angrily, though no air stirred in the room.

He tried to think of an argument that would sway his brother. He was constrained from mentioning eternal youth unless Robert consented to join them. "You wouldn't have to settle for a tiny knight's fee if you took oath with Lady Sharibet. She—she could arrange for you to marry an heiress—a Christian—and you'd be wealthy. Respected."

"Has your worldly estate caused you to entirely forget the faith of our fathers? Roland, for the sake of your soul, give up your apostasy and come home with me," Robert implored. "I'm certain that you'd be welcomed back into the arms of the Church once you'd done penance for breaking your Crusading oath. But if your soul is tainted with sorcery..."

"I serve the fairest liege in the world! And you could, too."

"No, Roli. I've had my fill of foreign lands, foreign women, foreign food." Robert refilled his cup yet again, but did not drink. "I want to live out my days among my own people, speaking my own language, eating good plain country fare. And when I die, I want to be laid in the family tomb alongside our ancestors, and await the Resurrection in their company."

He placed his hand gently on Arjumand's arm. "Don't you miss that? Don't you want to come home?"

"I—" The thought of Mathilde and her daughter closed Arjumand's throat, and he had to swallow before he could continue speaking. "I can't go home with you, Robert." He gestured, indicating the richly appointed reception hall. "I'm a lord here. Why would I want to go back to being the fourth son of the Sire d'Agincourt? No liege, no land, no prospects ... Are you certain you won't consider Lady Sharibet's offer?"

Robert shook his head. After a silence broken only by the patter of the rain outside, he put aside his cup and rose, unsteadily. "I suppose it's farewell, then."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Arjumand said, sadly.

A tiny, veiled figure appeared at the inner doorway, carrying a basket.

"My lady!" Arjumand rose, took the basket from her, and raised her hand to his lips. "Have you come to meet Robert?"

Sharibet nodded her head benignly. "It is a pleasure to meet my loyal knight's brother."

Robert bowed awkwardly. "My lady."

"Please convey my best wishes to your family, Sir Robert," she said. "Let them all know that Arjumand has served me faithfully and well. You should be proud of him. Please accept this small token of my appreciation."

Arjumand handed over the basket.

Robert stared at the packed rows of colored glass vials filled with attar of roses, dearer by the ounce than gold. "You are too kind, my lady." He did not look directly at her.

Sharibet's sparkling eyes shone through her sheer veil. She smiled whitely, and then was gone.

"No wonder you look so good, brother," Robert said, disparagingly, as Sharibet's perfume lingered in her wake. "Lapdogs live a long time."

"We will be taking ship for Constantinople next week," Arjumand said, stung by Robert's comment. "Before we go, can I give you some letters to take home with you for our parents? I'd like to send one to Mathilde, as well." *And why not?* Now that he no longer had to keep Michel's survival a secret...

"You won't be able to find a sober letter-writer over Christmas," Robert warned.

Was it Christmas again already? Arjumand sighed, then said, "That's all right. I'll write them myself."

Robert gawked. "When did you learn to write?"

"Sharibet taught me," Arjumand said, with a mixture of embarrassment and pride.

"You've changed, brother." Robert threw up his hands and let them fall. "No wonder I didn't recognize you at the gate, with your smooth face and clerk's ways. Enjoy your good fortune while you can. Smelling of honey..." he muttered again.

Arjumand leaned forward to kiss his brother's scarred cheek. "I've missed you, too, pie-eater."

Robert seized him in a rib-crushing hug. "You should have sent word, you varlet! But I'm glad you're alive."

"It is good to see you. And to get all the news." Arjumand disengaged with difficulty.

"I'll come again in a few days for the letters, and some more of that wonderful wine," Robert said.

"Until then, God keep you," said Arjumand, and had one of the kin show his brother out.

Then he crumpled against the silken cushions and wept for all the might-have-beens.

"Sad news, *mon coeur*?" Sharibet asked some time later, settling lightly next to him on the divan.

"No. Yes. I don't know." Arjumand scrubbed at his tear-stained face, and tried to smile for his lady.

Her arms went around his waist. Arjumand's smile collapsed like a mudbrick wall dissolving in a flood. Sharibet kissed his tears away with tender concern.

Finally he said, "Robert—what will happen to him now? He wouldn't even consider your offer. Will you—" He sat up, and pulled at his crumpled robe, trying to straighten it.

"Only good things will come to him from the House," Sharibet assured him. "From this day forward we will watch over him, protect him, and advance his interests where we can. If he falls on hard times, we shall ensure he receives a turn of unexpected good fortune. He is one of us. We protect our own."

"That is generous of you. But I..."

"His refusal is not your fault, *mon coeur*. He is past the age when adjusting to the life of a djinn would be easy for him."

Arjumand felt the weight of the things he could not speak out loud, or even think about. "He looks so old. He'll be dead in another ten years. Just ... worn-out."

"Don't be sad," she said, stroking his hair. "Perhaps we'll find him earlier in his next life."

"But it hurts," Arjumand said. "To think of them all growing old and dying. I would not return to Artois for the world."

"Death comes to us all," Sharibet said, softly. "Death, and its forgetfulness. Stay here with me, and forget your pain for a little while." She kissed him, and he returned the kiss, desperately, his hand stroking down over her throat, her collarbone, cupping her breast through thin silk.

* * * *

Later, both of them dozed, sated, on the divan. As the bells began to ring Vespers, filling the narrow streets with deep, melodious resonance, Sharibet finally sat up and buttoned her vest.

"You had better start your letters to your family, for we have many other tasks to do before we leave," she advised Arjumand, kissing his forehead. She took his hand and led him to her writing room.

Arjumand cut a goose quill pen for himself, and smoothed down a sheet of parchment. Then he sat with his chin propped in his hand, wondering where to begin, what to say. So much had happened to him, and there was so little of it that he was permitted to reveal.

My Lord Father and Lady Mother, your devoted son Roland sends filial greetings from the Holy Land.

I have met Robert here in Acre, where I chanced to stop while journeying to Constantinople. I am currently serving a

most noble and beauteous Saracen, the Lady Sharibet of the House of the Rose. I have missed you all very much, and only today learned that you thought I was dead...

He filled three sheets of parchment with accounts of his travels, an edited history of his service with Sharibet, and amusing anecdotes of life among the Saracens.

As good as anything a professional letter-writer could produce, he thought with pride as he finished his missive with good wishes and blessings for his family. He felt lighter somehow, as if the words he had committed to the parchment were a kind of confession. They wouldn't mourn for him any longer, and the tales of his adventures would fill up many a winter evening as his letter passed from hand to hand, from brother to parents to various cousins. Perhaps even Michel might read it...

He took up another sheet of parchment for the more difficult letter:

To the most noble Lady Mathilde, widow to Simon le Pelletier in Ypres, from Roland d'Agincourt, known as Arjumand abd al-Warda for these eight years, written by my own hand at Acre one day after the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, in the year of Our Lord, 1257.

Mine own dear sovereign lady, I recommend me unto you and send you God's blessing and mine. My brother Robert has brought me tidings of our family after these many years spent in service to a noble Saracen lady...

Arjumand wrote steadily, peppering his missive with long-unused phrases of courtly love. He took pains to describe as much of his present life as he could, telling Mathilde what he

knew she would want to hear: that he was safe, and happy, and settled with a lady of his own.

...We will continue our journey to Constantinople on St. Stephen's day. I pray you heartily that you will vouchsafe to send me word of how you do and that you will direct the messenger to the nearest House of the Rose. If I remember correctly, there is one recently settled in Ypres. They will ensure I receive your letter when I arrive in Constantinople. The Blessed Trinity bless you and your daughter, and keep you always.

He sanded the pages and waited until the ink dried, then folded the letter neatly within an oiled cover sheet, sealing it with ribbon and the House's signet.

Sharibet sealed her own letter to Cecilia. "I have a special task for you now, *mon coeur*. Nadira awaits her reward for finding the Lost One. She has asked that you be the one to Transform her."

"I am honored," Arjumand replied dutifully, concealing his dismay. In the years since his Appointing, he had scarcely exchanged two words with his former concubine, now a mother several times over, and chief among Sharibet's attendants.

"Come then. Let us obtain her formal consent."

Arjumand trailed Sharibet, steeling himself for the task that lay ahead. Recalling the distasteful glimpse he had gotten into her mind, her soul, he wished he could refuse Nadira's request without causing a major upset. What if he did something wrong? What if he found himself in a mental link with her, as he was with Sharibet?

He sighed, tugged at his robes, and steeled himself to perform his duty as Protector of the House.

Nadira knelt on the floor of her room, patiently waiting in a clean white robe.

Sharibet stroked her handmaiden's thick black hair. "My child, by finding one of the Lost Apkallu, you have earned a crown of eternal service to the House. Do you understand the nature of the choice you must make?"

Nadira nodded, her skin flushed and her heart racing.

"You think you do, but listen to me. You know you shall be eternally young and powerful. You shall be revered as a Protector of the House, yet you shall outlive your sons, friends, lovers. You shall become a drinker of blood, forced to conceal your true nature from all except kin. If the House should fall, or if you left its protection, you would be an outcast. Men would name you demon. Do you still wish this fearsome transformation? Do you accept this burden, and this gift?"

"I do wish it, Mother," Nadira answered eagerly, holding her head upright under the weight of Sharibet's hand. Arjumand remembered Nadira's obsession with becoming a djinn all those years ago, and felt a prickle of unease.

"Do you swear to keep our secrets? To protect the House of the Rose as the House protects you? To guarantee that anyone who learns our secret must be silent, dead, or one of us?" Arjumand asked, at Sharibet's silent prompting.

"I swear it," Nadira affirmed.

"Will you seal this pledge with your blood?" Sharibet asked, extending her hand.

"I will." Nadira did not flinch as Sharibet drew her fingers towards sharp teeth.

Blood welled from the shallow cut on the scarred tip of Nadira's ring finger. Sharibet kissed the wound. "I accept your pledge, my daughter. You will be Transformed—as soon as you give birth to the babe you currently carry."

Nadira's hand went to her still-flat belly. "Another babe?" Disappointment colored her voice as she asked, "But—what if something happens to me before then?"

Sharibet's eyes narrowed. "We will do all in our power to redeem our promise to you, whether in this lifetime, or the next. You will give the House one more child, Nadira, and then you will become one of its Protectors."

Nadira opened her mouth to speak, then she met Sharibet's glance and bowed her head. "As you command, Mother Sharibet."

As if conducting a marriage rite, Sharibet placed Nadira's hand in Arjumand's. "Do you, Arjumand, as Protector of this House, promise to Transform Nadira?"

"I do, if God wills it," he said. The vinegar-and-rust scent of Nadira's blood made his prick shrivel. He gave an inward sigh, then bent and placed his mouth over her wound.

Just as at his Appointing, the rush of images threatened to overwhelm him. Only now, as to be expected after nine years of life-experience, there were more of them, all marked by the self-centeredness that had so repelled Arjumand. The drive of her ambition to become immortal had not altered in any way.

He forced himself to turn away after what seemed the briefest of intervals. But as the last tremors of blood-ecstasy faded he couldn't help feeling relieved. He could do it. He would not shame the House.

"I look forward to welcoming you among the djinni, Nadira. The House needs more Protectors," Sharibet said.

"Until Constantinople, then," Arjumand pledged, forcing a smile in Nadira's direction. "And may your child be healthy and strong, and may you bear it easily."

"Thank you," Nadira answered. For a moment, in her smile, her true self shone forth: naked ambition and triumphant anticipation.

Chapter Twenty-one

"As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country."—*Proverbs*, 25:25

On the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin in the Year of Our Lord 1258, Theophila, Mistress of the House in Famagusta, Cyprus, sends respectful greetings to the Lady Cecilia at Dar al Warda, Alexandria.

Great lady, it is my mournful duty to send you sad tidings of the Lost One called Sir Robert d'Agincourt.

As Mother Sharibet instructed, we kept watch for the Rose of Tripoli out of Acre. Sir Robert arrived in Famagusta before the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Unfortunately, he was already very ill when the ship arrived, and Captain Alessandro dalle Rosa gave Sir Robert into my husband's charge.

We brought him to the House and summoned a physician for him, but it was too late. At Sir Robert's request, I sent for Father Peter. Sir Robert passed into the Underworld within a day of making his confession and receiving Extreme Unction, according to his faith in this life. May he be return to us soon!

We gave him a funeral fitting to his station, and endowed Masses for his soul at the cathedral in order to give his current family some comfort in their loss. Enclosed is a packet of his effects, should you wish to send them to Yusuf de la Rose in Ypres, who could dispatch a messenger to Lord Ulrich and Lady Blanche of Agincourt...

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, Egypt—Monday, 6th of the moon Safar, 656 AH (February 11th, AD 1258)

Cecilia knelt by a low wooden table that had a finish as smooth as silk. Indirect sunlight filled the chamber, shaded from the rising sun by an acacia tree overlooking the rose garden below. But she scarcely noticed her surroundings. Icy with shock, she held two letters: the first from Sharibet, dated six weeks ago at Acre, and the second from the matriarch of the House in Famagusta, dated less than two weeks ago.

Cecilia bowed her head. Utu—who had been so briefly Raymond-Soleil—although Found again, had not consented to join the House and now he was dead. They must begin their search anew, and hope that his next lifetime brought him in contact with the House in time to rescue him from mortality.

And Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne—thought dead—lived!

Good news mingled with bad, like honey laced with gall.

What should she do? Nearing thirty, Michel was likely too old to be Transformed successfully. Also, by Dominic's unwilling report, he had already refused Arjumand's invitation in Al-Mansurah, as he had refused Dominic's initial overture at Alexander's shrine. He was not a promising candidate.

Even if Michel consented, extricating him from the Templars would be difficult. But with so few djinni left to protect the House, how could she let him slip through her fingers?

And how would Dominic react when he heard that Michel was still alive?

Cecilia smoothed the parchment against the table surface, tracing the creases as if following a marked map through treacherous territory. Despite her best efforts, her control over Dominic had been tenuous since his injury. Should she even tell Dominic before she knew whether Michel could be persuaded to accept his Apkallu birthright?

Cecilia welcomed the interruption when her maid, Tirgit, entered the room.

"It's so flat here, my lady!" Tirgit still wore her sleeping shift, clean but shapeless with many washings and all the hems fraying. Her damp hair was evidence of a recent bath, and she smelled of soap and sweet herbs as she passed by. "But I'll never tire of watching the sea!" she added. Reaching the window, she peered through the intricately carved screens as if looking for ships, even though the House of the Rose was far from the harbor.

Cecilia put down her letters, and smiled at the girl. "Do you miss your mountains?"

"N-no," Tirgit lied. Fifteen now, and nearly a woman grown, she still had a child's delight in most things, but she had been subdued since their arrival in the city yesterday. "I can hardly believe we're finally here." She had been traveling with Dominic and Cecilia for four years now, enduring with them the broiling homeward sea voyage from Hind.

Cecilia sighed, luxuriating in the softness of clean cotton robes and a spotless room. She was weary of travel and troubles. Here there was no wind, no sun, no dust, no heaving ocean. And if she never saw another caravanserai or Mongol for a mortal lifetime, it would be too soon.

However, her return to the cities of the Mediterranean meant severe restriction of her conjugal pleasures.

Thinking of Dominic made her twinge. Their lovemaking, like their journey, had been as difficult and dangerous as she had expected.

"Do you think I can see *it* today?" Tirgit asked shyly, breaking into Cecilia's thoughts. "Of all the memories you returned to me, it's the one I want to see with my own eyes."

"You'll see it," Cecilia promised. "As soon as Ayesha brings your clothing." She refolded the letters and tucked them into her sash, still undecided whether to tell Dominic her news.

She had thought herself successful in taming her quarrelsome Apkallu siblings, gentling them little by little over their many lifetimes, carefully editing the memories she returned at their Raisings and Namings to moderate their knowledge of their powers. She told herself that her actions were necessary for their survival in this changed world that only dimly remembered the old gods, and it troubled her that both Enlil and Ninshubur had become suddenly insubordinate.

A soft scratching on the door signaled the arrival of Ayesha with her daughters and granddaughters. For Tirgit and themselves, they carried trays laden with bread, eggs, butter, cheese, clotted cream, and pastries drizzled with honey. For Cecilia, there was a goblet of fresh chicken blood.

While Cecilia sipped slowly at her meal, the kin ate with gusto, displaying armloads of clothing and jewelry suitable for an Egyptian maiden of a prosperous family. When the food was gone, Tirgit, her face glowing, was dressed in a new cotton shift, loose trousers dyed with indigo, and a matching,

long, buttoned vest with red embroidery. Ayesha's oldest granddaughter braided Tirgit's hair and bound it under a kerchief. As Tirgit put gold hoops in her ears and wiggled her fingers to make her new rings sparkle, the women of the House exclaimed over Tirgit's exotic features.

When Tirgit finished dressing in her new clothes, Ayesha and Cecilia led her through the house to the secret stair. Their way lighted by an oil lamp, they descended into the gloom of the huge old space that had once been a reception hall.

As Ayesha walked the perimeter of the room, lighting clusters of oil lamps on tiered wrought-iron stands, the faded wall-paintings leaped to life in the golden glow. Tirgit's eyes traced the outlines of the painted figures, and she stared open-mouthed up into the shadowed height of the barrel-vaulted ceiling.

She strode back and forth across the tiled floor, exclaiming at everything, until she noticed the echoes her voice brought forth. All at once she stood still and began a poignant Uzbek love-song, quietly at first, then louder and louder, pausing at the ends of verses to listen to the reverberations from the stark walls.

"Oh. It's just as I remember," she said at last, the chamber still echoing with her sweet alto.

Old Ayesha chuckled. "You should have seen it for the Appointing. Almost eight years ago, but it seems like yesterday. There was music and dancing and food—over three hundred of the family came from all over the world."

Tirgit, trying to imagine the sight of hundreds of family members feasting and making merry, stared into the gloom.

"The new Protector, Lord Arjumand—young, beautiful, his hair brighter than gold. May we meet some day when I am young again." Ayesha patted her withered breast, a smile curling thin dry lips. "And all the neighbors gossiped the next day about the djinni making music under the earth."

"They're probably wondering what we're up to now," Tirgit said, laughing.

"No doubt they are," Cecilia agreed coolly.

Ayesha's easy laughter stopped abruptly.

Puzzled, Tirgit looked back and forth between the old woman and the djinniah.

Cecilia said, "It's dangerous to attract attention. There is a reason why most of the Apkallu are Lost, and not with me—with *us*—today. Come, are you finished?"

Swiveling her head for a last glimpse of the faded glory of the Appointing chamber as Ayesha began to extinguish the lamps, Tirgit said humbly. "I've kept you from your correspondence, Lady. I know you have much to do."

Taking Tirgit's arm, Cecilia smiled, mollified, at the girl. "Well, but some of those letters have been waiting months, or years, for me. Another hour won't make a difference. And I've already read the most important ones."

Tirgit turned into Cecilia's arms and hugged her. "You have given me so much. I am so happy!"

Cecilia stroked Tirgit's hair, her nape, her shoulder in brief, light caresses. I wish I could heal Dominic as easily as I've healed this girl. I wish he could make love to me without—Not now, Cecilia.—Dominic's mental voice was brusque.—And probably not until the night before we leave.—

Cecilia saw that he was in the middle of negotiating their departure taxes with one of the customs agents. From the frustration and distaste coloring his thoughts, Cecilia realized that he had misinterpreted her inadvertent thought as a demand.

—I cry your pardon.—She projected soothing apology.—I had not meant to bespeak you.—

In reply, he showed her the Customs' Man of the Pen, crouched in the dark cargo hold of the *St. Barnabas*, which was loaded with goods in preparation for their departure for Venice. The official's stylus scratched rapidly over his wax tablets as he tallied the stacked sacks of peppercorns, cloves, dried ginger root, and nutmeg, and the wooden racks filled with sealed jars of perfume essence.

Cecilia saw Dominic's aura-wing, much restored after a steady diet of human blood, reach out and touch the forehead of the official in the first step of a coercive soothing. Then the image vanished as Dominic broke the link.

Cecilia knew she shouldn't expect him to react to her unplanned communication with a lover's ardor—but it would be nice if he could include a dollop of affection in his awareness of her. She sighed.

"What is it?" Tirgit missed little. She pulled away from their embrace, which had lasted only a few seconds.

"I wish I could make Dominic happy, too." Cecilia thought of the news in Sharibet's letter, and wondered whether the news of Michel's survival might be that gift of happiness.

Tirgit grinned. "Get him a catamite!"

Cecilia stared at her, bemused.

"He's sure to enjoy either the gift or the freeing of him. Either way, you'll have given some happiness. If not to Lord Dominic, then to the slave."

"I can't say that I'm entirely convinced by your suggestion," Cecilia said dryly. "But I will consider it."

Giggling, Tirgit added, "And if neither of them is made happy, you'll at least enjoy yourself at the sight of Lord Dominic's face when he receives your gift."

Now Cecilia laughed too, and the echo rang through the hall. The women began the climb back to the above-ground portions of the house.

At the top of the stairs, Cecilia pinched Tirgit's cheek affectionately. "Don't set your heart on this scheme, dear heart. It's a good joke, but..."

Menelaos would have laughed, and perhaps taken the youth to bed before freeing him. But Dominic might be outraged, or pleased, or he might slake his hunger outright on the youth, relieving Cecilia from her enforced celibacy. It worried her, after eight years together, not to know how he might react.

Ayesha bolted and locked the stout door behind them. A painted panel slid into place and became just another frescoed wall.

When they stepped into the courtyard, Cecilia heard the bells of the dovecote ring, announcing the arrival of a message-bearing pigeon. A few moments later the rapid slap-slap of bare feet against tile announced the appearance of Ayesha's great-grandson Tharwan. Cecilia turned to him,

holding out her hand to receive a narrow scrap of paper that had been tied around the pigeon's leg.

But Tharwan shrugged, bewildered. "There was no message, Great Lady."

Cecilia let her hand drop. "Where is the bird from?"

"Lady, it's a Baghdad bird. But Mother Sharibet and Lord Arjumand ordered all the kin to leave the city last *Shawwal*."

Cecilia returned to her chamber, bent on tackling her correspondence and her dilemma. Within an hour, Alexandria's everyday hum fell to expectant stillness, and only the little bells of the dovecotes could be heard across the wide city.

The people of the House drifted into the reception chamber, gathering in the comforting presence of their Protector. Tirgit sat at Cecilia's feet. There was the same imminence of danger as before a thunderstorm, although the sky was a faultless blue and the balmy air barely rustled the palm fronds.

And then it began, clear and ominous in the unnatural silence: a shrieking ululation of grief.

At least one of the messenger birds had carried evil news.

Every tongue began to utter its worst fears at once.

"Baghdad has fallen." "The Mongols have taken Baghdad."

"The Mongols took Baghdad and are on their way to Cairo."

"Cairo has fallen." "The Mongols are outside the gates..."

"Be silent!" Cecilia commanded, using her power to compel obedience.

—Dominic?—she inquired.

A sense of the quays came to her through their bond. Dominic, at the side of a pale and shaken Customs' Officer, was just climbing out of the lighter, surrounded by a group of the Men of the Pen, who were the senior administrators of the Mamluk government.

She pressed her question wordlessly.

—Caliph Musta'sim of Baghdad surrendered to the Mongols, and his army was massacred. Then the Caliph, obeying the orders of the Mongol khan, ordered that everyone who was not a Christian gather on the plain outside the walls, where all, including the Caliph and his family, were slaughtered.—And by sparing the Christians, does Hulagu Khan hope to ally himself to the Crusaders?—Cecilia asked.

—It seems so.—

Cecilia broke the link, and turned her attention back to the gathered kin. "Mother Sharibet was wise to evacuate the House in Baghdad," she told them. "She foresaw the destruction the Mongols would cause. The city has fallen, and most of its inhabitants were slaughtered, but our kin are safe."

Soft murmurs of relief—and concern—escaped the gathered family members. The piercing call of the *mu'adhdhin* from the neighborhood mosque interrupted them—not the normal call to daily prayer, but a signal for a nation to join in mourning.

The people of the Dar al-Warda assembled in the courtyard, then joined their neighbors in walking to the neighborhood mosque. Under the anonymity of her veil, Cecilia had leisure to think about the past and future.

Baghdad had fallen, as all cities fell in time.

Some of the Lost Apkallu had been found again. The essential miracle of reborn souls still awed her despite the millennia that had passed since Cecilia and her siblings had learned how to Transform themselves, and thus achieved divinity.

The wailing of the people of Alexandria faded to background noise as she made her decision. She would not tell Dominic about Michel. Not until she had seen the Lost one for herself.

And if she failed to convince Michel to take up his birthright ... better that Dominic did not know. He had already mourned Michel once. It would be cruel to give him hope now, only to snatch it away again if Michel proved too old to survive his Transformation, or too deeply rooted in his current life to leave it for the life of a djinn.

* * * *

The Templar Preceptory of Pézenas in Languedoc
Thursday, March 7th, AD 1258

In the dim, incense-scented coolness of the round stone chapel, two young knight-candidates knelt before the Preceptor, making their final vows to become Templars.

Michel, witnessing the oath-taking in his capacity as Marshal of the Preceptory of Pézenas, shifted uncomfortably on his hard stone seat. The throbbing ache in his thigh informed him that it would probably rain before dawn.

"...And do you also promise to God and to Our Lady Mary that you will help to conquer, with all the strength and power

God has given you, the Holy Land of Jerusalem; and that which Christians hold you will help to keep and save within your power; that you will never allow any Christian to be killed or disinherited unjustly; that you will never leave the Order for stronger or weaker, for better or worse, unless you have permission of the Master and of the convent authorities?" continued Archambaut de Montélimar, the Preceptor of Pézenas.

"Yes, sir, if it please God," both of the young knights answered in fervent unison.

Michel suppressed a sigh. Soon, these young men would depart for military duties at one of the Templar fortresses in the Holy Land. He wondered when exaltation would fade and reality set in.

Michel was too familiar with reality, each day indistinguishable from the last as he divided his time between his duties and his prayers. He would never see the Holy Land again, but the Templars had found a use for him since the disastrous Crusade in Egypt.

Three years as the Draper's assistant in the port city of Savona in Italy, three years in southern France—Occitania, as its inhabitants stubbornly persisted in naming it—first as the wine-vendor at the Preceptory of Tarascon on the Rhône, then as the loan official at the Preceptory of Alés.

For the past two years, he had served as Marshal here in Pézenas, collecting and requisitioning supplies for the fighting forces, as well as supervising the maintenance of the preceptory's buildings and stables. Rising steadily through the administrative ranks of the Order, he had built a reputation

for intelligence and efficiency, much to the relief of the craftsmen-brothers and serving-brothers, who were used to arrogant and illiterate knight-brothers.

The young knights finished taking their oaths, and Brother Archambaut gave them the ritual welcome into the Order.

"...on behalf of God and Our Lady St. Mary, and behalf of My Lord St. Peter of Rome, and our father, the pope, and all the brothers of the Temple, we welcome you to all the spiritual benefits of the house, from the beginning to the end of time, as you welcome us to be your brothers. And we promise you the bread and water and the poor clothing of the house, and much pain and suffering, for the glory of God."

It was time for Michel to invest the two new knight-brothers with their white wool mantles. He rose awkwardly with the aid of his crutch, holding the folded garments tightly against his chest. As he struggled across the smooth stone floor to the altar, he reflected on his own vows, so many years ago. He thought he had known his destiny then: expiating his sins by falling in battle.

He had never dreamed that the aftermath would include years of petty tedium, such as this week's worry about why there was a discrepancy of ten barrels between the bill of lading for a shipment of wine from Pézenas, and the bill of receipt sent from the Templar fortress in Acre.

As he fastened the first mantle around Sir Bartholomew's shoulders, whose face shone with excitement, Michel's mind was occupied with the missing wine. Had the clerk made an error in his tally? Or had the barrels been stolen en route?

Michel spoke a Paternoster as he tied the mantle's laces, then bent, ignoring the throbbing in his leg, to give the kneeling Sir Bartholomew the Kiss of Peace.

Michel then turned to Sir Stephen and repeated the sequence. Meanwhile, the part of his mind not occupied with the familiar ritual continued to gnaw at the problem. Perhaps the receiving clerk in Acre had made an error. But how could Michel verify this?

He finished his second Paternoster, kissed Sir Stephen, then returned to his bench, making room for Chaplain-Brother Giles to speak the psalm and bestow his own Kiss of Peace on the new brothers.

Finally, it was the Preceptor's turn. Archambaut, too, bestowed the Kiss of Peace, cleared his throat, and said: "Brother Bartholomew, Brother Stephen, Our Lord has led you to the fine company of the Knighthood of the Temple. You should be at great pains to ensure that you never do anything for which it would be necessary to expel you from it. We will now tell you some of those things..."

Michel let his mind drift during the familiar lecture that followed. What if he couldn't discover what had befallen the missing barrels of wine? The Templars reserved their harshest punishments for those who mismanaged or embezzled the Order's assets. Michel knew that he would not be stripped of his habit or walled up alive for the loss of a few tuns of wine, but there would be reports to file, and he would be questioned closely by his superiors. If he was found to have been careless, he would have to do penance.

Had he been careless? Dulled by the monotony of his daily life, had he failed in his duty? Michel prayed he had not.

The chapter ended, and Compline began. Michel stood and sang with the others. When the service ended, he hobbled across the rutted surface of the courtyard to the red-roofed dormitory.

When he arrived, the new knight-brothers were already there, painfully young and ignorant. He began to instruct them in the proper way to do things: Yes, it was part of the Rule to keep on shirt and lambskin braies while sleeping, so that they could dress more quickly should there be an attack. No, attacks weren't expected in France, but they followed the Rule anyway. Indeed, the oil lamps were kept lit throughout the night so that darkness might not tempt the brothers to sin. He finished his lesson with a demonstration of how to hang their mantles and tunic on one of the pegs in preparation for going to bed, and reminded them to kneel for the recitation of their Paternosters.

When he had finished with Brothers Bartholomew and Stephen, Michel hobbled to the other end of the dormitory and wearily sank down on his pallet. But despite his best efforts to sleep, Michel's thoughts returned to those cursed wine barrels.

Brother Archambaut favored kitchen duty as penance for erring knight-brothers, assigning demeaning tasks like making fires, washing bowls, and chopping garlic. Michel might even lose his habit for a week or two, and be forced eat off the floor in front of the assembled brothers at mealtimes...

He fell asleep, still worrying.

* * * *

The next day began like all the others.

When the sergeant-brother came to wake him in the chill hours before dawn for Matins, Michel fought the temptation to roll himself in his blanket and sleep just a few more minutes. As he did each day, he reminded himself that he had vowed obedience to the Order, so he must rise from his bed now.

Quickly dressing, Michel limped to the chapel in the company of the brothers, and sang the service for Matins. After a short nap, it was time for Tierce, Sext, and Prime services.

Afterwards, the brothers gathered in the refectory hall to break their fast on meat and bread, washed down with a heavily watered cup of the local wine. Today's reading was from the Book of Job:

"...and Satan answered the Lord, and said: 'Skin for skin, all that a man has will he give for his life. But put forth your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face ... '"

Michel ate and listened dutifully, averting his eyes from the still-shining faces of Brothers Stephen and Bartholomew.

Then it was time to grab his crutch and limp upstairs to the sunlit scriptorium that served as the preceptory's business office. He settled himself on his stool, picked up a newly-sharpened goose quill, and prepared to take up today's burden of correspondence.

His initial joy at being allowed to learn Italian, Greek, and Arabic had dwindled after too many years spent writing on

endless stacks of limp, oft-erased parchment, rubbed to a uniform gray smudge with pumice and cut into squares of varying sizes. He was still allowed to wear the white mantle of a knight-brother, but he was little better than a clerk.

With a sigh, Michel looked at the notes he had scribbled on a wax tablet, took a fresh sheet of parchment, and began preparing a letter of credit for a local merchant to sign and seal.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen. In the year of the Incarnation 1258, March 7th. I, Peter Vitallus, a merchant of Béziers, do acknowledge and confess to you, Brother Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, Marshal of the Preceptory of Pézenas, that I have bought, had, and received from you, on behalf of the Order of the Knights Templar, six loads of cotton less thirty-four pounds, renouncing, etc. As the price of that cotton I owe the Order one hundred and six pounds of the mixed money now current in Marseilles which make two hundred and twelve of Raymond's pounds. This one hundred and six pounds of mixed money, twenty-six pounds per mark by weight, I promise by this agreement to pay to the Order. Payment will be made on Michaelmas of the September next coming...

As he waited for the ink to dry, Michel propped his bearded chin on his hand, and stared out the unglazed window at the low, brush-covered hills that surrounded the Preceptory. A bar of sunlight entered through the window, and moved across the clean-swept floor with the inexorable slowness of his days.

From the tilting yard, the sound of horses' hooves pounding packed earth, the clash of weapon on weapon, and the shouts of men engaged in cavalry training echoed off whitewashed walls.

As Marshal, Michel was nominally responsible for the military and security matters of the Preceptory as well as the supplies. If not for his injury, he would have been the one instructing the Order's recent recruits in the art of maneuvering their horses in squadron formation. Instead, Michel was imprisoned in the scriptorium while his squire, Aumery, led the knight-brothers in a mock melee.

Michel rubbed his leg. The pain in his thigh and hip had never abated. He could perform his morning exercises sparring at swords with Aumery, but his balance was uncertain. Riding a horse for any period of time was agonizing. When he journeyed from place to place he was forced to do so in a litter like some pampered noblewoman.

The melee in the courtyard ended with shouts of laughter. Aumery's raised voice dispensed both praise and correction. Michel forced his attention back to the list on the wax tablet. He crossed off an item, took a sheet of parchment, and applied himself to his next task, though the phrases all ran together.

Finally, the Vespers bell rang. Michel gratefully put down his pen, rubbing his eyes and stretching. His shoulders and neck ached from hunching over the tall, slanted desk. The bar of sunlight had crept across the floor and now hung on the opposite wall of the scriptorium, having darkened in the course of the afternoon from white-gold to copper. A stack of

neatly inscribed accounts, reports, and correspondence directed to his superiors attested to Michel's efforts.

Tomorrow, there would be more of the same, and the day after that. No—wait. The day after tomorrow was Sunday, and the following day he was ordered to travel to Béziers to receive twelve destriers owed as rent on one of the Templar-owned estates outside the town.

Michel shivered as he left the scriptorium.

On his first visit to Béziers, he had nearly fainted from shock when he arrived at the Cathedral to meet the Bishop. The plaza was the same one that had haunted his dreams for years, although the church looked very different from the building in his dream. Just being in the city made his heart jump and his hands sweat. And nightmares racked him for weeks afterward, of a desperate flight through a smoke-filled city, a valiant stand made at the doors of a smaller, older-looking cathedral, and then, defeat and death at the hands of a howling mob.

No, he did not like Béziers at all. It was a cursed city.

In the chapel, the soothing Vespers hymns restored his equanimity. He was not prepared to hear himself ordered to report to the Preceptor's office after supper.

Surely it was too soon to be assigned penance for the missing wine! Michel had not yet verified the clerk's tallies against the bill of lading. He fretted all through the meal.

As he entered the Preceptor's austere chamber after supper, however, he was surprised.

The gray-bearded Archambaut greeted him with a warm smile. "Brother Michel, I received good news from today's

messenger. May I offer my congratulations to the new Preceptor of Ypres?"

As Michel gaped, Archambaut offered him a folded parchment with the official Templar seal dangling from a white silk ribbon. "I will be sorry to see you leave us, Brother Michel. You have performed your duties as our Marshal most excellently. But the current Preceptor in Ypres, Nicolas de Pirri, is ordered to the fortress of Margat in the County of Tripoli, and they needed an able knight-brother to take his place immediately."

"On behalf of God," Michel accepted the parchment with his head bowed, numb with disbelief.

"Go ahead. Read it," commanded Archambaut.

The contents were brief, sealed with the signet of the Master of the Order, Thomas Berard, who had succeeded Renaud de Vichiers almost two years ago.

Having heard good report of the Marshal of Pézenas, Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, the said knight-brother is hereby ordered to appear at the House of the Templars in Ypres by the Feast of St. George in the fourth week of April 1258, and there to assume the duties of Preceptor until such time as the Master of the Order shall direct him otherwise.

"You have family in Ypres, have you not?" asked Archambaut.

"Yes," Michel replied, still reeling. "My sister Mathilde, a widow, lives there with her daughter. I haven't seen her since I departed on Crusade."

"Just remember your vows, Brother Michel—no kissing your sister, and no home-cooked meals ... unless you invite

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

another brother to dine with you." The twinkle under Archambaut's bushy gray brows belied his stern words.

"Of course, sir. My sister is an excellent cook—it should be easy to persuade one of the brothers in Ypres to accompany me as a chaperone." Michel gave the Preceptor of Pézenas one of his rare smiles. He could already hear the familiar, guttural dialect of the Low Countries; already taste the thick ales.

His heart sang, home, home, home.

Chapter Twenty-two

"I will rise then and go about the city; in the streets and crossings I will seek him whom my heart loves."—*Song of Songs* 3:2

St. Martin's Church, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Feast of St. George, Tuesday, April 23rd, AD 1258

"He's late!" Blanche whispered fiercely to her mother as they both genuflected before the altar. Spring sunlight filtered through the clerestory windows over the new choir, its high columns like the trunks of tall white trees. They went to stand in their accustomed places near the thick pillars of the old section of the church. "You said he would be here!"

"His time is not his own, sweeting. Now stand up straight, or the priest will take you for a heathen."

"No he won't! Not when my uncle's a Templar!" Blanche's coif slid half off her head as she craned to look back toward the entrance. Her Uncle Michel was coming!

"Don't be impertinent!" her mother warned, but the admonition was softened by her quickly-suppressed smile.

Blanche squeezed her mother's warm hand for a moment, then Maman straightened Blanche's coif, forcibly aligning her shoulders to face her toward the sacred Presence. "That's better. Now behave, or I'll have to take you home."

"Oh, Maman, you wouldn't?" Blanche bounced anxiously.

"Behave!"

"Yes, Maman!" Blanche brought her hands together and bowed her head in prayer. "Dear God, Heavenly Father,

please bring Uncle Michel soon. I want to see him! Please, God. You wouldn't want me to be unhappy, would you? So please bring him soon."

She heard the murmuring start by the entrance doors, and rejoiced that God had heard her and answered so quickly.

"There he is!"

"That's him, the new Templar Preceptor."

"Mmmm. What a shame he's a monk."

"What a shame he's crippled—"

Blanche went on tiptoe, trying to see past the adults around her, but there were too many and they were all too tall. She only heard sounds: clink, thunk, clink, thunk.

In the next moment, Uncle Michel broke through the crowd and she was able to breathe again. Even after all her daydreams, she was not disappointed, seeing him for the first time in the light from the altar.

His short hair and his long beard shone like gold. His mantle was white, with a big red fork-armed cross, and the toes of his shoes were rounded, not pointed like a regular knight's. As he took a step closer, she realized what caused the clinking sound—his plain iron spurs striking the flagstones.

The thunk came from his wooden crutch. Her heart constricted. She felt such pain on his behalf that she wanted to cry, but he was approaching and she knew she had to be brave.

He stopped, right in front of Maman, and looked so happy, like the inside of his face was full of light. He smiled at her—he had all his teeth, too!—and said, "Mathilde."

He didn't say any more than that, but Blanche could tell that he wanted to. His expression was funny, as if he were hungry, or about to cry.

"Michou," Maman replied, her eyes shiny with tears. "It's so good to see you again. This is my daughter, Blanche."

Blanche knew she was supposed to curtsy now. But she wanted to jump up and hug him and have him enfold her in his arms, and smile at her and kiss her, like the papas of her friends would kiss their daughters, but he was a Templar and couldn't touch women. Not even his sister. Not even his almost-ten-year-old niece.

He turned to her and Blanche felt an odd jolt, as if she had met him before, somewhere ... She lost her train of thought when Maman gave her a shake, and Blanche remembered to curtsy. She bent her knees, looking down at the stone floor, but nothing could dissipate the sense of instant attachment to her uncle. None of Maman's stories had done him justice.

"This is my squire, Brother Aumery," Uncle Michel said.

Blanche spared the red-haired man dressed in black robes a quick look. He wasn't nearly as handsome as Uncle Michel, but he winked at her and gave her a friendly smile.

She was blushing as the priest entered. The various conversations around them faded to whispers and then to silence as everyone turned to face the altar. The priest, who wore a green brocade surplice thickly embroidered with silver thread, stood with his back to the congregation and intoned, *"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen. Introibo ad altare Dei."*

Everyone crossed themselves, and the Mass began.

As the worshippers chanted responses to the priest's next prayers, Uncle Michel whispered to Maman, "I can't tell you how good it is to be home."

"I prayed for you every day. And for Roland." Maman's hands were clasped so tightly that her fingertips were bloodless white.

Uncle Michel winced. "I'm so sorry I couldn't bring him home too."

"All is as God wills," said Maman, but Blanche saw the tears roll down her cheeks. "At least *you've* come home. But your poor leg!"

Everyone around them beat their breast, repeating, "*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,*" and Blanche hurried to duplicate the gesture.

Uncle Michel's eyelids flickered, and he looked up toward the altar as if trying to concentrate, but his gaze came back to Maman after just a breath.

Blanche felt the same way about him. She spent the entire creed, gospel, and offertory memorizing his face—so like Maman's—his broad shoulders, the elegance of his fingers, callused from sword and pen alike. Surely he was the most handsome man on earth!

As everyone knelt for the sacrament and Maman set down their pillows for kneeling on the hard floor, she saw Uncle Michel move his crutch forward, to give himself better balance. But too many people crowded nearby and he couldn't put the crutch out as far as he needed to.

The knee of his bad leg bent. It hurt him to put his weight on it, she could tell from the way muscles tightened in his jaw

and around his eyes. Then he teetered on the bad knee, hanging onto his crutch as he brought his good leg down.

But somebody bumped into the crutch before he got his other knee under him, and he swayed, off-balance. He began to fall and, without thinking, she grabbed his elbow to steady him. Her effort gave him the balance he needed to collect himself.

Some of the people around her snickered, but most of them smiled and nodded at her.

Uncle Michel smiled too, and her heart melted. He made the sign of the cross over her head, and said, "Bless you, my child, for your help," in his deep wonderful voice.

Brother Aumery whispered loudly to the person standing next to him, "He was wounded in Egypt, you know, in the last crusade. Sacrificed the use of his leg for the Holy Land."

"Blanche! You know he could get into trouble for touching you!" Maman pulled her away from Uncle Michel. But Blanche scarcely noticed her mother's disapproval, because she had learned something marvelous about him.

Uncle Michel smelled like a pine forest in summer, not sweaty and gamy like most men.

Blanche closed her eyes and prayed. "Please, God, let him smile at me again." Through the rest of the Mass, that was the only prayer she made.

* * * *

Ca' Dalle Rose, Venice—Feast of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, Monday, June 2nd, AD 1259

Dominic prowled through the dark hold of the galley as he checked the stowed goods against the list in his head. Bales of bed linens, crates of kitchen utensils, the ungainly shapes of disassembled furniture, rolled tapestries, packed clothing, stored foods, and the bulk of the load: pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and myrrh.

The scent of myrrh, pungent and clean, reminded him of Michel. The memory was a splinter he couldn't tease out. Nothing else had moved him so—not even finding Tirgit, though she was a good girl, and a charming companion for Cecilia.

He finished his inventory. Cecilia would need most of the goods for her journey and subsequent stay at the newest House of the Rose in Flanders.

Since they had departed Alexandria in March, having stayed an extra year to ensure the immediate threat of a Mongol attack had abated, Cecilia had been talking about visiting the newest Houses in Flanders and the Hansa, to ensure they were getting along successfully.

Dominic scaled the sturdy wooden ladder, and lifted himself up through the hatchway onto the deck. The sunshine, after the close darkness of the hold, was blinding. The captain of the galley nodded respectfully. Dominic could only make out the motion. He returned the gesture, and stepped out of the way of the boarding passengers.

He saw Cecilia come aboard, the most important passenger and the last to board, and wondered if she expected him to display some regret at her departure. If so, he didn't feel it. He couldn't show it.

The kin of the Venetian House gathered on their private dock and lined the second-floor loggia, waving and calling farewells.

Tirgit followed Cecilia onto the galley, self-importantly carrying a casket containing the jewels her mistress refused to part with for the duration of this adventure—a tamer one, by far, than Cecilia's travels of the past nine years.

Dominic approached his consort, now seated on a bench on the captain's deck above the rowers' aisle. She was shading her eyes, despite wearing a broad hat with a veil. As he came close, the captain moved away to give them a last private moment before the departure.

"Everything is safely stowed," he said. "And the weather should remain calm—"

"We're only crossing the lagoon. I'll be sleeping in Padova tonight." Her voice was sweet, but he caught the cool undertone.

"I wish you a good journey." It was an inadequate farewell, but nothing else occurred to him, other than to beg her leave to search more widely for a reborn Michel, and she had already refused him once. He would not humble himself to ask again.

She extended her hand and he kissed her fingertips. She stroked his shaved cheek in a caress that said more than speech, even mind to mind. Then she withdrew her hand and set it gracefully in her lap, looking as calm and beautiful as a stone idol.

"Cecilia..."

"I hope to send for you before the Alpine passes close for the winter."

He stiffened. So, the separation would not be a permanent one? He had thought that perhaps her dissatisfaction with his limited abilities might free him from having to kill for her pleasure. "As you will."

He had thought his tone neutral, but she turned her head. Impossible not to feel the cold hurt that emanated from her.

"I know you don't believe me," she said, in the Ionian Greek that had been Menelaos' mother tongue, "but I have your interests at heart. And those of the House. Oh, Mene—Dominic..." She broke off.

"*Kyria*," he said uncomfortably, then returned to Italian. "May we meet again."

He stepped back, but not before smelling the salt of her tears, though the veil concealed her expression.

Tirgit stood very still at Cecilia's side. He held out his hand to her, and she raised it to her forehead. "Remember me." She continued then with her own spontaneity, kissing his palm and whispering, "You have been as a father to me all the years of my life worth living. I will miss you."

Dominic patted her cheek. "I know you'll take good care of Cecilia. May we meet again."

Tirgit's smile was watery and forced. Surprising her—and himself—he touched his lips to her forehead in a brief kiss.

Then he turned to the captain, nodded briskly, and walked down the short gangplank onto the house's dock.

The director of the oarsmen began his count, and the oars snapped down. The rose-bannered galley slipped away from

the dock, merging into the traffic. Soon, it was out of sight around the curve of the canal.

Dominic breathed more freely. She was gone. Nerving himself up to deal with her appetite every day had been more fatiguing than all his years with Sharibet.

He turned back into the house as the family drifted away, returning to their appointed tasks. Leave-takings were a much safer excitement than riots or sieges.

Reaching his room, he picked up a book of Arthurian tales and sat at his writing table, intending to spend a few hours reading in blessed solitude. But after a few minutes he put it down again, leaned back in his chair, folded his hands behind his head, and contemplated the painted beams of the ceiling. No more duties today. He was free to imagine what he might do to please himself.

His thoughts stalled. He remembered what Menelaos had enjoyed, but what pleased *him*? Play the lute? He had no audience. Read the book he had chosen? He had read it before, along with all the other books in this House. Go to a tavern? He had no friends.

Find Michel's next incarnation.

He closed his eyes. He spent most of his time being efficient and numb. Why did he suddenly hurt so much? All these years, yet the wound bled inexhaustibly.

Michel had gone into the Underworld nearly a decade ago. Perhaps he had been reborn by now, but he might not be found in this lifetime.

Look at Tirgit. No member of the House had died near her mountain village, yet she had been reborn there. Michel's new

incarnation could be a girl or boy any age up to eight years old. He wouldn't remember who he had been, but he might feel he wasn't where he was supposed to be. He could be living under any circumstances, rich or poor, beloved or abused. Like Tirgit, Michel-who-was might at this moment be a slave—perhaps even in this very city—ready to be purchased by a panderer or a bawd...

Dominic groaned. He knew what he wanted to do, even as he knew how hopeless his quest might be.

* * * *

The Rialto was busy, even in the sweltering early-summer heat. Dominic recognized most of the traders and merchants as he walked through the overflowing spaces.

He walked further into precincts strange to him. Because of their secrets, the House of the Rose did not keep slaves. They rescued their own when they found them, of course. Once family, always family, no matter how they were reborn.

There were several *fondaci* dedicated to the slave trade, each a two-story building with its separate courtyard. In the heat, red and white striped awnings protected buyers and merchandise alike.

Skilled domestic slaves could be purchased at the Ca' Antico, Dominic discovered. Did he need a concubine? Skilled hairdresser? Fine seamstress? Musician? Clever-fingered masseuse?

But Dominic wanted only to see children.

The master trader, as sleek and well-groomed as the human wares on display, made apologetic yet firm denials of

Dominic's request to see his newly-arrived stock, until Dominic used his power to coerce him. Then the trader showed Dominic through a private door into another set of rooms where unkempt slaves, not yet prepared for sale, awaited their fate.

Dominic scanned the faces of the girls, most surprised, some apprehensive. One or two of them, the best-looking and most skilful, might cost as much as a hundred bezants.

None of them was young enough.

He shook his head, let the trader escort him back to the front door, and released the coercion.

The next building was the Ca' d' Schiavoni, the house of the 'big slaves'—untrained—and therefore much less costly. Dominic looked over a half-dozen fenced enclosures containing ten to twenty dispirited men each. These slaves, captured from lands north of Venice, were destined for the worst sort of heavy manual labor in mines or on farms, and they knew it. The luckiest of them, sold to Muslims, might become guardians of cemeteries or—once castrated—harem guards. They were cheap, expendable, wretched, and all adults.

The last *fondaco*, the Ca' d' Veneto, was much older than the Ca' Antico, and in much worse repair. Plaster had fallen away from the walls, leaving pale pink brickwork showing like scars. The awnings here were tattered and faded. This was the house of children, the sons and daughters of the slaves in the Ca' d' Schiavoni.

There were ten boys in the courtyard, taking the air under the watchful guardianship of a tall man with a whip. He never

used it, but it was potently visible. The boys ran and tumbled with frenetic energy.

Dominic looked them over closely, but none of them noticed him.

The master of this *fondaco*, introducing himself as Graziano d'Veneto, had the wide shoulders of a former galley oarsman. He cordially offered Dominic food and drink and all the services his house could provide.

"I want to see children under the age of nine years," Dominic told him.

"Are you looking for something in particular? I have a register if you'd like to look through it..."

No, Dominic didn't want to look at a register. He was tired already from the exercise of his power, and pain had settled above his eyes. He understood he was acting the part of a fool.

What did he think to accomplish by conducting a search without Seer's Eyes? But what if he gave up the hunt and didn't *look*? Surely there would be some spark of recognition—or *something*—when he found the child who had once been Honoria. He had recognized Tirgit, after all.

"I want to see children under the age of nine years," Dominic repeated firmly.

The trader bowed and conducted Dominic through the rooms of the *fondaco*.

The children in the girl's section ranged from toddlers to teens. Adolescent girls cared for the younger ones. Some girls glanced up curiously when he passed. Some cried. Some played with dolls made out of sticks and scraps. One or two

watched him hopefully. None triggered his sense of recognition.

Graziano next led him to the boys' section. Two shiploads of captives were on hand, awaiting favorable tides before being sent to the Egypt. The healthiest and strongest would wind up as Mamluks.

He saw sad boys, boys bored and terrified at once, defiant boys, and a few beautiful youths certainly not destined for the army. Most of them refused to meet his eyes. But in the last room, one boy did look at him. He looked twice, in fact, starting as if in recognition, dawning hope quickly veiled by tremulous eyelids.

Dominic stopped, intrigued. He didn't feel any tug of recognition. But then he hadn't recognized Michel or Roland by sight, either. Only a taste of their blood had revealed their identities. "That one. I'll take him."

A bow, a grateful phrase, and Graziano led Dominic to the fondaco's office to complete the sale.

After desultory bargaining, Dominic handed over four silver piccoli, and the clerk wrote out a receipt for the slave boy, called Nebogu. As Dominic accepted the receipt, an attendant appeared, towing a hurriedly-scrubbed Nebogu in a new tunic.

The boy beamed at Dominic. "Master!" he said clearly in Italian, then chattered rapidly in some other tongue.

Dominic thought he might puzzle out Nebogu's words if he had the time to match them against his memories. But before he could pin down any meanings, the slave trader slapped the boy and ordered, "Quiet!"

The boy cringed.

Dominic seized d'Veneto by the hair and administered a calculated slap, using exactly the same force the slaver had used. "This boy belongs to me now," he said as Graziano covered his face with his hand. "If you touch him again you'll regret it."

The man puffed up with anger, opened his mouth to spew hot words, and then hesitated. His thoughts visibly spiraled between 'I'll kill him!' and 'My God! He'll kill me where I stand!' Fear won out over anger. D'Veneto bowed and babbled apologies.

Dominic ignored him. He placed the receipt in his belt pouch. "Come with me," he said slowly and clearly to the boy.

"Yes, Master!"

The only thing that marred Dominic's exit was Nebogu's gob of spittle, precisely aimed to land on the door sill.

"None of that!" Dominic warned.

"Yes, Master!" Nebogu said. He had already done it, anyway.

Dominic kept the boy in the corner of his eye as he returned to the gondola, hoping to discern if his walk or his gestures were familiar. Nebogu wasn't a handsome child. He had a round head, big ears, and wide brown eyes. Even the boy's happiness was unfamiliar, pouring from him like heat from a fire.

Piero Contarini stood on a canal dock, jabbing his elbow into Antonio Michiel's ribs and laughing snidely. Nine years had not changed Contarini much, except to enlarge his figure. He pretended not to notice Dominic's gaze as he said loud

enough for the whole quay to hear, "Would you look at him? His wife's not even gone a day and he's already bought himself a catamite."

Dominic sent a fist of air toward him. It dissipated as it traveled the distance between them, but it was still strong enough to topple Contarini into the stinking water of the canal.

Antonio Michiel tottered for a moment, too.

Dominic watched with satisfaction, Nebogu with wide eyes.

Michiel threw himself forward, landing on elbows and knees. Dominic accepted his prostration, then signed to Nebogu to approach and assist him to rise.

Contarini gave bubbling shrieks from the water. The gondoliers rushed to extend their oars to him. He climbed, sopping and filthy, out of the canal. His murderous gaze focused on Dominic. Then Michiel, limping, led him away.

"You pushed him!" Nebogu whispered delightedly. "How?"

Dominic smiled. "I never touched him. We were far away."

"You did!" Nebogu insisted.

At a miniscule shake of Dominic's head, Nebogu closed his mouth.

"You are a great..." Nebogu struggled to find the word in that he wanted. He settled for an expansive gesture.

Dominic boarded the House of the Rose's gondola in triumph.

* * * *

Maryam goggled as Dominic entered the House, Nebogu in tow.

"I'm going to Raise and Name him," Dominic told her.

"It is good to meet again, but he doesn't look old enough to receive his memories," Maryam said. "You are certain he is one of us?"

Dominic didn't answer. He wasn't certain, yet. He only hoped, in a painful way that left him breathless.

Nebogu stared loose-jawed at the painted ivy burgeoning on plastered walls. The Isfahani carpet under his bare feet seemed to be a further occasion of bliss. He chirped greetings at all the family members who passed by on the stairs, ostensibly on legitimate errands, but actually to inspect him.

It was laughable how quickly the word spread. Even before Dominic reached his chamber, almost everyone had caught a glimpse of the boy. Nebogu, on his part, repaid all the interest with broad smiles.

When they reached Dominic's chamber, Nebogu studied everything—the bed, the desk, the lutes and books—with frank admiration. He took deep breaths, evidently gratified at the scent of roses that permeated the house.

Dominic closed the window shutters against the reflections that danced with the canal water's ceaseless movement. In the gloom he noticed Maryam standing anxiously in the doorway.

"You're going to do it *now*?" Her hand covered her mouth as if she didn't dare say more.

"Why not? Better to find out before he learns anything." Surely, given that initial start of recognition, Nebogu was of the House...

"Has he consented?"

Dominic glowered. "I consent for him."

Maryam trembled, but she said, "If Simon Major were still alive—"

"Leave us!"

Maryam made a dismayed noise and stepped back into the hall. She closed the door, muttering, "May you remember him."

"Remove your tunic," he commanded the boy, who had visibly wilted during Dominic's exchange with Maryam.

Nebogu started. "Master?"

Dominic tugged at the cheap material. "Off!" When there was no move toward obedience, he ripped the tunic at the high neck and peeled it away.

Nebogu's stare held more shock than fear, but there was enough of the latter to send tremors along his skinny limbs, now fully revealed.

"Go sit there." Dominic pointed. It was a test, and they both knew it.

Nebogu had very few choices, and all of them were bad. He moved jerkily and climbed the steps to the high bed. There he hunched, bitter resentment distorting his features.

Dominic's lips curled, realizing how quickly he had fallen from savior to savager. He thought about reassuring the boy, but knew that he wouldn't be believed under the circumstances.

Soon he would *know*. He savored the moment of balance between past and future, fully alive to the possibilities of pleasure—or pain.

Nebogu began to cry from the tension. He wiped the tears trickling from the corners of his eyes, then discovered something engrossing about the floorboards. He focused on them so intently that when Dominic sat down next to him his whole body twanged like a bowstring.

Dominic clasped the back of the boy's head, holding the fragile skull with his fingers while his thumb found a frantic pulse point in the thin neck.

He touched his lips to soft skin, and bit down. Nebogu yelped and struggled as blood leapt into Dominic's mouth and his senses exploded as if struck by lightning. He allowed himself to be swept along in the current of Nebogu's memories.

Sunlight slants in columns through whispering pine trees. Dust sparkles like stars but the birds are silent. He imagines he does not hear the screaming coming from his village or the sound of hunters' hoofbeats in the fields beyond this forest. He even dreams of escape ... but they catch him anyway.

Dominic continued to drink, rummaging through bits and pieces of Nebogu's lives, searching for any memories he recognized.

Cold snow, dazzling sunshine, the rush of wind as the sled careens down the hill's face ... men shouting and killing a bear with spears ... in dim firelight, a thin, hollow-cheeked woman on a pallet of furs slowly raises her skirt...

Still nothing. Dominic dug with all his powers for the earliest memories. Hot wind across a savanna. A lion's scent upwind. Gazelle spoor underfoot. Family walking all around him. His stomach growls. A baby bawls...

Dominic pulled away from Nebogu's limp body, blood rushing like the sea in his ears.

He held a dam of air against the wound in the boy's throat. Nebogu had lost consciousness, his eyelids pearlescent in the gloom.

Dominic tried not to think, tried not to feel, but he couldn't escape the ruin of his hopes. He had risked the possibility that Nebogu might be a stranger, but he had been so certain of his intuition, and that Nebogu was one of the Lost of the House, perhaps even Apkallu.

Dominic bent over Nebogu. His body sang with pain, his blood throbbed with it. Knives tore out his heart, great beasts trod his bones, the emptiness at his core ached. Pure need, it didn't care what fed it. It *wanted*—

His fingers twitched against warm flesh. The boy had charmed him falsely, learning by demonstration the most dangerous secret of the House. His memories had proven him a stranger to the House. And many in Venice would understand his language. Nebogu must be disposed of quietly.

Dark temptations offered him release, respite, repletion.

The skinny throat was under his mouth again. Dominic felt himself weightless as he dissolved the bandage of air.

Blood flowed into him, salty-sweet, and he drank it, savoring its heat and life. Only a few deep swallows, and the boy's heart thundered. Dominic drew harder, fighting protective reflexes which wanted to shunt the remaining blood to the body's core.

The flow of blood faltered, the bond to life broke, and white radiant light wiped Dominic's consciousness away.

* * * *

He floated, dreaming, completely satiated, until the wet pungency of urine penetrated his stupor.

He had fallen back onto the bed, the boy's body a slight weight on his chest. Nebogu's last revenge stained his drawers and the bed covers, clammy under his thighs.

Dominic was too overwhelmed to feel disgust. For those few moments he had been free. Free of desire, free of loneliness, free of doubts.

He took a shaky breath and came back to himself.

He sat up and shifted the boy's body onto the bed. Dragging the damp cover and the corpse onto the floor, Dominic removed his ruined clothes, and tossed them onto the heap. He cleaned himself, donned fresh garments, and threw open the shutters. The tide had turned, freshening the lagoon.

Dominic smiled as he remembered Piero Contarini, fetid and fouled from the canal. He might die, too, from a fever brought on by the polluted water.

Dominic began to think again. He had things he could do, things he should do. His holiday was over. He had not found Michel, but he had found peace, for a while. It would be enough, until he found Michel again.

There was a small crowd on the other side of his chamber door. Maryam, Simon Minor, and Simon Minor's wife, Cosima.

The senior members of the family. Their hopeful expressions changed to dismay as they looked into his chamber.

"Lord—?" Maryam started the question, but he cut her off.

"He was not one of us."

Maryam caught sight of what lay under the pile of crumpled bed linens and clothes. "You *killed* him?"

Dominic took a step forward and they all stepped back, away from him. Dominic kept walking. He wanted to leave the house for a while, and go somewhere where the weight of memory did not burden all within.

"Lord? What shall we do with—"

He said over his shoulder, "Whatever you want. I don't care. He had no Name."

He didn't look back to see their reactions. It didn't matter. Nothing did, except finding Michel.

Chapter Twenty-three

"For amen I say to you, if you have faith like a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Remove from here'; and it will remove. And nothing will be impossible to you."—

Matthew 17:19

Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Saturday, September 20th, AD 1259

The travelers entered Ypres through the fortified Lille Gate as the brief, gray autumn afternoon darkened into night. As they rode through muddy streets lined with gabled brick houses and the occasional mansion surrounded by a garden, Cecilia allowed herself to look forward to a hot bath and a clean bed. Along the roads from Padova, where there wasn't a House of the Rose, the inns had been passable, with one or two unfortunate exceptions, but all required that travelers share their beds with strangers, sometimes packing as many as six guests per bed.

It had taken nearly four months to make the journey overland from Venice to Ypres, stopping at each House along the route to perform Raisings and Namings for those adolescents who had come of age since her last visit. A few of the young men so Raised had come with her to serve as apprentices in the Ypres House, known here as the Rosenhuis.

Now, finally arrived at her destination, Cecilia was nearly overwhelmed with the smells of manure, woodsmoke, spiced meat pies, and the pungent reek of a dyeworks somewhere

close by. The deep music of the Vesper bells resounded through her bones. First a single bell, then a second church took up the summons, a third, and a distant fourth, until it seemed that the very bricks of the city urged the faithful to prayer.

Vespers was the end of the guild-mandated workday. The streets quickly became crowded with apprentices, weavers, spinners, and dyers, either leaving their workshops and heading to their homes, or leaving their homes to visit with friends. Soon, curfew would empty the muddy streets of all but the scavenging dogs, cats, and pigs.

Fortunately the Rosenhuis was near the Lille Gate, situated across from St. James's Church in the Street of Roses. Cecilia wearily dismounted in the cobbled courtyard as one of her outriders strode to the thick oaken door and announced their arrival to the porter.

Tirgit slid off her mule with a loud groan, rubbing her backside. "Thou heavy-footed afreet!" she scolded in Arabic, then switched to her painfully learned Flemish. "My mistress, is our journey truly at an end?"

"I pray so," Cecilia answered, dismounting herself as a low door opened on the far side of the courtyard, and several flaxen-haired stableboys trotted out to take charge of horses, mules, and the baggage wagon.

The Rosenhuis was a new building, three stories high, with a steep tiled roof broken by little window gables, smooth gray stone walls, and arched windows glittering with dozens of round, thick, green-glass panes. Half the courtyard was

planted with Sharibet's finest rose varieties, still gloriously in bloom despite the approach of autumn.

Then a crowd of people poured through the front door to greet them. To Cecilia's dismay, all of the retainers of this House appeared to be golden-haired Flemings, though their manners were impeccably deferential. Only Yusuf al-Warda, the master of the house, and his wife and daughters were Sharibet's descendants. They waited at the door for her, looking like sober, prosperous burghers in their best clothing.

Yusuf greeted her with a low bow. "Welcome to the Rosenhuis, Lady Cecilia. Please come inside."

She and Tirgit stepped into a tiled entrance hall, gloomy in the dusk but impeccably clean and smelling of roasted meat and beeswax candles.

Yusuf bowed again, and spoke in Arabic. "I am known here as Josef de la Rose, but my True Name is Enki-am-dir. May I present my wife, Fausta, and my daughters, Marie and Katherine? May you remember them."

"It is good to meet again, Enki Prospers You," Cecilia said, then smiled at the two little girls who stood hand-in-hand, staring up at her. They looked about four and six-years-old. Her smile faded as she looked at their auras. They had not been Raised and Named in a previous life. New to the House, then.

Fausta stepped forward. Her golden-eyed beauty contrasted oddly with the starched linen wimple and embroidered woolen gown of a Flemish merchant's wife. She murmured, "Lady, it is good to meet again. You yourself first Named me in the reign of Caesar Antoninus Pius."

"It is good to meet again, Fausta. And this is Tirgit," Cecilia said. "Named Lal-Hamun. She is one of us, though she wandered far before she was Found."

"It is good to meet again," Tirgit said.

"Welcome home," Fausta said in a hurry, hardly looking at her. "I'm so sorry for the poor welcome, Lady Cecilia. We're short-handed here. My mother, may she be remembered, passed into the Underworld last year, and my husband's brother and his wife went to Antwerp to set up a House there. Our apprentices went with them, and there are no maids of age from here to Marseilles."

"Mama, what are you saying?" the six-year-old demanded in Flemish.

A flutter of eyelashes revealed Fausta's embarrassment. "My daughters were born here, and they have no Arabic, I'm afraid. I'm doing my best, but it has been ... difficult to keep to the old ways."

"You should start them on it soon, if you wish them to do well in the House," Cecilia warned. "They'll need it, should they live to be Raised and given Names."

Fausta's eyes closed briefly, as if hearing worst-feared news. Then she opened them and gave a professionally welcoming smile. "We are honored to serve you, Lady. May I show you to your chamber?"

Cecilia mulled over the prospects for her visit as she followed Fausta and her daughters up a flight of stairs framed with a fantastically carved and polished banister. With only locals serving this House, and even its daughters aliens, she might have to spend months carefully playing the role of a

virtuous merchant's widow, with only Tirgit, a couple of the new apprentices, Josef, and Fausta privy to her true nature. Unless she had come on a fool's errand, in which case she would go south to spend the winter at a better-staffed House.

At least the master and mistress of this House knew their duty to her. After the public welcome and the assignment of a suite of rooms, servants bearing firewood, a wooden tub and buckets of boiling water appeared. While one laid and lit a fire in the fireplace, others sprinkled the tub with sweet herbs, mixed hot water and cold, then vanished with admirable grace.

Cecilia shed her mud-spattered garments and lowered herself into the hot water. She closed her eyes blissfully and leaned her head against the edge of the round tub, letting the heat soak into her bones.

Tirgit bustled around for a few moments, unpacking clean garments and piling more wood on the fire. Then she unpinned Cecilia's hair, scooped soft, perfumed soap from a bowl, and began to massage Cecilia's scalp. After a few minutes, Tirgit began to work the lather through the rest of Cecilia's hair.

"You should join me," Cecilia said, sleepily, sitting up and tilting back her head to allow Tirgit to rinse her hair with warm water from a pitcher.

Tirgit scooped up more soap in a washcloth, and began to lather Cecilia's neck and shoulders. "Thank you, but I fear it would scandalize Fausta's servants."

The cloth moved lower, gently scrubbing Cecilia's sensitive breasts, and she arched her back, pleased. "Probably," she

murmured, raising her arms. It was tempting to simply fall asleep in the hot water. "But you must bathe once I'm finished here." Cecilia reluctantly stood and allowed Tirgit to finish lathering and rinsing her.

Then she climbed out of the tub, feeling each of the hundreds of miles of horseback travel imprinted in her aching muscles, and stood before the roaring fire.

A knock sounded on the door as Tirgit was drying Cecilia with clean linen towels that smelled of cedar. Fausta appeared with a tray bearing a jeweled goblet and a flagon smelling of fresh pig's blood. "The Lady does us great honor," she said, bowing. She set the tray down carefully on the table by the bed. "If this refreshment does not please—" she rolled back her embroidered sleeve. "You would be most welcome."

Cecilia heard the woman's heart beating with excitement—or fear. She wrapped a towel modestly around her, then stepped forward and took Fausta's cold hand in her own. "That will not be necessary, but I thank you for your courtesy."

Fausta's pulse jumped, then began to slow. It had been fear, then, for this daughter of the House with only a few remembered lifetimes, and no regular contact with the djinni.

"I will leave you now," said Fausta, bowing deeply. "You have but to command, and it will be done, Lady."

"The bath was good," Cecilia said. "If you would send up another bucket of hot water for Tirgit?"

"Of course." Fausta backed out of the room.

Cecilia drained the goblet quickly and served herself the remainder from the flagon before it could congeal. Then she

allowed Tirgit to comb out her knee-length hair and sat in front of the fire to dry it.

A blonde maidservant appeared a short while later, delivering the requested hot water and more towels. While Tirgit washed herself, Cecilia opened her writing box, took out parchment, pen, and an inkwell, and began to compose a letter to Dominic.

"My lady," said Tirgit, drowsily, from the tub. "Will you send Lord Dominic my love? I wish he could have come with us."

Cecilia dipped her quill in the small glass inkwell. "I wish it, too, but it would have been unwise to leave the southern Houses with no Protector," she lied, thinking that things might go more smoothly here without his interference.

When Cecilia had finished her letter, she allowed Tirgit to braid her still-damp hair. The bed was large, curtained, and very soft. Cecilia sank into the cloud-like featherbed and fell into her old, bad dream:

The Queen of the Underworld stood on a high cliff overlooking a settled plain. From her vantage point, greenish-gold fields of ripening grain shimmered in a moist breeze. The cluster of square plastered buildings that was the city of her traitorous sister shone carnelian in the sunset light. The Queen of Heaven's temple rose in a high, stepped tower in the middle of the city. In the east, the waters of the great lake gleamed a hazy pink and silver.

The Queen of the Underworld turned to her priestesses, to Eresh-erib, the chief among them, and sang:

"Let the traitor-goddess know my vengeance.

Let her city know my vengeance, pronounced by those
who decree fate.

She has broken the Law: she has stolen from the gods;
She has given what was sacred to the men of her city.
For her great crimes let her descend into the Underworld.
Let her be Forgotten!"

*Eresh-erib sprinkled a sacred circle of salt and barley meal
around the Queen, chanting:*

"Let her wander the earth, forgotten.

Let no god Name her. Let no one call her kin.

Let her be Lost for a thousand years."

"Let her be Forgotten," sang the priestesses.

"Let her city be wiped away; let her city be Forgotten.

Let the people who accepted her stolen gifts be Forgotten!"

"Let them be Forgotten," intoned Eresh-erib, completing
the circle. She stepped back into the ranks of the priestesses.

*The curse completed, the Queen raised her arms, closed
her eyes, and began to sing vengeance.*

*First she sang the destruction of the storehouses, feeling
the power of the earth flow through her to shatter the great
pottery grain jars and beer jars, the precious alabaster vases
of perfume, and the stacked ceremonial platters of hollowed
agate and obsidian.*

Then she sang down the mudbrick walls of the city,
shivering and crumbling them. The white-washed houses of
her sister's city collapsed, sending clouds of dust into the
twilit air. But her sister's temple still stood.

The earth began to sing in harmony, a deeper, more
mysterious melody than her own. The Queen, intoxicated,

allowed herself to be seduced by this power. As the temple bowed, then fell, the Queen sang a duet with a bass voice thrumming below the ruins of her sister's city. But the earth's music would not hold to only one song. It broke free, and the cliffs separating the plain from the Great Green Sea screamed discordantly, responding to the straining need of living rock to move—

The cliffs rumbled and cracked. A giant ripple raced across the plain. The priestesses screamed, falling to the ground, and the Queen landed on her knees.

She stopped singing, abruptly, but the earth of the plain continued to shudder like the skin of an ass tormented by stinging flies. The song of the earth continued, terrible now with an uncontrolled drumbeat of destruction.

The western cliffs reverberated, amplifying the stolen song until the Queen could not hear her own screams. The dreadful noise reached a crescendo with a mighty pulse, then stopped. For an age, profound silence reigned.

Then the western cliffs exploded outward. Hungry salt waters from the sea found a gap and thundered to the plain below, pooling at the base of the cliffs. The gap widened rapidly, and more water poured in. In minutes, a boiling brown wave swept across the barley fields. Gathering speed, it raced through the shattered walls and fallen buildings of the city.

The Queen of the Underworld felt her brothers and sisters drown, trapped in the underground Chamber of Judgment where they had come to condemn their traitor sister. They

died together, their separate presences snuffed out almost as one.

The waters sought more, greedily devouring all the lands and the cities of the plain in the days and nights that followed.

The Queen, sole surviving divinity, stood on the cliff from sunrise to sunset each day, watching mutely as her world ended.

Not everyone perished. Erish-erib's priestess-daughters survived, and some of the mortal inhabitants of the cities further east had the chance to flee to higher ground. But the cities themselves vanished beneath the waters as the plain became a great inland sea, and the gods passed into legend.

* * * *

Cecilia awoke, weeping and shaking, in Tirgit's embrace.

"There, there, Lady. Oh, Mistress, don't cry!" crooned Tirgit. She had left her pallet beside the warm hearth, and was stroking Cecilia's hair.

But horror gripped Cecilia as if the disaster had just occurred, rather than seven millennia ago. Of all the Apkallu, only Cecilia still wore her original body. Only she still remembered that first, terrible deed of Inanna, the World-Destroyer. And each time the nightmare came to her, she knew she had done the right thing when she found the Apkallu again, locking away their memories of the time before the Flood to spare them the anguish of remembering.

"Here, Lady, please stop weeping. It was only a dream."
Tirgit's forearm pressed against Cecilia's mouth, warm blood flowing against her lips from a shallow cut. "Only a dream."

Cecilia accepted the proffered solace. The comforting images in Tirgit's memories washed away the evil dream. When she regained her composure, she leaned against Tirgit, murmuring, "Thou art the best and kindest of women."

A blush rose from Tirgit's breasts to her cheeks. She slipped a bandage over an arm hatched with many tiny scars.

Cecilia kissed the bandage, kissed Tirgit's bare shoulder, and pulled her under the warm covers with her. There was more than one way to forget a nightmare.

But afterward, with Tirgit sleeping easily, Cecilia thought about the dream. So many years since it had tormented her ... One of the Lost Apkallu must be nearby. She exhaled, feeling the last of her uncertainty disappear in the warm aftermath of Tirgit's blood and shared caresses. Her beloved Ea was surely here in the city ... and soon they would be reunited.

Smiling, she drew Tirgit closer, and slept again.

* * * *

In the morning, she arose and attired herself in a rich but sober gown with matching veil and wimple. She was already planning how she might discreetly investigate Michel.

But as the sun rose higher in the foggy sky, she heard the deep voices of the earth urging her to join her song to theirs. The great flat plain on which this city was built longed to unite with the sea from which it had been stolen.

Cecilia shuddered and closed her eyes at the image of broken dikes and silver-gray waters drowning spires and sweeping away neat farms, unable to drown out the siren song that ran through the veins of the earth.

* * * *

St. Martins' Church, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Feast of St. Matthew, Sunday, September 21st, AD 1259

Kneeling upon an embroidered cushion on the stone slabs of the church floor, Cecilia tried not to wince as the priest butchered his Latin. She set her teeth and prepared to endure him because Josef had discovered that Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne attended Mass in this church three Sundays a month, using the holy services as an excuse to visit with his widowed sister and her daughter.

Unfortunately, this was not the church nearest the Rosenhuis, so Cecilia's appearance had caused more of a stir than she had intended.

She was thankful when it was time to rise, and she was free to look around for the one she sought. But the contrast between the old, dark nave and the new, bright, soaring choir made it difficult to search for an aura. She had been sensing an Apkallu's presence for almost an hour. But where?

She finally spotted what she sought near the middle of the congregation. Recognition raised gooseflesh from the crown of her head to the small of her back. A man, a woman, and a girl, with identical profiles and deep-gold hair ... all with the blazing auras of the Apkallu.

Two of her Lost, and—!

She studied them, struggling for self-control as her heart pounded. The tall knight in his white mantle was broad-shouldered, with a long, untrimmed beard. Ea's clear golden aura was strong except for the upper part of his right leg, where it boiled redly.

Equally familiar and dear was the aura of the woman in the starched linen headdress standing next to him. But Ninharsag's bluish-white nimbus showed worrisome, irregular gray blotches of disease. Was Cecilia too late? Certainly, Ninharsag would not be able to undergo the transformation any time soon. Cecilia would have to find a way to befriend her and offer healing help.

But the girl—Cecilia's breath hissed between her teeth as the girl suddenly turned her head, as if feeling the weight of Cecilia's glare. The little face was fair and rosy-cheeked, blonde hair escaping from beneath a linen cap all askew. Her blue gaze held Cecilia captive with puzzled intensity, and the bright rose-pink aura—unmistakable—flared as if in acknowledgment. Then the girl blushed at her mother's whispered correction and quickly turned away.

Dread paralyzed Cecilia.

She was here! The Cursed One! Drawn to the reborn souls of those who had once been her siblings, though stripped of her memories and Forgotten by House and djinni alike.

Cecilia's mind worked furiously through the remainder of the Mass, as she rose, and knelt, and spoke the correct responses with the reflex of centuries. The problem of extricating Michel from the bonds of his mortal life had just been complicated. Bad enough he had taken holy vows;

worse that he was an important official and his absence would be noticed. Worst of all, *she* was here.

The Mass dragged to an end. Cecilia waited until most of the congregation left the church, Sir Michel, Mathilde, and the Cursed One among them. Then Cecilia allowed Josef to escort her out, followed by Fausta and her daughters.

"That Templar," Cecilia said. "Does the House have any connections with him?"

Josef looked stricken. "Of course, Lady. He is the new Preceptor ... We deposit our gold in the Templar vault. We've been watching him as your letter instructed. Although I think he knows we do. But Lady, we have been careful!" he finished, desperately.

Cecilia smiled. "Fear not, faithful servant. He is one of us, though he does not yet know it."

Josef bowed his head, trying unsuccessfully to conceal his dismay at failing to recognize one of the Lost. "Yes, Lady."

She turned to Fausta, who looked dismayed that Josef had missed a chance for elevation within the House. "Does he have any vices, any weaknesses that you have heard of?"

Fausta shook her head. "Some of the ladies call him 'Brother What-a-Waste.'" She shrugged apologetically. "They complain that they have practiced their wiles on him to no avail. He seems faithful to his vows."

"I must make his acquaintance," Cecilia said.

As they walked back to the House, Tirgit said, excited, "Oh, we must write Lord Dominic at once!"

"No!" Cecilia said, sharply. "I forbid it."

Tirgit looked bewildered. "But Lady, the news would make him so hap—"

"No, Tirgit," Cecilia snapped. Seeing the hurt on her maid's face, she sighed and relented a little. "This is a very delicate situation and I don't want to raise false hope. It would only hurt Dominic ... we will notify him when the time is right."

"Yes, Lady." Tirgit bowed her head, but unhappiness radiated from her.

* * * *

Templar Preceptory, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Tuesday, September 23rd, AD 1259

Michel rubbed his eyes. He chewed on the frayed end of a goose-quill pen and contemplated the requisition before him. The Marshal of the Order in Acre wanted five destriers, ten palfreys, and ten rouncys. Decent riding palfreys and dependable packhorses could be had from a breeder in Zillebeke, just south of Ypres, but war-horses were another matter.

The purchase of five destriers would consume a considerable portion of the Ypres preceptory's revenue for this year. His first inclination was to buy from his father's estate in the Ardennes Mountains. To his knowledge, no one bred or trained better horses. Michel could send the Marshal of the house to inspect and fetch them, but would giving the Order's business to a family member be against the Rule?

Michel glanced down at the blank piece of parchment alongside the requisition, and sighed. The Templars had been kind to send him to Ypres, where he could see Mathilde and

Blanche, and even his father occasionally, but his day-to-day duties had only grown more onerous with his promotion. His only enjoyment as Preceptor was when the merchants called upon him, and shared stories of their travels.

Michel forced down his dissatisfaction, made his decision, and dipped his pen in the inkhorn.

To Gerard, Sire de La Roche-en-Ardenne: Right beloved father, I greet you well and send you God's blessing...

He was relieved when Brother Philippe cleared his throat politely from the door of Michel's office. As Preceptor, Michel was the only Brother to have a private chamber, to preserve the confidentiality of those who borrowed money or deposited valuables for safekeeping. "The merchant Josef de la Rose and his kinswoman, the widow Cecilia le Byzantine, wish to see you."

Michel put down his pen, glad of the interruption, and covered his correspondence. Aware of the House of the Rose's Saracen—and sorcerous—connections, Michel had watched Josef closely for any hint that he was more than he seemed. But Josef was, by all reports, an honest sober, church-going Christian. Their brief business conversations had not yet afforded Michel the opportunity to inquire about Sir Dominic, who still haunted Michel's dreams from time to time. "Bid them enter."

Josef seemed nervous as he stammered his way through the introduction of his kinswoman, Cecilia le Byzantine. She stood silently, as befit a modest widow. Michel noted the subtle use of kohl and tinted salve on her fine-featured face.

She probably wanted to deposit her jewels for safekeeping. Would she try to seduce him?

Michel was sore wearied of the games many women tried to play with him, that served only to remind him of his circumscribed life. He initiated the obligatory dance of courtesy with offers of hot spiced wine and chairs for de la Rose and his kinswoman.

The maid held her mistress's cloak and took her place behind Cecilia's chair. They had the similar coloring: black hair, olive skin, and blue-green eyes. The girl murmured in Arabic, "Oh, mistress, he is indeed 'Brother What-a-waste!'"

Michel's face grew hot, embarrassment warring with laughter. He decided to diplomatically pretend he had not understood.

However, Cecilia shot him a shrewd glance over her goblet of spiced wine, followed by a sweetly benevolent smile.

Michel found himself smiling back, and wondered suddenly why she seemed so familiar. Surely he would have remembered had he met her somewhere. She was very beautiful.

"I beg a thousand pardons, Brother Michel," Cecilia murmured, also in Arabic, as if they were old friends. "My maid Tirgit is most impudent to holy men."

Michel frowned ostentatiously at Tirgit, who blushed. "Had I known that my future held such beauty," he bantered, also in Arabic, "I might have reconsidered taking my vows. But, alas, it is too late for me. I shall have to restrict myself to offering you the services of the Order."

Josef rose and bobbed a bow in Michel's direction. "I must excuse myself, Sir Brother. I have a—a meeting at the Wool Merchant's Guildhouse. I hope you will not mind if I leave my kinswoman to conduct her business with you?"

"Of course not," Michel said, though he wondered why de la Rose was so nervous. "If she does not object."

"I do not," said the lady, now speaking Flemish. "Josef, I will return to the House when I am finished here."

Josef began to bow to her, then caught himself, with a guilty glance in Michel's direction.

Michel kept his expression impassive, but his curiosity was intense. Who was his visitor, really?

Michel returned his attention to his visitors. "My lady," he addressed her as a noblewoman to see how she reacted. She did not blink. Even more intrigued, he asked, "How may the Order be of service to you? And would you prefer to conduct your business in Flemish, or another language?"

"Whichever you prefer, Brother Michel."

"Flemish of course," Michel replied. "Though, if you wish, I can speak Arabic, or Greek, though I lack practice." he finished in that tongue.

"But you speak it beautifully," she said, flirtatiously lowering her eyelids.

This was turning into a most interesting appointment. What did she really want?

Chapter Twenty-four

"The count Roland, when dead he saw his peers, And Oliver, he held so very dear, Grew tender, and began to shed a tear; Out of his face the color disappeared; No longer could he stand, for so much grief, Will he or nil, he swooned upon the field."—*The Song of Roland*, c. 1100

"However, Flemish will suit me." Cecilia reached out with her power to soothe the angry red aura of Michel's injured thigh. It paled to pink almost instantly. "I wish to rent an estate outside the city, near the roads either to Tournai or Arras. The property must have a stream, a well, or other source of water, space for a large garden, stables for at least twenty horses, and enough pasturage to feed them and sufficient cows and sheep for the household. Do you currently have any such properties for lease?"

"I believe we have several properties that meet your requirements, my lady, unless cost is an object with you."

She gave a small smile.

"Brother Philippe!" Michel called to the brown-robed Templar hovering near the doorway. "Fetch me the accounts for our properties at Sint-Eloois, Vierstraat, and Chancy."

"On behalf of God!" Brother Philippe bowed, and withdrew.

As they waited for his return, and before she could initiate any conversation, Michel leaned forward with concern.

"Forgive me for presuming to ask, but I feel I must. Why do you, a widow, wish to dwell alone, away from the safety of the city?"

"I thank you for your care, Brother Michel," Cecilia answered, all the while working at suppressing his pain. "My cousins at the Rosenhuis have graciously opened their home to me and my household, but I am accustomed to being mistress in my own establishment."

"I see," he replied, his eyes measuring her. He didn't seem to be aware of the tension draining subtly away from the rigid line of his shoulders "And this is acceptable to Lady Sharibet?"

She suppressed a gasp. He knew Sharibet's name! What else might he know—? She recovered quickly. "I see you've spent some time in Outremer. I assure you, Brother Michel, my presence here is acceptable to Sharibet." She gave him a coy smile, frantically revising her strategy for handling him. He was showing himself to be every bit as astute as Honoria had been.

"And do you know a man calling himself Sir D—ah, Brother Philippe." Michel tried to conceal his disappointment at the interruption as the dark-robed Templar returned with an armful of parchment rolls.

"What an excellent filing system!" Cecilia commented, seizing the distraction as Michel untied the first bundle, divided into groups tied with different colored ribbons. "We use a similar method in the Rosenhuis."

"It is useful," Michel agreed, but without the keen interest he had shown in her earlier comments.

She studied him as he unrolled and scanned the documents, mentally subtracting a decade and that horrible beard. Michel was still extremely handsome despite his

injuries and his age. He would have been dazzling at seventeen.

He finished his perusal of the papers and began to describe the estates. Cecilia quickly dismissed both Sint-Eloois and Vierstraat as unsuitable, but the Chateau du Chancy, a fortified manor house mortgaged to the Templars by a knight who never returned from Crusade, was a good possibility.

"Oh, Brother Michel," Cecilia said, injecting a note of breathless compassion into her voice. "I've heard that you were wounded in the last Crusade." She wanted to keep him talking for a while, so he would learn the benefit of her presence, without realizing the actual reason for his new sense of well-being.

"I fought at Mansurah. Most of my brother-knights fell there thanks to the folly of the King's brother." His face grew stern. "Robert d'Artois's overweening pride led us all into a trap set by the Sultan."

"You thought the Sultan laid that trap for you?" Cecilia asked. "But he was already dead!"

Michel was visibly surprised. "If not the Sultan, then—but of course it must have been Fakhr-ed-din's plan." He focused Honoria's perceptive gaze on her. "But how do you know this?"

"Fakr-ed-Din was the general, but the plan was Shajar ad-Durr's." Cecilia said.

"We were defeated by a *woman*?"

"The Sultana. A most remarkable woman." Cecilia controlled her irritation at his attitude, reminding herself that he had no access to his memories.

Michel propped his elbows on the slanted surface of his writing table, waiting expectantly for her to continue.

"Shajar ad Durr held Egypt united in the face of the Crusader invasion." Cecilia folded her hands in her lap and smiled sweetly at him. "And she did it so well, that after the assassination of her son-in-law, Turan-Shah, the Mamluks and the Council of Emirs confirmed her as the Sultana of Egypt in her own right. It was she who authorized the reduction of King Louis' ransom, so he could pay it. She also ensured that the surviving common soldiers were released.

"Alas, the Caliph disallowed her accession, quoting the Prophet, 'Unhappy is the nation governed by a woman.'" Cecilia snorted genteelly. "The Caliph also told the Egyptians, 'If you have no men, I will send you one.'"

"What did the Sultana do?" asked Michel.

Cecilia shrugged. "Shajar ad Durr was forced to marry one of her generals, Aybeg. She ruled through him until just last year. Lamentably, her husband tried to set her aside for a young concubine, and supposedly she stabbed him in his bath. She was murdered in turn, either by his men or by his sons. No one seems to know exactly what happened."

"You sound as if you admired her."

"I pitied her end," Cecilia said, "But in her life she proved herself both intelligent and powerful. Women manage households every day. What is a kingdom but a household writ large?"

Michel grinned, and sat back. "I am sure you are right, my lady, although I know little of women."

"But you know the East. Tell me of your travels."

She was gratified that he relaxed sufficiently to talk about his time in Acre and in Italy. He had Honoria's gift for observation, but the air of command was new to this lifetime, though not surprising. He had, after all, been born into the warrior class of this society.

To prolong her visit, she waited until he had finished telling her about the bandits that infested the coastal highways in Italy. Then she spoke of a related incident during her recent travels along the Silk Road.

"We were on the shores of the Black Sea, my kinswoman Leila, my late husband, and I—alone with a single leaky skiff, and the seas quite restless. And Leila, God keep her, says to me, 'But it's not big enough to hold all my trunks!'" Cecilia laughed. "The bandits were hot on our trail, and we were lucky to have found a vessel at all, though it cost us a silver dirham. But all ended well..." Cecilia omitted mention of the slaughter that the djinni had been forced to inflict among the bandits, who caught up with them while Leila was still arguing about how many of her chests would fit on the tiny skiff.

"Leila got to keep her precious wardrobe and her jewelry, and the boat did not *quite* sink beneath us, though we had to bail mightily—ah, here is your man again."

Cecilia broke off as Brother Philippe bowed apologetically at the open door and said, "Your next appointment is here, Brother Michel."

Michel glanced at the marked candle burning in a corner of the office with apparent astonishment that an hour had flown by. He recovered his demeanor and said, "Lady Cecilia, would you like to ride out to the Chateau du Chancy and inspect it

on the next clear day? I could arrange for the Marshal to escort you."

"I would like that very much. However ... no. I know you're extremely busy. I mustn't impose upon your time." She stood and straightened her skirts. "Send word, and I shall be ready."

Tirgit handed Cecilia her cloak, and batted dark eyelashes insouciantly at Michel. He blushed, and stood without regard for his injured leg.

Cecilia, exhausted by the effort of suppressing his pain but very pleased with the way the interview had gone, let the flow of her power cease. She leaned on Tirgit most of the weary walk back to the House.

* * * *

Michel sat when Cecilia left the room and watched wistfully through the door as Brother Philippe escorted the two women out through the common area. He could not remember having a more interesting visitor. He felt so at ease with her.

But he had work to finish. He sighed. He would have to find an appropriate punishment for Brother Philippe, who had lied about there being a next visitor.

He rolled up and re-tied the property documents, leaving out only those that pertained to the Chateau du Chancy, and turned doggedly back to the letter to his father.

As he shifted his weight on his stool, he noticed he'd been granted a minor miracle. The accustomed torment in his leg had receded to a faint ache. He praised God long enough to

prove that his respite had only been temporary, and sighed, returning to his never-ending duties.

* * * *

"You're smiling!" Aumery said, as he entered some time later and flopped down in one of the visitor's chairs. Despite the cold, cloudy weather outside, perspiration matted his close-cropped auburn hair, and he smelled of horse. "I heard you had a woman who was not your sister visit you this afternoon." He grinned. "And that she stayed for over an hour, and you were smiling and laughing with her. *Immoderately*," he added in Brother Philippe's censorious tones.

"It was business! Josef de La Rose brought her, She said she wanted to rent—" Michel said, defensively, then noticed his squire's smirk. "Aumery!"

The other man had the audacity to laugh. "Oooh. Was she pretty?"

"Yes. And I enjoyed our conversation," Michel confessed, studying his ink-stained fingers. His palms still bore a swordsman's calluses, but the most prominent mark on his right hand was a scribe's callus at the first joint of his middle finger. "She's kin to the House of the Rose, and has traveled the Silk Road." And he still had no idea why she made de la Rose so nervous.

"So she's rich, too. Careful of your vows, Brother What-a-waste!" Aumery ducked the crumpled ball of parchment that Michel tossed at him, then wiped his forehead on his brown sleeve. "The new recruits are coming along well. They'll be

ready to ship out soon. However..." He straightened in the chair, took a deep breath. "That isn't why I came to see you."

"No?" Michel inquired. "You came to see whether I was being seduced?"

"No. No, of course not." Aumery blushed. "I have, er, something I need to tell you."

Michel raised his eyebrows at Aumery's discomfiture. "Yes?"

Aumery cleared his throat several times. "I—ah—that is—" He gulped, then said, all in a rush: "Brother Michel, it's time for me to notify you that my ten years' Term of Charity will be completed at Easter. And I won't be renewing my vows."

"What?" Michel blinked, feeling as though he had just been kicked by a mule.

"You didn't know?" Aumery scratched his chin. "But of course—it was before you joined. I took vows, but only for a fixed term."

"Have you been unhappy, then?" Michel asked, thinking of his own dissatisfaction.

"No—oh, no! I have found great satisfaction serving God—and being your squire—but I never meant to spend the rest of my life as a Templar."

"What will you do?" Michel asked, still reeling. How could he face the monotonous routine of his daily life without Aumery's cheerful mien and dry humor?

"Many a lord will be glad to hire a Templar-trained man-at-arms," Aumery smiled crookedly. "And, though we exchanged no promises, and there was no betrothal, there was a girl at home who swore she'd wait for me. We've not been in contact

since I went away, but my mother has kept me informed as to how Margaret's been doing. And she hasn't yet married," he said with some satisfaction.

"Well, it will be a sore loss to me. You've been an excellent squire and—" Michel swallowed hard. "And I should like to think we've become friends."

"Indeed, and I am honored for it," Aumery replied, flushing. "I hope you will not think my departure a slight against you. You've been a kind master, and I've learned so much ... And I shall miss those Sunday dinners at your sister's." He looked away, embarrassed, and said jokingly, "I will have to beg her recipe for almond fish stew for Margaret." He rose to leave. "I'm sorry to bring you disappointing news, but I had to give notice now. And I am happy to think that I'll be going home, come Easter."

"Didn't you tell me once that you were the son of a knight?" Michel asked, struck by sudden inspiration.

"I'm a knight's bastard, yes," Aumery replied, with an inquiring lift of his reddish brows. "What of it?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Michel said, but he'd been struck by a sudden inspiration—not that he would tell Aumery of it before he could make all the arrangements. "I shall miss you a great deal."

"And I, you. Well," Aumery got up and went to the doorway, then paused. "When I came to you, just now—" he said, hesitantly. "It's the first time I've seen you smile in months."

"My leg stopped hurting," Michel said.

"Praise be to God!"

"For a while."

Aumery's face fell. "Are you sure it wasn't the woman who made you smile? Because unlike me, you will be a Templar until you die."

Michel had no response to make. Aumery nodded and left for his next duty, leaving Michel to stare glumly at the pile of pending documents. He had no heart for them.

He would go to chapel, he decided, and kneel and pray that this melancholy be lifted from him. Dear God, let him think no more of beautiful, mysterious Byzantine women...

* * * *

Letter to Dominic in Venezia, written in code:

29th September 1259 AD

To Lord Dominic in Venezia from your dutiful daughter Tirgit in Ypres: My lord, I commend me to you, and beg forgiveness for disobeying my lady's order to withhold these tidings.

We have found your Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne. My mistress did not tell you of this before, lest it prove a false identification.

He is alive!

However, as he has become a Templar, it will not be a light task to convince him to take oath with the House. Also, it grieves me to tell you that while he is still handsome, he has been sore battered by this life and is now crippled.

My lady is doing all she can to prepare Sir Michel for his invitation. She has said she will write to summon you when

she thinks it is prudent, but I know how you have longed to be reunited.

Additionally, Sir Michel's sister is also one of the Lost, but she is very ill. My lady hopes to make her acquaintance soon, to see if her disease may be cured.

I pray you heartily to give the House in Venice my greetings, and send me word how you do. Written by my own hand on the Feast of St. Michael Archangel, thy faithful daughter Tirgit al-Warda

* * * *

Lease & Guarantee for the Chateau du Chancy near Ypres:
In the name of the Lord. October 1, in the year of the Incarnation AD 1259 .

Be it known to all men that I, Cecilia le Byzantine, merchant femme sole, confess and acknowledge to the Order of the Knights Templar, that I owe 90 livres for one year's rent of the Chateau du Chancy which is two leagues south of the city of Ypres.

I promise by this agreement that those 90 livres, in peppercorns or livre tournois, will be given and paid to the Knights Templar, or to its servants, next Easter. I promise that all expenses incurred in seeking or collecting that debt I will repay to the Knights Templar or its servants, and I shall believe the Order's simple word in the matter. I swear upon the Holy Gospels of God that I will not break this agreement.

To this I, Cecilia le Byzantine, under pledge of all my goods, constitute myself as the principal debtor to the Order of the Knights Templar, contracting to pay the Order or its

servants on the day agreed upon, and to adhere to the terms written above. I renounce the law "De principali prius conveniendo" and the respite of twenty days and four months and all other delays and law.

*[signed] Brother Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne,
Preceptor in Ypres for the Order of the Knights Templar*

*[signed] Cecilia le Byzantine, merchant femme sole, lately
of Venezia*

Witnesses, etc.

* * * *

St. Martin's Church, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Sunday,
October 19, 1259 AD

Blanche tightened gloved hands around her hand-warmer. Outside the church, dense fog wrapped the city. Despite the heat of the coals held in the hollow metal sphere, and being squeezed between the tall, comfortingly solid forms of Uncle Michel and Brother Aumery, she was still cold. Her neck was all gooseflesh. She was acutely aware that the Byzantine woman was standing a few rows back and to the right.

After enduring this until her neck itched, Blanche turned her head to look at Lady Cecilia. This time, Cecilia caught her looking.

As on previous occasions, meeting the lady's hostile stare sent a shock right through Blanche. Why did Lady Cecilia's eyes hold such dislike mixed with a strange sort of longing?

Blanche felt torn. Everyone seemed to love Lady Cecilia, who was as beautiful as the statue of the Virgin. Even Uncle

Michel, normally so reserved, laughed and joked freely in her presence. And Maman—well, she doted on her.

At the beginning of October, Uncle Michel had asked Maman to invite Lady Cecilia to Sunday dinner. Maman had been gracious, of course, and Lady Cecilia charming, and they had become friends over spiced wine and a plate of ginger wafers from Master Hendrick's bakery. Now when Maman fussed over preparations for Cecilia's visits, a jealous pang went straight through Blanche's heart.

And why did Lady Cecilia look at Uncle Michel in a way that even Blanche recognized as unfitting for a virtuous woman contemplating a Templar?

Uncle Michel caught Blanche staring at Lady Cecilia. He directed the briefest warning lift of a golden eyebrow in Blanche's direction. He gave Cecilia a polite nod and a slight smile before turning his own attention back to the pulpit.

Blanche felt her cheeks grow warm at his wordless reprimand, but she found herself unable to look away. A trick of the light made Lady Cecilia briefly appear very old and very sad.

Sister. The word popped into Blanche's head, and she felt dizzy as well as cold. There was a crawling sensation in the pit of her stomach, part pity and part terror, the same feeling she got when Maman took to her bed with fever and chills.

Blanche bowed her head. The priest was winding up his sermon with a story about a merchant robbed and abandoned on a foreign shore.

Then it was time to recite the Creed, to take the silver denier from her glove to put in the offering basket, and to

watch Maman and Uncle Michel file up to the altar with the rest of the adult congregation to kiss the gems-encrusted gold cover of the Gospel. They took Communion, Uncle Michel accepting a privileged sip of wine from the massive silver-gilt goblet. His bearded face was serene as he swallowed, the lines of pain graven on his forehead temporarily erased.

She understood why Cecilia looked at him the way she did.

The Mass concluded with the prayers for the living and the dead, a Paternoster and an Ave.

The last echoes of the prayer, chanted mostly in unison by the congregation, were still echoing in the stone vaults as the heavy oaken doors opened, admitting cold air, and people began to stream out.

Blanche walked slowly with Uncle Michel, but before they reached the door, Lady Cecilia was there, nodding graciously to acknowledge Aumery's greeting, and seeming not to notice Blanche at all.

"Brother Michel," she said, in that sweet voice. "How does your sister? Has her condition improved?"

Michel bowed, and the edge of his white wool mantle brushed Blanche's cheek. "My niece," he said, giving Blanche a worried glance, "tells me that Mathilde was too ill to rise from her bed today."

"She has fever and chills, and she says her bones ache like an old man's," Blanche volunteered, despite the fact that, as a child in the company of adults, she was expected to be silent.

"I dislike the tenacity of this fever," Cecilia said. "I have some knowledge of herbs—may I have your permission to call upon your sister with my remedies?"

Uncle Michel said, "I would be honored if you would impart your knowledge to us, my lady."

Cecilia nodded, and her gaze locked with Blanche's. For once there was no hostility there, only shared concern, and Blanche felt an absurd stab of hope. Strange as it seemed, she suddenly knew that if Lady Cecilia could not cure Maman, no one could.

Blanche curtsied. "Thank you, my lady. I will tell Maman that you are coming—"

"Tomorrow," Cecilia said, firmly.

* * * *

Deep sadness pierced Cecilia the next afternoon when she called upon Mathilde, who had once been Ereshkigal's sister Ninharsag.

Tirgit drew aside a heavy embroidered bed hanging. A pale Mathilde sat in her bed, propped up by goose-down pillows and wool-stuffed bolsters. She could hardly accept a steaming cup from Tirgit because of the tremor in her hands.

"My mistress has sweetened it with sugar and ginger," Tirgit coaxed.

When Mathilde sipped, she wrinkled her nose. "What an evil brew."

"It will bring down your fever and soothe your aches," Cecilia said, severely. "But you must drink it all, or I shall be forced to scold you. Drink!"

While Mathilde obeyed, Cecilia observed her and grieved. The physician had come earlier, and he had bled Mathilde from the inside of her elbow in an attempt to drain off the evil humors sickening her. Of course his treatment had only weakened her further. The bandage that circled her arm was only a little paler than her too-white skin. The scent of her blood was tainted with the consumption that would kill her.

No herb yet discovered could cure what ailed Mathilde. Cecilia did not dare to perform a Transformation—she might kill Mathilde outright. It was risky under the best circumstances with a young, healthy candidate. Many never awoke from the three-day sleep. Those who were old or ill rarely survived. Menelaos, who had been Transformed in his early forties, had been one of her few older successes, but he had also been a vigorous, healthy soldier.

Cecilia hoped only to offer Mathilde some ease for her symptoms, and take this brief opportunity to renew the connection between them before Mathilde returned to the Underworld. If the Fates smiled upon them, they would meet again in Ninharsag's next life.

Mathilde finished the medicine and said, "You are so kind to me." She patted the thick fur coverlet. "Come, sit here."

Cecilia obeyed, lacing her fingers tightly upon her lap, as Tirgit took the cup and quietly withdrew from the bedroom.

"It is strange, I know," Mathilde reached to cover Cecilia's hands with her own. "We met but a short while ago, and yet I feel I have known you forever."

Her fever-hot fingers burned on Cecilia's, as if branding her with imminent loss. Cecilia closed her eyes, trying not to

weep. "My sisters are long dead," she said, after she regained control. "And yet I feel that you are like one of them to me."

Hectic roses bloomed in Mathilde's cheeks. "Tell me the truth, then, dearest sister—what ails me? Can it be cured?"

"I fear not." Cecilia unlaced her fingers, and clasped Mathilde's feverish hand. "I have seen this illness before. It disguises itself as a catarrh or quartan fever at first, but soon it settles in the lungs."

"A consumption of the lungs? Holy Virgin protect me." Mathilde crossed herself. "How—how long until—?"

"If you partake of fresh air and eat well, you may live for several years," Cecilia answered, her voice trembling. "But eventually, you will begin to cough up blood. And then..."

"And then." The trembling in Mathilde's hands stilled. "Well, none among us escape our mortality, whether it be sooner or later." Her flushed face grew serene and she asked, "Is my illness the reason why you have offered to help arrange Blanche's marriage so advantageously?"

"Yes, in part. It will also remove your daughter from—from possible contagion."

No need for Cecilia to take an active role in her enemy's next demise. By arranging an honorable union she had sealed Blanche's fate. As a Frankish nobleman's chattel, she would bear one child after another until she died of it.

And she would be separated from the other Apkallu, unable to infect them with her disloyalty.

"At least I know she will be well taken care of," Mathilde whispered. "But ... I had hoped to see my grandchildren, to see *his* face, in theirs, living on." Mathilde moved against her

pillows, as if seeking relief from aching joints. A few tears slipped from between tightly closed eyelids.

Cecilia brushed them gently away, wishing she had the power to speak the Word of Life to save her sister Ninharsag.

Mathilde blinked hard and gave a brave smile. "Have I yet thanked you for your kindness to my daughter?"

"No need for that." Cecilia shrugged, as if embarrassed. "I would have done it—"

"For anyone? I think not."

"For my sister." Unnerved by the perception in Mathilde's blue eyes, she continued, "And since I also owe your brother many thanks for his assistance, it was my pleasure to return a favor in some small way."

Indeed, leasing the Chateau du Chancy and making subsequent arrangements for repairs afforded her frequent pretexts to ask Michel's advice about one thing or another. Each time, she used her powers to subtly instill in him the awareness that her presence brought him surcease from pain.

"Are you in love with Michel?" Mathilde asked, bluntly.

Cecilia shifted uncomfortably. "Do you mean, am I trying to seduce him? No. That would be futile. Your brother honors his vows." She forced her mouth into a wicked smile. "But he *is* an extraordinarily well-favored man. And I am a woman, not a saint."

Mathilde breathed a laugh. "He's as stubborn as a mule. I think he might have been happier had he married, but I know he won't change his mind now."

"Perhaps you ought to inform the other ladies of Ypres of his stubborn virtue, yes?" Cecilia requested, dryly. "I am not

the only one who has discovered a good reason to attend Mass at your church."

Mathilde's laughter blossomed, sputtered, then turned into painful coughing. Cecilia moved quickly to offer a handkerchief.

When the coughing spell ended, Mathilde fixed Cecilia with a sharp glance. "You didn't answer my question. I suppose that, too, is an answer." She stopped for a moment, as if weighing her next words. "He feels something for you, and that concerns me. When you're with us, I see him looking at you. Laughing with you. He seems ... lighter. Cecilia, do not ruin him, I beg you."

Cecilia balanced on truth's sharp edge. "I do care for him and I wish for his happiness above all things. Will it satisfy you if I swear I shall not take any action without his consent?"

Mathilde's pale mouth quirked. "It must, though I think you could convince a saint to sin." Her fingers relaxed their grip on Cecilia's hand, and stroked the soft fur of the coverlet. "There would be no honor in a liaison between you, only a brief interlude before the Order took him away and punished him."

"I understand," Cecilia said, bowing her head. "If only we had met before he took his vows!"

"He was a boy when he left for Egypt, despite his spurs and belt. And you would have been, what? Eleven? Too young to marry, and love." Mathilde settled back against the bolster. "Sweet Virgin, how I loathe feeling so tired all the time."

"Let me read to you some more," Cecilia offered quickly.

"The book is there," said Mathilde, pointing, then she covered her eyes.

Earlier, Cecilia had read from *The Song of Roland* while the water for the herbal infusion boiled. Now she opened the gilded wooden cover and found her page again.

"I'll read until you fall asleep," she said, though she could not see the letters on the page through the blur of her tears.

No matter—she would swallow this ache in her throat and watch over her Lost One while the autumn afternoon faded to twilight. Her voice was steady as she recited the stanzas of Olivier's death from memory:

"Unlucky, friend, your courage was indeed! Together we have spent such days and years; No harmful thing twixt thee and me has been. Now thou art dead, and all my life a grief. And with these words again he swoons, that chief, Upon his horse, which he calls Veillantif; Stirrups of gold support him underneath; He cannot fall, whichever way he lean..."

Chapter Twenty-five

"Brethren, it is now the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because our salvation is closer than when we first accepted the faith ..."—Lesson from the First Sunday in Advent, *Romans* 13:11-14

The bells were ringing Vespers.

Aided by Cecilia's potion, Mathilde had fallen asleep some time earlier, but Cecilia was unwilling to leave. She sat for an hour in the gathering gloom, watching the fever flush gradually disappear from Mathilde's skin, and the pattern of her breathing fall into a gentle, regular rhythm.

Cecilia felt every day of her vast age as she finally rose and went downstairs to the parlor, where Tirgit awaited her. If only she had arrived in Ypres last spring, or last winter, before Mathilde had become ill! Cecilia might have found a way to convince her to attempt the Transformation.

To Cecilia's surprise, Michel and his fox-like squire also awaited her in the small, wood-paneled parlor. Candles flickered in their holders, and the room was close with smells of men, horses, and Michel's myrrh.

"My lady!" Tirgit rose from her stool in front of the parlor fireplace, where she had been playing at cat's cradle with—Cecilia froze. Her heart gave a thunderous beat.

With the Cursed One.

She closed her eyes, faint and sick with murderous jealousy. She reminded herself. *Tirgit doesn't know. She only sees a child whose mother is dying.*

Michel was suddenly standing near her. "Lady Cecilia," he said, concerned. "Are you well? Do you need to sit down?"

Tirgit helped her to the stool by the fire. Next to...

Cecilia sat very still as Tirgit hovered, anxiously chafing Cecilia's cold hands between her own warm ones. After a moment she was able to draw breath, and focus on Michel, ignoring as best she could the hateful presence beside her.

"Are you feeling better? Would you like some wine?" Michel asked kindly, but his real question lingered unspoken.

"I'm fine. Just a bit tired. Your sister is better, for now. Her fever has abated, and she is sleeping." She stood and gestured curtly to Tirgit.

Tirgit draped Cecilia's thick, fur-lined cloak over her shoulders, and fastened the ties. The Cursed One, properly silent today, stared with wide blue eyes. Cecilia hastily averted her gaze.

"I had better not disturb her, then," Michel said, looking towards the stairs leading up to Mathilde's bedchamber. "I will return tomorrow."

"That might be best," Cecilia agreed, as Tirgit put on her own thick wool cloak.

"May we offer you an escort home, Lady Cecilia?" Michel offered politely.

"Thank you, yes."

Blanche jumped up and curtsied, studying her toes. "Thank you very much for coming to see my mother, Lady Cecilia."

Cecilia was forced to acknowledge her, but soon they were out in the clean damp of the city streets. They walked for a block, Cecilia together with Michel, limping on his crutch.

Tirgit strolled behind with Aumery, who carried a torch. Silence was thick as honey between them before Michel ventured to ask: "How bad is it?"

"Bad." Cecilia swallowed, and pressed gloved fingers against her eyes. "Mathilde suffers from consumption of the lungs. It's still in the early stages, but..."

"Oh." Michel's shoulder's slumped and his crutch hit the ground with hard little smacks. After a long while he said, "God is calling my sister to a better place." His voice was hoarse. "But it is difficult to accept His will."

"This God wills too much unhappiness," Cecilia snapped.

"I think we inflict unhappiness on ourselves," Michel said, softly, "when we rebel against our circumstances, or behave dishonorably. God provides us opportunities to earn forgiveness."

"Are you happy with the Templars?"

"I have never sought happiness, only penance." Michel adjusted his white mantle. "I have much to atone for."

"Surely not!"

He glanced her way, and his rueful smile gleamed in the deep dusk.

She realized that this was her key to understanding him. "What did you do?" she whispered, using her power to unlock his truth.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was soft, his words blurred. "When I was in Egypt, I betrayed my comrades. They died. My cousin Roland died, because I desired knowledge before honor. The man who led me into temptation was a

sorcerer of your House. Do you know him? He called himself Sir Dom—"

Cecilia wrapped Michel's wits in her power to stop his questions.

He fought without knowing what he did, but the shining insubstantial wings of his aura filled the street from side to side, growing brighter as she wrestled for control of his mind. He was winning.

Not yet a djinn, but he was so strong! Panicked, Cecilia sent a fist of air to skid his crutch out from under him. He fell, heavily, into the cold mud of the street.

She knelt beside him, exclaiming, "Sir Michel!" But her touch on his face was the last weapon she had to subdue him.

Abruptly, his aura flared, then faded. He groaned, caught his breath, and turned his face away. Then Aumery, having handed his torch to Tirgit, was there, fussily helping Michel to rise to his feet. Michel's white mantle was streaked with filth. "My lord, are you all right?"

"Yes, fine. I just slipped. Clumsy of me." He shook his head and then looked for her. "Lady Cecilia, my apologies. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Sir Michel. Just worried about you." *Oh, truth ... Gods, he was so strong!*

"My lady?" Tirgit whispered.

"Not now, girl!" Cecilia snarled. She was shaking.

Aumery was brushing ineffectively at the stains on Michel's mantle.

"Aumery. Stop it," Michel growled. "Lady Cecilia, I beg your pardon. Shall we go on?"

"Certainly. It's not far to the Rosenhuis." She made sure her voice was concerned and nothing more.

Michel shook Aumery's hand from his arm and started limping along.

"You must come inside and have some hot cider before you go back to the Preceptory, Brother Michel," Cecilia said. "I will see that Josef lends you a litter. You must not strain your leg with that long walk beyond the walls."

"I'll stay at the Templarhuis within the city walls tonight." Michel said, pretending, though not very well, that he was not in pain. "It's not far."

As they walked through the cold, dark streets of Ypres, Cecilia's mind raced. He had joined the Templars to atone for Roland's death, but Roland was not dead! Perhaps that truth, applied at a crucial junction, might serve to pry Michel from the greedy clutches of the Templars.

Or it might not. She had just experienced his strength of will. What if she could not bind his memory during his Raising and Naming?

She *must* convince him to swear his loyalty to the House. She had already missed her chance to Transform Mathilde. It hurt to find her Lost Apkallu, scattered like poppies in a vast field of grain, only to lose them again, and again.

* * * *

Michel refused to stay once they arrived at the Rosenhuis. He nodded, thanked Cecilia again for helping his sister, and hobbled away with his squire.

Cecilia held her temper until she and Tirgit reached their room. As soon as Tirgit closed the door, however, Cecilia turned and slapped her.

Tirgit flinched, stunned. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Why, Lady? What did I do?"

"Never play with her again."

"Play...? With Blanche? But she's just—"

"Silence!" Cecilia breathed. She sparked a fire in the logs set in the fireplace, over and over, releasing her wrath.

"Never speak her name again." Spark. "Don't associate with her." Spark. "She'll be leaving soon, anyway." Spark. "Damn her!"

The fire roared, its light writhing up to the tall ceiling. Cecilia could see its molten glow with her eyes closed. Its heat warmed her, but she was still frightened. She fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands. Now she could weep.

When the storm passed, she found herself wrapped in Tirgit's embrace, her face buried in Tirgit's shoulder. The wool gown beneath her cheek was wet with her tears.

"Oh, Lady, Lady, it will be all right," Tirgit crooned, stroking her arm.

Cecilia bit her lip. She sat back and wiped the last tears from her cheeks. "Tirgit—"

"Yes, Lady," she said, eyes downcast.

"My dear, she is—" She swallowed. It was hard to say it aloud. "Blanche is the—is the Cursed One."

Tirgit covered her mouth in astonishment. "The Forgotten One? That little girl?"

"Her soul is the soul of the Destroyer. You must not tell anyone," Cecilia ordered. "I'm only telling you now because—" She stroked Tirgit's bruised cheek. "She'll be gone soon. I've made arrangements. But until then—"

"Oh, no, of course not, Lady. I didn't know—"

The girl's cheek was warm under Cecilia's lips. "I was so frightened for you." She put her arms around Tirgit, holding her close and rocking, grateful for her comfort.

* * * *

Ca' Dalle Rose, Venice—Christmas Eve, AD 1259

The people of the House were dressed in their finest, and the house itself was filled with the fragrance of baking bread, spiced meat, and honeycakes.

But the mood in the House was grim. Dominic noticed the family's reaction to him as he skirted the edges of their preparations. Sidelong glances, conversations redirected, hurried departures from the room he had just entered.

They were frightened of him. It might have been uncomfortable if he had cared. As it was, he only awaited an opportune moment to slip away to the Rialto.

It was a beautiful day. Cold, crisp, with the sun shining in the cloudless vault of heaven and reflecting in countless sparkles from the waves and windows on the canal. The House's gondolier, knowing Dominic's destination, wanted to protest, but Dominic frowned, and Sharibet's kinsman bent to his oar without a word.

Graziano d'Veneto knew Dominic very well by now. When Dominic entered the slave dealer's office, his welcome was

apologetic. "Because of the winter conditions, we have no new arrivals. Do you want to look over the available stock again, or have you a purchase in mind already?"

There had been a thin, dark-haired boy that Dominic had noticed but skipped over on his last visit two weeks ago. "The one you called Smerdy. You still have him? Can you guarantee he is less than nine years of age?"

"Yes, indeed I still have him, Messer Domenico," Graziano said. "But I don't understand why it is that you have such a strict requirement as to age. If they're strong, and comely enough, and the right size..."

"Do you care why I buy them?" he asked with deceptive mildness.

"Well, I assumed—that is, it's none of my business."

"Just so. If he's the correct age, bring Smerdy. If not, find me a boy or girl who is young enough."

The slave trader bowed deeply. "Certainly, Certainly. I'll return in just a moment." He sidled from his office.

Dominic had little hope, not that he had ever had much, that this method of searching for Michel would succeed. It was causing a lot of friction within the House, too. But each dose of human blood made him stronger. Before embarking on the Silk Road, he would not have been able to knock Contarini into the canal from such distance. And if they met again today, Roland would not be able to overpower him so easily, if at all ... Dominic's memory of his shameful defeat in Al-Mansurah still rankled.

But the one injury that had not yet healed was to his Seer's Eyes. He wished, not for the first time, that Sharibet

had consented to give him Nadira. It would be years, if ever, before her sons proved whether they had her ability to see auras.

He was so tired of waiting.

Graziano finally reappeared at the office door, shepherding Smerdy, who was dressed in a new tunic like all his predecessors.

But Smerdy took one look at Dominic and turned to run. Graziano caught him by the hair, a secure hold, though Smerdy bit and flailed and twisted, screaming the whole time. Graziano cuffed him, and repeated the blow, but thin little Smerdy was a fighter. He dug his fingers into the jamb of the door and wouldn't let go, though his nails tore and bled. "No! No! No! Not him! Don't let him kill me, too!"

By now extremely annoyed with Graziano's incompetence, Dominic stood and seized the boy's arm. He could almost see the glowing tip of his wing touch the boy's forehead. But when Dominic squinted, he saw nothing but empty air.

Coerced into quietness, Smerdy went limp, with only a sporadic twitching of his limbs to show that his desire to run away had not been quenched.

"Ser Domenico, I beg your pardon for this unseemly display!" the slave master exclaimed, breathless. "Obviously, this one doesn't have the temperament for a house slave."

"No, that's fine. I'll take him. Have your clerk deliver the receipt to the House, as usual. Here." Dominic tossed a handful of silver coins onto the writing desk, where they settled with a chime.

"Yes, sir. Of course. Have a blessed Nativity. So happy to serve you—"

His voice cut off as Dominic closed the office door behind him. Smerdy, walking stiff-legged to avoid being dragged, writhed within acceptable limits. Tears poured silently from his brown eyes.

Dominic shook the boy's shoulder once when they reached the front door. "You may think you know your fate, boy," he said quietly. "But if you disgrace me on the way back to my House, it'll go worse for you."

Smerdy made a little gasp and said, his voice shaking so hard he was almost incomprehensible, "P-p-p-p-please, s-s-sir. I have to p-p-piss—"

"No doubt," said Dominic. He pointed the slave toward the Ca' Antico's outer wall.

Resistance seemed to drain from Smerdy along with the pungent stream of his urine. He accompanied Dominic meekly enough into the gondola, and sat, shivering and withdrawn, until the boat bumped into the House's dock. Then he started wildly, gathered himself, and made as if to jump into the canal.

Dominic restrained Smerdy with a hand of air, half in and half out of the gondola, then grabbed him by the waist and carried him inside the House.

He didn't get very far. Maryam and Simon Minor, Cosima and the other Raised and Named members of the House stood waiting for him in the entrance hall, their hands clasped at their waists in the ancient attitude of supplication, their faces stony.

Dominic stopped, surprised.

Maryam stepped forward. Her mouth a hard line, she spoke in the House's language. "Lord." Her gaze flicked to the boy, terrified and motionless in Dominic's arms. "It is not fitting, what you do."

"I do nothing against the law," he countered. "Either of the House, or of Venice."

"That may be so," said Cosima. Usually, she preferred invisibility. Today, she stood forward as well. "But you are frightening our children, who are in the House, but not yet of it. Because of your treatment of these slaves, they have begun to fear being Raised and Named."

Simon Minor spoke next. "Lord, you have made our House's name notorious in this city. I cannot do business without men smirking at me and raising their prices. Your name has become a byword for—" He flinched at Dominic's glare, and fell silent.

The maids, several of them crying, pushed their leader forward. She said, her voice wavering, "We can't k-keep disposing of the—the remains. Of the children. Even if they're not of the House."

Dominic looked over the stable lads, and Simon Minor's younger brother and his wife. Though resolute in expression, none of them seemed to have anything to add.

Now it was his turn to speak. "Well, I can see that you have made up your minds to this—"

But before he could finish, Maryam whispered, "Lord, we do not willingly give him to you."

He recoiled from her words. "I bought him! With my own money!"

Simon Minor tossed a bag of coins at Dominic's feet. They clinked heavily against the tiles.

Incredulous, Dominic released his hold on the boy.

Smerdy stumbled forward, and the head maid scurried to scoop him up. She retreated, holding him against her chest like a much younger child.

As one, the kin bowed to him and left, dispersing to their various duties.

Alone in the entrance hall, Dominic rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand, and wondered bleakly what to do next.

* * * *

House of Simon le Pelletier, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—
Feast of St. Agatha, Thursday, February 5th, AD 1260

"I will miss you," Mathilde said, against Blanche's braided hair. "Be a good girl—a good wife."

Blanche clung to the soft fur of her mother's cloak, breathing in the familiar scents of lavender and woodsmoke for the last time. "I will, Maman."

"Will you write when you arrive in Liege? To let me know that all is well with you?"

"I will write you," Blanche promised. "Every week." Her voice was rough with the effort of holding back tears.

The sky was full of stars, but the first gray haze of dawn showed in the east. The street was filled with guests from the betrothal feast last night, gathering now to bid Blanche

farewell. Many of them looked ill-used by the wine they had consumed. Everyone except Blanche had been very merry.

Someone standing nearby belched loudly, and somebody else grumbled in a low voice about the icy pre-dawn wind. Several—the belching one among them—looked as if they had not gone to bed at all, but had sat up all night eating and drinking and gambling.

The eating and drinking had commenced shortly after Blanche had exchanged espousal vows in the presence of the priest and accepted the ring of Evrard de Bressoux, eldest son of Sir Pieter de Bressoux of an estate near Liege.

Maman had hired extra servants, and the neighborhood cookshop had outdone itself with joints and roasts and pies filled with spiced eels and minced pigeon. There had even been jongleurs, to sing and tell funny stories between courses.

Blanche had tried to enjoy herself, but every delicacy and note of music had reminded her that she was being sent far away, to live in the household of Madame and Monsieur de Bressoux, her in-laws. When she turned fifteen, her marriage to Evrard would be consummated, and the two of them would set up a household. And then she would have babies of her own and be a grown-up woman, like Maman.

The thought made her very sad, with an undercurrent of nervousness. What if she couldn't please Madame, and they shut her up in a tower in disgrace? What if she never saw Maman again?

Blanche stood a moment longer in the comfort of Maman's embrace, feeling the brush of fox fur against her cheek. Then

she stepped back and forced herself to smile. "It will be well. I like Evrard."

It was true. He was a slender, brown-haired boy of fourteen, quiet at first but with a cheerful smile. Unknown to his mother, he had brought his pet ferret with him to Ypres, and he and Blanche had formed an instant alliance to conceal the lively little mischief-maker from the adults.

Maman smiled back, her eyes reddened and shiny. "God and the Virgin go with you, sweeting."

A clatter of iron-shod hooves on the frozen mud of the street alerted them to Uncle Michel's arrival. As always, he was accompanied by Brother Aumery, who gave her a solemn wink as Michel awkwardly dismounted. Blanche smiled at them both, but she had eyes only for her tall, golden-bearded uncle. He had come! Last night he had only stayed to witness the betrothal ceremony before hurrying back to the Templar Preceptory for Vespers. Surrounded by well-wishers, she had not had the chance to bid him farewell.

But now he was here.

She rushed over to him, and remembered barely in time that she was not allowed to embrace him. "M-may I have your blessing, uncle?"

Heedless of her new gown and squirrel-trimmed cloak, she knelt at his feet, felt the warm pressure of his hand on her head, and heard his deep voice murmuring in Latin. An unfamiliar sensation washed over her at his touch, as if she were on the verge of remembering something important. She concentrated, but nothing came. It was like standing on the top of a tower on a moonless night, and trying to locate a

building in a darkened city below, where no lamps shone and no hearths glowed.

She saw the sweep of Michel's white mantle as he made the sign of the cross over her. Then it was over, and she rose to her feet. Her eyes met his, then she ducked her head. "I will miss you, and your stories of Egypt," she said. "But I won't forget my duty."

He gave her a smile of surpassing sweetness. "I know. God be with you, Blanche."

"And also with you," she replied. On impulse she took his hand, and kissed it, and drew it to her forehead. "Remember me."

"I'll never forget you."

"Come, child," said Madame de Bressoux. "It is time. We must leave now to reach the Three Swans in Courtrai by sunset."

"Yes, Madame," Blanche said, obediently. Evrard's mother was a stout woman, a little abrupt at times, but kind. Perhaps having to live with a future mother-in-law wouldn't be so bad. Just before retiring last night, Madame had told her that she was looking forward to having a daughter in the house. *Five boys*, she had said with a thin smile. *Past time to even the odds a little.*

Blanche impressed one last glimpse of Uncle Michel in her memory. His gaze was fastened on Lady Cecilia, who had emerged from the house to put a comforting arm around Maman.

Unease mingled with disappointment as Blanche turned away and prepared to mount her mule. Evrard rushed to her

side to help her with grown-up courtesy. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, and Blanche valiantly blinked away her tears. She didn't want him to think that she was sad about going with him.

And then they were off amid shouts of farewell and bawdy well-wishing from the guests. As the little party rode down the street, followed by the creaking bulk of the baggage wagon, one image remained in Blanche's mind—the odd expression on Lady Cecilia's face as she had put her arm around a weeping Maman.

With a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold morning, Blanche finally realized what it had been: hatred.

* * * *

Ca' Dalle Rose, Venice—Maundy Thursday, April 1st, AD 1260

There was a packet of letters awaiting Dominic when he returned from the morning's business. The Alpine passes had finally reopened after a hard winter, and couriers could once again travel between northern Europe and Italy. Most of the letters were from the other Houses across Europe, but one letter—surprisingly—was from Tirgit, directed to him.

He turned the packet over in his hand, wondering: was it good news or ill?

After the mutiny at Christmas, it had been a quiet winter. Dominic had purchased no more children, though he spent the weeks of Lent resenting the kin's edict and desperately wishing he could resume his search for Michel ... *and drink more human blood*, his conscience whispered.

Smerdy had been put to work caring for the kitchen garden, and business in the House of the Rose had gone as usual. Dominic and Simon Minor sold perfume essences and spices to the merchant princes of the city, enough work to keep Dominic from brooding over his losses.

He turned the letter, folded into a stiff square and sealed with the House's stylized rosette. Word had gotten through before the passes closed that Cecilia's journey had gone well. Had something happened important to the House during the winter, the pigeons would have carried news via Marseilles, so this missive could only be of personal interest.

His skin grew cold. What news would Tirgit send only to him? Hands shaking, hope returning like blood to deadened limbs, he broke the seal and skimmed the contents.

Tirgit's clumsy handwriting blazed as if limned in gold and sunlight. He read the lines over and over again, not daring to believe them. Michel was still *alive*? Still himself? Not a new person, reforged on the anvil of the Underworld?

Breath shuddered through Dominic as pain evaporated in the heat of his longing. *Michel. Alive.*

His eyes returned to the letter, and he finally registered the import of the other lines: ... *beg forgiveness for disobeying my lady's order to withhold these tidings...*

All his burning joy ignited into rage. A sudden wind swirled around the bedchamber, strengthening as his anger grew.

Cecilia had dared to keep this information from him. She had lied to him! Suddenly her expedition to Flanders made sense.

Dominic stood in the center of his room, consumed by anger, vaguely aware that he was glowing, the light streaming against the frescoed walls of his room. The wind swept papers from his shelves and his writing table. His bedcurtains billowed wildly, their rings scraping against the rod that supported them.

Cecilia had left Dominic to cool his heels in Venice and make a fool—a monster—out of himself searching for the next incarnation of a man who was still alive. She had *known!*

He smashed a fist of air against the closed door of his room, and saw a pale golden comet streak across the room, trailing a fiery tail. The wood of the doorjamb cracked and the painted wooden panels of the door bulged outward like a sail filled with wind before bursting loose.

The door flew down the stairs, hissing and clattering against the plastered wall, gouging the ivy frescoes.

Anxious heads popped around corners, regarding him with alarm. "What has happened, lord?"

"She knew! She knew and she didn't tell me!" he roared, the words scraping through his throat like ground glass.

"Knew what, Lord?" It was Simon Minor, creeping up the staircase, his golden eyes wide with dismay.

Dominic ignored him, using his power to smash the shelves and his writing table to splintered kindling, then paused, his head and heart both pounding with the exertion.

He would tear the whole House down, all the gods be damned, one lie at a time.

Then his mind cleared as he recognized the import of what he had just done, just seen. The glowing trails of destruction

... his Seer's Eyes were finally healing. For the first time in half a century, he could see an aura.

He looked for an instant at the young Master of the House. A bright flare rose above his forehead, the sign of his Raising and Naming, of his belonging to the House.

Dominic took a slow, ragged breath, closed his Seer's Eyes, and stepped past the broken wood scattered over the floor of his room. He began to issue orders. "Pack me a heavy cloak, extra hosen, and any safe-conducts I might need from here to Flanders. Simon Minor, take over those transactions I was in the middle of—" He talked for some minutes as the younger Simon frowned in concentration.

Bewildered family members sprang to do his bidding. He blinked and noticed the light coming through one of the windows. It was just past noon on a glorious spring day. Four days until Easter, the day symbolizing rebirth.

Oh, yes. He felt reborn all right. *Michel. Alive.* "Maryam."

She stopped, her face a serene mask. But he could See her aura, gray with fear.

"Yes, Lord?"

"Prepare a farewell feast—for the House—and for me."

"A—a farewell, lord?" Her heart stuttered.

"Was my instruction unclear?"

She didn't look at him. Perhaps the carpet bore secret messages that interpreted his orders. At last she swallowed.

"You're leaving us?"

"I'm leaving for Ypres. Tonight."

"But there's no galley leaving for the mainland—"

"That's correct," he said, forbiddingly.

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

"Oh. Then you'll be thirsty, I'm sure. We'll have a feast, even though it's still Lent." She gave him a servant's bow, and fled.

He wandered back into his ruined chambers, feeling light, dazed, and horribly impatient. There were hours to survive until he could leave for Flanders. For Ypres. For Michel.

He savored the thought, closing his eyes. Then he smiled, found some maps, and began planning his journey.

* * * *

The stars were distant and fickle companions as he tore through the sky, high above the wrinkled Alps. His aura wrapped him in a gauze of shimmering light, bronze wings spread wide against the black air. Three hours since he had shaken the dust of Venice from his boots. Three hours to go until he shocked the watcher at the House of the Rose in Bern.

Already he was tired, but it was wonderful to match himself and win against the contrary winds. It had been years—lifetimes—since he had felt this strong, this sure of himself. If he had had the breath to spare, he would have sung.

He would be in Bern by dawn, in Paris by Saturday. And then ... He laughed, shouted with anticipation, and flew as fast as he could.

Chapter Twenty-six

"...by examining and comparing the good or evil in things, we must decide our course. Sometimes we will regard pleasure as an evil and pain as a good."—Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, (341-270 BC)

Templar Preceptory, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Easter Sunday April 4, AD 1260

Dawn gradually lightened the green-glass windows of the round Templar chapel, its light not yet challenging the golden glow from the dozen beeswax tapers lighted in honor of the occasion. In company with the brothers of the Order, Michel stood easily on his good leg, feeling at once happy, sad, and gratified as he watched Aumery kneeling before the altar.

Yesterday, Aumery had been ritually bathed to purify his body and soul. Clad in white robes, he had spent all night in vigil before the altar, preparing himself for his initiation by prayer and meditation. Today was his final day of service to the Knights-Templar. Today, Michel would give his friend the finest gift in his power. Today, Aumery would become a knight.

The brothers chanted the traditional prayers as Michel invested Aumery with a white belt and golden spurs, and instructed him in his duties. Then came the final and most important part of the ceremony: the dubbing.

Aumery knelt. Michel touched the unadorned Templar sword to Aumery's right shoulder, saying: "This is to remind you of the oaths you give and receive." He raised the sword,

then struck Aumery's left shoulder lightly. "This is to remind you of your obligations to use this sword to protect the helpless, serve Justice, and to fight the enemies of God."

"I will remember," Aumery said, as Michel sheathed the sword and handed it to Sergeant-Brother Philippe.

The candles glowed no brighter than the joy that radiated from Aumery's face.

Michel's superiors in Paris had not been entirely pleased at Michel's proposal to give Aumery a suit of mail and weapons from the Order's store of offerings. In a flurry of correspondence during the gray winter months, Michel had insisted that the Rule granted him the right to bestow items of his choice on a friend of the House. Moreover, Aumery deserved them for taking up those responsibilities that Michel's injuries prevented him from fulfilling. In the end, Michel's will and persistence had prevailed.

"Be thou a good knight. Rise, Sir Aumery!" Michel said, his voice ringing with pride.

Aumery came to his feet smoothly. Brother Philippe buckled the scabbard and sword to the narrow belt. Then it was time for the final part of the knighting ceremony.

Facing Aumery, Michel spoke the formula of the *co/ee*: "Let my blow remind thee that a knight's estate brings pain as well as honor." Aumery braced himself, and Michel struck him, hard, on the side of the head. "In remembrance of Him who made you and ordained you knight!"

Aumery staggered, grinning widely, and the other Templars raised a loud cheer in his honor. "Thank you,

Brother Michel," he said, clasping Michel's forearm. "You've done more for me than I ever expected—"

"I will miss you, Aumery. You have been my right arm and my shield. I know that you will do honor to your spurs."

"I shall try," Aumery replied, seriously. Then he added with a mischievous grin: "I've been your right leg, too."

"And my nursemaid long enough. It's time you were a free man, Sir Aumery."

"I do like the sound of that! If only little Blanche could hear it. Wouldn't she be impressed! Now if I had a horse..." Aumery sighed grandly, and they moved away from the altar, amid many congratulatory back slaps. They took their places among the other Brothers assembled in the chapel as the Matins service began.

Thinking of his niece, so far away, Michel almost forgot to impart the next bit of information. Just before Chaplain-Brother Richards began the service, Michel whispered, "Oh—Mathilde has prepared a special celebration dinner for you this noontide." Along with a last surprise...

Aumery clasped his hand over his heart. "God bless her. She's a saint! Do you think she'll share any more recipes?"

Michel laughed, but his spirit was heavy as the service began.

* * * *

After attending the dawn Easter Mass at St. Martin's, Cecilia walked briskly back to the Rosenhuis, her fur-lined cloak drawn tightly around her, and Tirgit following a pace or two behind. Ice-clouded puddles crunched under the wooden

clogs that protected their thin leather slippers from the muddy street. The pale morning sunlight was not yet strong enough to melt white-hazed frost glittering on rooftops and the bare branches of garden fruit trees.

But the swelling willow buds gave a promise of another spring. Perhaps with a promise of a bonus to the workmen, the repairs to the long-uninhabited Chateau du Chancy might be completed in the next week. Fausta de la Rose would be relieved to see her go, Cecilia thought, with a wry smile. It was one thing to belong to a family that acknowledged living deities ... and quite another to host one for an entire winter.

As she approached the House, Cecilia saw Josef awaiting her on the doorstep with the Rosenhuis's Flemish butler, Bertrand. Both men looked anxious, and waved as soon as they caught sight of her.

Cecilia quickened her step. What could have happened in her brief absence? She scanned the gray stone facade of the Rosenhuis. No signs of fire or armed struggle.

"My lady," said Josef, tremulously, as she arrived at the house. "It's Lord Dominic!"

Hideous possibilities flashed through her mind as Tirgit gasped. "What has happened?" she demanded, automatically opening her link to him.

Another shock: he was *here*.

"Nothing, nothing," Josef said, blinking rapidly. "It's just—he arrived without his horse. He said it collapsed several leagues outside the city, and he had to walk the rest of the way. Overnight. But—we had no word of his coming. Did you know?"

In the periphery of Cecilia's vision, Tirgit made an odd movement—almost a flinch. Cecilia turned and saw that her maid's olive complexion had blanched to ivory. Tirgit's stricken glance met Cecilia's for an instant, then skittered away.

The treacherous little fool! Cecilia felt a sick lurch.

"He refuses all refreshment, my lady" added Bertrand, clearly avoiding blame for inadequate hospitality.

Josef frowned. "I worry that he carries bad news."

Cecilia cursed both Tirgit and Dominic silently, and hastened to reassure Josef. "I think not. I believe he is merely eager to investigate something I found." She could not say more in the presence of the butler, but instead made the sign for Apkallu in the House's sign language.

Looking relieved, Josef followed her and Bertrand inside the house. Both of them left her alone to enter the parlor, where a smoky peat fire waged valiant battle against the damp chill as Dominic paced with halting steps.

"Dominic," she said coolly.

Tirgit, creeping along in Cecilia's wake, mumbled, "I'll rouse the cook, Lady," and fled.

"Cecilia." She touched his mind briefly, gaining an impression of great weariness, and under that, resentment and anger. His pale skin was stained with exhaustion and travel-grime, the lines of his face deep-cut.

"Come upstairs to my chamber," she said.—You look half-dead.—Four days from Venice. I flew the entire distance.—

And he was proud of himself! She did not speak again until they had climbed the stairs to the privacy of her chamber, and then he forestalled her.

As soon as she closed the door, he demanded: "Where is Michel? I want to see him."

He was like a clay jar containing Greek fire, Cecilia thought, liable to explode and rain fiery destruction everywhere. And yet he was wholly alive in a way that she had not seen him since Béziers. "Michel is nearby," she said, donning tranquillity like a coat of mail. "But you need refreshment and sleep first."

"Sleep be damned. I *need* to see him. Now," he rasped.

Tirgit entered the room, carrying a tray with one goblet and large jugs each of blood, broth, and milk. She set the tray on the table and bowed gracefully. "Welcome to Ypres, Lord Dominic. I beg you to accept the hospitality of this house before you collapse and alarm Master Josef and his wife."

She filled a goblet and handed it to him, making sure to keep a cautious distance from Cecilia. Dominic's mouth quirked at her bossy demeanor, but he took a grudging sip that quickly turned into a gulp.

Tirgit promptly refilled his goblet, and he drank that off as well. In short order, he finished the blood, the milk, and most of the beef broth. The terrifying gray transparency that overlaid his features began to subside.

Sated at last, Dominic handed back the goblet, then sank down with a groan on the linen chest that stood at the foot of Cecilia's bed.

Cecilia sat next to him, thigh to thigh though the layers of linen, silk, and wool separating them. She wrinkled her nose.

"You need a bath."

"Not before I see him."

"Michel is currently celebrating Easter services at the Templar Preceptory outside the walls. But later today he'll have dinner at his sister's house here in the city. You won't be able to see him for at least six hours." Cecilia turned to her maid. "Tirgit! Arrange a bath."

The girl jumped. "Yes, Lady." She bobbed her head with unaccustomed meekness.

Cecilia added, sharply, "And I'll have words with you, later." By then, perhaps her temper would be cooler. At this moment, she wanted the girl's back laid open with a whip for interfering with her careful plans. In a few hours, thought Cecilia, she might be able to control herself enough to administer a beating that would leave no scars.

When Tirgit had withdrawn, Cecilia swallowed her anger and put a conciliatory hand on Dominic's arm. "I have already taken steps to win his trust, and that of his sister. But we must act carefully!"

"We must convince him that his place is with us."

"And how do you propose we accomplish this?"

"I'll go see him. Talk to him." Dominic fairly quivered with suppressed passion.

Cecilia closed her eyes, heartsick. The old Menelaos would have devised his strategy after cool analysis of the situation. "The last time you tried that, he ran from you. Now, he's the

Preceptor of the Templars. He has nowhere to run. He'll fight you."

Dominic leapt from the bench and began pacing again. "What if you seduced him?"

"As a woman, I am barred from meeting with him unless his chaperones are also in attendance. And he holds to his celibacy, not for lack of trying on the part of this town's ladies." She folded her hands in her lap. "Like Honoria, Michel is very strong-minded. I've been trying to find a subtler way to gain his favor."

"We could just take him for a private conversation."

"And do what? Open the gates of his memory? Without his consent? You know what that might do to him, unprepared as he is. And if he refuses us—" Cecilia shuddered. "The Law is the Law."

* * * *

Dominic waited, though each minute of the morning crept by like an hour. Finally, just before noon, Cecilia led him to the door of Mathilde's neighbor Katrin Merghelynck.

Cecilia knocked. When the porter answered, she informed him that she wished to call upon his mistress. The old man left them standing impatiently in the tiled hall. Cecilia said mind-to-mind:—Katrin loves receiving visitors, especially when her husband is away on business.—

Dominic barely registered Cecilia's words. *Soon*, he thought. What would Michel look like at thirty? Would he welcome Dominic or hate him? What should Dominic say to him? His racing thoughts were interrupted when Katrin

appeared, all smiles and bustling hospitality. She was young, a typical blonde-and-pink Fleming, dressed in sober wool and spotless linen. "Welcome, welcome, Lady Cecilia. This is an unexpected honor!"

"Happy Easter, Vrouw Merghelynck," responded Cecilia. "I wanted to introduce my ... brother, Dominic di Bergama, who has just arrived from Venice."

"What a long journey that must have been, my lord!" exclaimed Katrin.

"It was shorter than you might think," replied Dominic, brusquely.

Katrin's face fell a little, but she brightened at Cecilia's smile. "Please come upstairs. My parlor is much warmer—can I offer you some hot wine?"

Dominic climbed narrow stairs that smelled of roasting lamb and cinnamon pastries, following the two women and wondering why Cecilia had brought him here. Then he understood: the parlor overlooked the street directly across from Mathilde's house.

He settled himself on the cushioned window seat, and waited impatiently for the refreshments to arrive. As soon as the maidservant closed the parlor door behind her, Cecilia reached out with her aura and sent Katrin into a deep sleep.

Dominic flung open the window, looking eagerly down the length of the street below. It seemed like centuries before Mathilde's dinner guests arrived. There were six men—four of them were wearing dark Templar habits, one in a white mantle, and the last in secular clothing.

Dominic recognized Michel's tall, golden-bearded form. A second later, he invoked his Seer's Eyes, and saw the proof. Michel's bright wings eclipsed the feeble auras of the ordinary mortals around him. Dominic tensed, gripping the window frame. How he wanted to fly down, to greet Michel and carry him away!

The timber-and-plaster houses lining the street echoed with the sounds of laughter and jesting.

"Tell us true, Sir Aumery," said one of the brown-robed Templars to his secular companion, who was clean-shaven and wearing a yellow tunic with a dark blue mantle. "Now that you're a free man, what are you going to do first?"

Sir Aumery grinned. "I'm going to grab the first pretty woman I see, and kiss her!"

Everyone laughed, and then Mathilde opened her door. Dominic saw that she, too, possessed the bright aura of an Apkallu, but it was tarnished with the blotches of disease.—Ninharsag. May we meet again!—came Cecilia's thought.

"And here she is, brothers!" Aumery cried, seizing Michel's sister and giving her lips a hearty buss.

Mathilde gave a surprised shriek. Laughing, she pushed Aumery away. "For that, you bold seducer, I have a special revenge!"

A groom emerged from a nearby alley and led a splendid chestnut destrier towards the men. Aumery's jaw dropped when the groom handed him the reins.

"Congratulations on your spurs, Sir Aumery. This horse—" Mathilde's voice dissolved into rough coughing. Dominic felt

how the sound tore at Cecilia's heart, but his entire attention was on Michel, leaning quietly on his crutch.

Mathilde continued: "This horse—for all you've done for my brother, and for our family, I want to give—"

"Madame Mathilde!" Aumery choked. He cast an awed glance at the tall Ardennais gelding.

"Treat him well, Sir Aumery, and he will bear you to the ends of the earth," Michel said. "Though I hope you will not go so far!"

"Brother Michel, Madame Mathilde, thank you, thank you!"

Michel made a fending-off gesture. "A hundred times you've thanked me already. You earned your spurs by your faithful service. No more thanking, I beg you!"

The other Templars laughed.

"Brothers, please come in for dinner," Mathilde said. "Sir Aumery, I promise that your horse will be waiting for you when you're finished!"

Aumery left off stroking his new mount's nose and handed the reins reluctantly back to the groom, but he looked longingly over his shoulder as he walked away.

"You'll be riding out in the morning, then?" Michel asked, as they entered the house.

The door closed, and the only sound in the street was the jingling of the gelding's harness as the groom led him back to the stables.

Dominic turned to Cecilia, feeling as joyful as sunlight on snow. "All these years ... I had hoped, but I had not really expected—Cecilia, we *must* convince him!"

Cecilia placed her hand over his. "We shall try. Now come away, and get some sleep."

* * * *

Templar Preceptory, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Monday,
May 3, AD 1260

The weeks that followed Aumery's departure were lonely for Michel. Bare-branched April ripened into a mild May, and he frequently found himself staring out the open window of his office, breathing the fragrance of pink-blossomed fruit trees. Then, guiltily, he would force his attention back to the stacks of requisitions, authorizations, accounts, and correspondence that awaited his decisions.

He wondered how Aumery was faring with his sweetheart, and Blanche with her betrothed. Were they well? Happy?

Perhaps because it was spring, or because Aumery had left for the love of a woman, Michel found himself increasingly tormented by unchaste thoughts. Celibacy, of all his vows, had been the easiest to keep, because the chronic pain in his leg dampened desire. But now, with his pain easing, he began to notice soft curves under brightly colored gowns, tendrils of hair peeking out from headdresses, the white skin of cheek and throat.

He was particularly disturbed by Lady Cecilia, who, despite her move to the Chateau du Chancy, frequently accompanied his sister to Mass and stayed afterward for dinner. Michel would find himself laughing at a riddle-game played over wine and wafers, then meeting Cecilia's gaze with an odd jolt in the pit of his stomach.

He could not stop thinking about her. The scent of her sandalwood perfume haunted him, as did the vision of her red mouth. At Mass just yesterday, he had been inundated with the desire to taste her lips. Although he hurried to pray forgiveness for his sinful thoughts, he could not banish her image from his mind. Neither prayer, nor fasting, nor harsh penance freed him from his torture.

Now, captive at his desk with birds singing outside his window, Michel's head drooped forward and his eyes grew heavy.

She stands in the cathedral, close enough to touch, her face an alabaster glow in the twilight. The scent of sandalwood surrounds him like incense. She places her slender hand upon his arm with an enchanting smile. She speaks. He sees her ripe mouth moving; her delicate pink tongue, licking those full lips...

Helpless, he watches as she releases the ties of her gown and removes her wimple. Stripped to her shift, she faces him with her unbound hair falling in inky waves to her knees. He bends his head to kiss her, to feast on her mouth like a starving man. He tangles his fingers in her hair, excited by its softness and the musk that rises from her skin.

She sighs as she draws him closer. Her cool fingers brush the back of his neck, and he wants only to tear their garments away and unite with her. Sinking down, he urges her legs apart and enters her. She moans and clings to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders...

Michel woke, nearly toppling off his stool. He was sweating and trembling in the aftermath of an unexpected climax,

blinking at the late afternoon sunlight washing the disordered stacks of parchment with pale gold. He glanced around guiltily, wondering if any of the brothers had noticed his sinful dreaming. But no one came to bother him except some inquisitive bees from the garden.

Ashamed of his weakness, Michel picked up his quill and began to write, repeating Paternosters in his head. But both prayers and work were unsuccessful at driving the vivid, carnal dream from his mind.

* * * *

Chateau du Chancy

"When will he be ready to accept our invitation?" Dominic asked yet again, as he paced back and forth next to Cecilia's bed. They officially had separate chambers in the Chateau du Chancy, to keep up the guise of being brother and sister.

"Why is it taking so long?"

Cecilia sighed and stared up at the bed hangings. "I dislike invading his thoughts. It's exhausting. He resists my every suggestion."

Dominic's mouth turned downward in displeasure. "Then we must do something else. What does he want? What does he need? Let us find a lever to move him."

She rolled over, hiding her face in the pillow.

"You do have something! What is it?" Dominic leaned over the bed and stroked her hair. "Tell me," he wheedled.

She hated that tone in his voice, the obsession in his eyes. "I brought with me—"

His skilled fingers traced their way down the sensitive skin of her throat.

She shivered with pleasure, then continued. "Sharibet met Roland's brother in Acre, and identified him as Utu-who-was. He refused consent, and was too old besides, so she gave orders that he should be followed, and protected. He sailed from Acre last year, but died of fever in Cyprus. The kin there sent his possessions to me. I have the letter Roland wrote to Mathilde." She swallowed as Dominic's hands moved lower, then sighed in frustration as he pushed himself abruptly away. It was far too risky for him to kill someone here. But how she wished!

Dominic grunted thoughtfully and resumed his pacing. "Were you ever going to mention this to me?"

"I didn't know about Mathilde. And as for Michel—should I have given you false hope? He must be nearly thirty now. Even if he does consent, he may not survive Transformation."

He disregarded her warning. "So, if Robert died before delivering the letters ... Does the family know about Roland?"

"Mathilde prays for the repose of Roland's soul every Sunday. And I believe Roland's supposed death is the reason Michel joined the Templars. He blames you."

Dominic shrugged. "Where are the letters now? I want to read them."

Ah, gods who never were, this was getting worse and worse. "In my jewel casket."

Dominic found the box and broke it open, disdaining the key. He pulled out the packet of letters and seated himself to read them.

"Yes," he said at last. "This may work."

He jumped up to pace again. "Now when can we deliver—damn! We'll have to wait until Sunday Mass. I hate this waiting," he said, stalking back and forth like a lion in a cage.

* * * *

St. Martin's Church, Ypres, Duchy of Flanders—Sunday,
May 9, AD 1260

The scent of sandalwood coiled like a serpent beneath the hymns and sermon. Michel gritted his teeth and resolutely faced the front of the church. But he could see Cecilia's gold-embroidered sleeve out of the corner of his eye. She knelt alongside Mathilde, their heads bowed in identical attitudes of prayer.

In his dream last night Cecilia had also been kneeling, but in the very opposite of prayer. Her fingers had been cool against his heated flesh, and her mouth—

Michel stifled a groan, and focused on the priest's Latin phrases, willing the holy words to drive away the terrible weakness of his flesh. He did not blame Cecilia for his plight. It was his own carnal nature that made him take her delicate flirtation as a challenge to his vows.

The prayer ended, and Michel staggered to his feet. His leg, stiffer than usual, twinged fiercely. He missed Blanche's quick, unobtrusive hand under his elbow.

The priest read from the Gospels: "Beloved: Each good gift and every best favor comes from above, comes down from the Father of the lights of the sky, who has never known change, who is never shadowed over ... So strip away

everything filthy, every vicious excess. Humbly welcome the revelation that has struck its roots into you, that has the power to save your souls."

Oh God. How he wanted to save his soul!

A draft stirred, and sent another coil of Cecilia's perfume to snare his thoughts.

* * * *

Cecilia bided her time. After the priest droned the final blessing, she turned to Mathilde and Michel. "I was late this morning because a courier arrived, bringing sad tidings."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Mathilde said, putting a hand on Cecilia's arm.

Cecilia bowed her head. "It's not my grief, I'm regret to say. I received word that your cousin, Sir Robert d'Agincourt, departed this life last year."

"How did he die?" Michel asked.

Mathilde crossed herself. "Poor cousin Robert! Do Aunt Blanche and Uncle Ulrich—his parents—know yet?"

"He was struck down by a fever while traveling home on a ship owned by the House of the Rose," Cecilia said, keeping her link open to Dominic. "The letters he carried were sent here. Mathilde, one of the letters is addressed to you."

She motioned to Tirgit, who instantly broke off her animated conversation with one of the handsome young van der Meusen sons and came over. In the aftermath of Cecilia's calculated punishment at Eastertide, Tirgit had been punctilious in her duties, and considerably less impudent.

Detaching a small package of oiled parchment from her girdle, Tirgit offered it to Michel with a curtsy.

As Michel accepted it, he felt Tirgit smoothly slide a folded note into his sleeve. Michel raised his eyebrows in surprise, but she returned his glance with bland innocence and backed away.

Mathilde had not noticed the by-play. "Why would Robert have a letter for me?"

"He was so good to Roland and me while we were in Egypt, and afterward, when I first joined the Order..." Michel lifted the packet into a beam of sunshine coming from the high windows of the choir. "This is very fine handwriting. Shall I open it and read it for you, Mati?"

"Yes, please." Mathilde moved slightly to stand with her brother in the shaft of light.

* * * *

Michel took his belt knife and severed the ribbons fastening the packet. The unbroken wax seal bore the impression of a stylized, many-petaled rose, and broke in brittle fragments.

He unfolded the oiled parchment and a string of blue faience beads slid out. With a start, he recognized them, and remembered how angry he had been with Roland for buying them.

Wondering how they had come to be sent to Mathilde, Michel caught them around his wrist. He opened several closely-lettered pages and began to read out loud.

"To the most noble Lady Mathilde, widow to Simon le Pelletier in Ypres, from Roland d'Agincourt, known as Arjumand abd al-Warda for these eight years, written by my own hand at Acre on the Feast of St. Thomas—"

The subtle application of rouge showed starkly artificial against Mathilde's bloodless cheeks. "I thought—you said—that Roland was dead."

"Abd al Warda..." Michel's heart was racing. "Slave of the Rose," he translated, watching Cecilia's face for a reaction. Her expression was politely interested, but no more. *Does she know about Sir Dominic?* he wondered, not for the first time.

"We never found his body, Tilde," he said, gently. "Sir Dominic captured him, didn't he, Lady Cecilia? Captured him, leaving only his surcote behind." He closed his eyes in a spasm of pain and regret.

"Please, what does the rest of the letter say?" Mathilde begged, not giving Cecilia the opportunity to answer. She held out her hand for the packet and Michel gave it to her.

"Mine own dear sovereign lady," Mathilde continued, in a quavering voice. "I recommend me unto you and send you God's blessing and mine. My brother Robert has brought me tidings of the family after these many years spent in service to a noble Saracen lady—" Her voice cracked. "I can't believe it! He's alive! Praise God!" But before she could read any more, she broke into hysterical weeping.

* * * *

Cecilia and Michel towed Mathilde to a nearby bench and made her sit. Cecilia passed her a clean handkerchief and

tried to soothe her while keeping one eye on Michel. She saw the play of emotions crossing his face as he avidly read the closely-written pages he had snatched back from Mathilde's hands.

All the while, he fingered the blue beads as if he recognized them. When he came to the end of the letter he carefully refolded the pages and bowed in Cecilia's direction. "I thank you for this gift, my lady," he said, a little hoarsely. "It is good to know that my cousin lives and thrives. Trust Roland to have found himself a Saracen princess!"

His sister smiled as she dried the last of her tears. "Roland. Oh, do you think I could write him in return?"

"Allow me to offer the services of the couriers of my House," Cecilia said. "That will be the fastest way to correspond with your cousin."

"Thank you." On impulse, Mathilde leaned forward and kissed Cecilia's cheek. "You have been so good to us."

Startled and discomfited by this impulsive display of affection, Cecilia gave a gracious nod, collected Tirgit, and took her leave. Enough meddling for one day.

* * * *

Back at Mathilde's house, Michel sat with his sister and Sergeant-Brother Philippe in the parlor as she read the letter again. When she was done, he offered his arm to help her rise, and the stiff crinkle of parchment inside his sleeve reminded him of the note Tirgit had slipped him.

Had Cecilia somehow sensed his shameful lust for her, to suddenly act so boldly? He knew himself for a sinner, so he

contained his curiosity as he and Brother Philippe followed Mathilde to the house's great chamber for Sunday dinner.

Mathilde, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright with joy, enjoyed the excellent roast capon and spiced croquettes of fish with a hearty appetite.

By contrast, Michel scarcely ate a bite. His initial joy had burnt down to a vast relief that he had not been responsible for Roland's death, after all. And then jealousy set in. Was his cousin truly as happy as his letter had represented him? During all the years of his penance among the Templars, Roland had been living in luxury, experiencing adventures that Michel had only dreamed of!

Roland. Wealthy, honored ... and apostate, living in a House of reputed sorcerers.

Michel had a disconcertingly vivid flash of Mansurah, and his cousin in a turban and Saracen robes, standing over the bloodied corpse of a knight.

A throbbing headache seized him, nearly blinding in its intensity. Michel drained several cups of spiced and sugared wine in an attempt to deaden the pain, and forced himself to pay attention to Mathilde's chatter as she debated what tidbits of news to include in her letter to Roland. The servants brought out a course of stewed eel and a salad of fresh greens with sugared violets, but Michel could only push a small portion around on his trencher while his headache wielded mace and mallet inside his skull.

Finally, it was time to return to the Preceptory for Nones. The cool breeze of the summer afternoon cleared his head, and the headache began to recede.

It was past sunset when Michel finally found the privacy to light a candle in his office and read Cecilia's note. The expensive paper had been perfumed with sandalwood, and the faint scent made his pulse pound.

Brother Michel, I recommend me unto you & etc.

As you have heard by now, your kinsman, Sir Roland d'Agincourt, has taken service with the House of the Rose. I wish to meet with you, privately, and soon, regarding a related matter.

By my own hand, Cecilia le Byzantine.

He was deeply disappointed. He had thought her so noble, generous, and true. Yet here was proof of her duplicity. She knew that a private meeting would be a violation of his vows and the ruin of his career.

He had been the recipient of too many missives just like this one to fall for her ruse. 'Related matters' indeed! Did she take him for a fool?

Well, maybe she did. And maybe he was. Look at him, mooning over Roland's death for almost ten years, while his cousin enjoyed wealth, travels, and a beautiful mistress.

Michel clutched his head. Envy and sorrow and gladness and confusion roiled through him. He was glad Roland was alive, but his cousin's supposed death had been the beginning of his own life with the Templars. Now the foundations of that life proved rotten and crumbling.

Parchment crackled under his elbow—another requisition for men and equipment for the endless struggle in the Holy Land. Sometimes it seemed he pushed men and horses into a bottomless maw which never gave anything back save it was

mangled. And every year, the reason for all the effort slipped further away.

Could Christians ever recapture Jerusalem again? What difference did doing his duty make? His hand crushed Cecilia's note. The scent of sandalwood ignited his sinful lust.

Yes, he wanted Cecilia. He wanted to go to her, and sin, and forget the wasteland of his life for one sweet hour.

But when that hour was done, he would be stripped of his honor, his rank, of the very clothes on his back, forced to eat his meals with the dogs on the floor. For there would be no concealing his crime. He could not sin, and lie about it. As a Templar, he was sworn never to speak a falsehood.

If he had never joined the Templars, he could have gone to her, swived her, and worried only about the sin of fornication. But if he were not a Templar, what would he be? A landless cripple in his father's hall. Or dead long since, in Egypt or elsewhere.

His life as a Templar had meaning, even if it wasn't always as exciting or interesting as the life that Sir Dominic had once promised him. He was old enough now to understand the truth of the Order's promise to him: "*... much pain and suffering, for the glory of God.*" He had given his word, and must keep it to be true to himself.

Taking up the crumpled scrap of note, Michel smoothed it out and scrawled across it:

Lady, you know I cannot. Blessings of the Holy Virgin Mother be upon you.

He signed the note with his initials, and sealed it. Calling one of the sergeant-brothers, he instructed that the note be

Glass Souls
by Michaela August

sent to the Chateau du Chancy by a lay courier. No need to throw into temptation's way any of the brothers whose souls were in his keeping.

Even after the courier departed, the scent of sandalwood lingered. But he was resolute. He had made his decision long ago. And he would live with the consequences.

Chapter Twenty-seven

"The king has risen again, translated to heaven, and the bodily form shines forth ... Their magic is working within him! Nevermore can his heavenly glory be gone from him. He has taken unto himself The genius of every god."—Inscription from the tomb of Unis-Ankh, 2428-2407 BC

Chateau du Chancy—Feast of Gordianus and Epimachus,
Monday, May 10th, AD 1260

The note with Michel's curt reply sat on Cecilia's writing table. She smoothed it. Sunlight streamed into her chamber, but nothing could warm her.

"We should leave Ypres before the summer is too far advanced," she advised Dominic through a shell of serenity.

"You're giving up so soon?" Dominic scowled from the steps that led up to Cecilia's high, curtained bed.

"I have lost his trust now."

Dominic was sitting, elbows on knees, head on hands, but now he moved, freeing his right arm to form a fist, as if to strike her. "He doesn't know what we want to offer him. Invite him again."

"No." She drew a deep breath and folded the parchment. "He won't put aside his vows. He's too old. It's too late for him in this life."

"No!" Dominic's gray eyes blazed. "We have to try again. Let me approach him. I'll tell him—"

She shook her head, grieving that his obsession, like sunlight transmitted through a convex glass, had burned his

reason to ash. "We may not tell him any more. We must honor his decision and hope to find him again someday."

"No!" he repeated. "I'm done waiting for him. He's here, now. I'm going to—"

Oh, gods that never were. She stood to face him, trembling. "Dominic, the Law forbids—"

"Damn you and your Law!" He stood, too, his weight balanced on his forward foot, his right hand opening and clenching.

"It's our Law, and has been since the beginning of days!" Cecilia said. "No one shall be Transformed without consent."

His fist opened as if throwing something away. "He's one of us. That means he's already given his consent. He just doesn't remember it. If we Transform him, and return his memories ... He would understand. We should take him."

"No! I forbid you any further contact with him." She tried to enforce her command with mental coercion, but Dominic, sensitive to her intrusion, broke her bonds like cobwebs, glared at her, and strode out of the chamber.

Cecilia fell back into her chair, horrified. She bent over the table and buried her face in her hands. She could lose both Dominic and Michel here.

Mathilde. Robert. Menelaos. Honoria. Anna. Raymond-Soleil. Horst ... The roll call of her dead was endless.

* * * *

The day had been interminable as Dominic made and discarded complicated plans and waited out of Cecilia's reach for night to fall. Now scudding clouds blown in from the sea

alternately veiled and revealed the gibbous moon as he flew toward the Templar Preceptory. Below, Ypres crouched within its walls, church spires black against the moonlight, windows smoldering with the dim glow of candles and hearths.

Everything looked beautiful. He was going to fetch Michel.

The Templar Preceptory was a complex of buildings just outside the southwest gate of the city. A round chapel adjoined a large building that combined dormitory and refectory. It faced a large courtyard hemmed by kitchen, stables and a windowless square brick storehouse. The practice yard, kitchen garden and orchard extended to the west, and the entire compound was surrounded by a high brick wall.

He passed easily over the wall and descended to the crenellated roof of the chapel. Across the courtyard, the faint yellow glow of two lanterns showed where yawning sergeant-brothers stood armed watch before the storehouse. The dormitory was, as far as he could tell, unguarded.

Candlelight glowed through the shutters on the second floor. Dominic soared over to the dormitory and braced the leather soles of his boots against the bottom of a window frame, the bulk of his weight supported two stories above the ground by his will alone. He gripped the stone traceries of the window arches with one hand and, with the other, used his knife to lift the simple latch. One shutter swung slowly out.

He slipped through the unglazed window.

Inside, a peat fire warmed a double-row of pallets evenly spaced along opposite walls. More than a dozen men snored, snug under striped rugs. Every pallet had a small chest at its

foot, with a folded dark habit laid neatly on the lid, a pair of shoes, and sometimes a sword, placed next to each.

As he padded through the dormitory, Dominic laid a glamour of deep sleep over the men. But he reached the end of the row without finding Michel.

Where was he?

Cautiously he opened the door at the end of the room opposite the hearth, and found the stair landing. Silently, he closed the door behind him and crossed to the door on the other side.

Listening, he heard only one sleeper behind this door. His hand shook as he lifted the latch and peered through shadows that moved with the wind-blown clouds. The Templar-mandated lamp here burned steadily, washing the plastered stone walls with amber light.

Dominic saw a man, asleep in a cocoon of blankets, wearing a nightcap that nearly concealed his features but could not conceal the wings of his aura. Hoping with all his might, Dominic touched the sleeper with his power to make him slumber more deeply.

The man sighed. He rolled slightly, and taut lines of pain around his mouth relaxed.

Dominic's breath caught. At last, he was face-to-face with his beloved again. Tenderly he brushed golden hair from Michel's brow before pulling back the striped blanket. Like all other Templars, Michel slept clad in his tunic, braies, and hosen.

Dominic stooped to lift him, rejoicing in the weight of warm muscle and solid bone, smelling the sharp fragrance of

myrrh. His arms tightened around Michel's unconscious body as he felt a surge of happiness.

No more searching. No more waiting. He had Michel, here. All would finally be well. Michel was strong, as Honoria had been strong. Cecilia's fears would be for naught, her foolish regulations unnecessary.

Dominic grinned as he imagined the other Templars awakening to find that Michel had vanished without taking his habit, shoes, or sword. But by that time, it would be too late. Michel would be his.

* * * *

Michel awoke, the scent of sandalwood teasing his nose and the sounds of cursing in a foreign language battering his ears.

His eyes snapped open, and he gasped.

Lady Cecilia, nude and as glorious as an ancient statue, sat propped up by large pillows beside him. The coverlet had slipped down to her waist and her unbound hair flowed like a dark river over her shoulders, only partially concealing her firm, round breasts.

They were in a bed, together. He had dreamed this a dozen times, a hundred times. But never had he imagined she would be haranguing someone he couldn't see while he lay next to her.

Then she noticed he was awake.

Instantly she quieted, and her expression changed from fury to sweet concern far too quickly for the latter to be genuine.

She leaned close to him, her hair brushing his face, and at its touch he realized this was no dream. He was not safely asleep on his pallet, dreaming of wickedness for which he could do penance, then forget.

Shock ignited him. He lunged to escape, only to be shoved back into the soft billow of featherbed by an invisible hand.

"Wha—why?" Michel sputtered, a dozen questions colliding in his mind, and none escaping the confines of his throat. What had happened to him? How had he gotten here?

And most importantly, *why* was he here?

"You fool!" Cecilia said, but not to Michel. Why was she so angry?

Michel struggled to rise again but an unseen weight pressed down on his chest, pinning him. He craned his neck frantically, trying to see around the scarlet drape of the bed curtains.

Then a man stepped forward into the soft glow of candlelight. He had a strong, ruthless face, the dark hair framing it divided by a white blaze. If he had a beard, he would look just like—

Michel's heart clenched in terror. "God save me!"

"I mean you no harm, Michel." Dominic's smile seemed genuinely joyful. "It is good to meet again."

"Release him!" Cecilia commanded.

The weight on Michel's chest vanished, but his questions intensified. He sat up among the tumbled pillows, trying to keep his eyes averted from Cecilia's bare breasts.

Trying—and failing. Even in this moment of peril, the lure of her body was as strong as fear. So he faced Sir Dominic. "I assume you had me brought here. What do you want?"

"Yes, my lord," Cecilia said acidly. "Pray, explain to Brother Michel all he desires to know."

"When you declined Cecilia's invitation, I feared that you did not know all that you were refusing."

Dominic's intense gray stare and his kindly tone of voice unnerved Michel. He realized he was panting and he made himself stop. He could not slow the racing of his heart. "What she offered, whatever you might offer—I renounce it. I saw what your sorcery wrought upon my companions in Egypt. You killed them all."

And befuddled them first ... the dreams! His dreams of Cecilia had been sent to snare him! Michel realized that Cecilia and Dominic must have been weaving spells against him for weeks.

"Not all." Dominic's smile turned unpleasant. "Only those who harmed our House. Sir Jean survived. As did Roland. Both of them took service with the House of the Rose and they are both happily alive to this day."

Roland's letter had seemed too good to be true. Had he been captured like this, and offered conversion or death? Poor Roland. *God, send me strength.* "As apostates, far from their homes and families," Michel said, resolutely.

"No, as members of our family, now." Dominic spread his hands, a merchant's gesture. "We offer you your rightful place in the House of the Rose. You can have health, long life, the secrets of magic."

"I won't sell my soul," Michel said, quietly. Did Dominic think he had already paid for it with his hundred gold bezants? Would Michel's years of penance among the Templars count for nothing, in the end?

Cecilia slipped a thin silk robe over her shoulders and gave Michel a tentative smile, then put a hand over the juncture of his hip and thigh. "Accept our offer, and your soul will remain your own, I swear it. And your body will be healed of its injuries."

The light pressure felt like a burning brand through the linen of his braies, and the pain receded like frost in sunlight. Mother of God! She had been bewitching him all along!

"We wish only to restore you to your rightful place. You are a member of my family, whether you recall it or not."

"How dare you imply—! My father, like the blessed King, is a faithful man! He has no bastard children. You lie, if you claim any relation to me!"

Cecilia blinked and quickly removed her hand from his leg.

"All the promises I made you in Egypt were true," Dominic said, stepping closer.

He felt the pull of their desire as if it were his own, and the rightness of the communion that they offered.

It was a strange tableau, Michel thought with sudden detachment, as they awaited his answer: he, clad only in his underclothes and hosen, in bed with a beautiful naked woman, being offered everything he had ever dreamed...

Before he could betray himself, he said, "You know I cannot accept your offer. I have already taken vows with the Templars."

"You won't reconsider?" Cecilia pleaded. "Is there nothing we can offer you?"

"No. No matter how many times you ask," Michel said. He saw Dominic's expression, and knew that he had sealed his doom.

"Michel." Cecilia's head was bowed, and her hair veiled her face. "We have an unbreakable law that protects us: 'Who knows our secret must be silent, dead, or one of us.' Since you will not become one of us, will you swear to be silent?"

Miserably, he said, "Lady, why do you torment me? You know I am a knight of the Church. I cannot promise to protect sorcery, nor can I swear you a false oath."

"Oh, Brother Michel, I am most sorry." She shot a venomous glance toward Dominic. Then she reached to take his face in her hands, implacability underlying the sorrow in her expression. "Forgive me!"

He lunged backwards, sensing the danger in her touch, his hands and heels scrambling for purchase on the smooth sheets, but his crippled leg and the soft quagmire of featherbed impeded his escape.

Help arrived from an unexpected source: Dominic seized her wrists. "No. I won't allow it!"

Cecilia's expression hardened. She tried to free her hands but could not. "Dominic, no. The Law—"

Behind Dominic, Michel saw Cecilia's maid, eyes wide, hand clapped over her mouth, emerging from a sleeping alcove tucked behind the massive fireplace. Keeping her horrified gaze fastened on the three of them, she edged towards the door leading downstairs to the great hall.

Opening the door, she slipped through and vanished. Michel hoped against hope that she had gone to fetch aid against the sorcerers that held him captive, but he suspected she had merely abandoned him to his fate.

Dominic said, "I won't let you kill him. I won't chance losing him again."

Cecilia said something to him in the same language she had used earlier. Her imperious manner vanished. Now she was simply pleading.

Dominic listened to her, shrugged, then, faster than Michel could see, he released his grip on Cecilia's hands and dragged Michel off the bed. Michel struggled as Dominic carried him across the bedchamber to Tirgit's alcove.

"Stop fighting," Dominic commanded, in a low voice. "I'm trying to save your life. Don't move until I return."

Dominic dropped him onto something soft. The air around Michel suddenly shimmered and became dense. He tried to sit up, but could not. He felt as if he were trapped in the thick mud of an invisible bog.

Dominic disappeared, leaving Michel to take stock of his shadowy surroundings. Tirgit's pallet still held her warmth. There was some kind of icon mounted on the back of the fireplace. Gold leaf gleamed in the sudden moonlight breaking through clouds and an unglazed arched window opposite. It was not, as Michel had suspected, a Byzantine icon of Virgin and Child. It was a portrait of a beautiful brown-skinned woman with golden eyes, holding a bouquet of roses.

Through the closed door came renewed sounds of argument in that incomprehensible—and naggingly familiar—language.

With an immense effort, Michel turned his head towards the window. So near! He tried to move his arms and legs, but he was helpless as a jellied eel in aspic. How had Dominic spun this invisible net?

And how could he have misjudged Cecilia so badly? He had believed her overtures of friendship, believed her to be modest and virtuous. And if someone had told him yesterday that she would try to snap his neck while gazing at him with eyes that melted with regret, he would have dismissed such a claim as madness.

Yet, even now, Dominic begged for Michel's life.

Michel wanted to live, but there had been something very disturbing about Dominic's gaze. His expression during that entire strange scene in the bedchamber had been that of a heartbroken lover, rather than an avaricious merchant determined to acquire a prize.

Dread shivered Michel's bowels. If there was a fate worse than dying at Cecilia's small white hands, it might be having Dominic rescue him.

He tried to break the invisible bonds that held him, straining every muscle, until the sweat ran stinging into his eyes. He blinked rapidly, at last recognizing the futility of his effort. He would not be able to overcome Black Arts with brute force.

Michel began to recite a Paternoster, willing the Latin phrases to drive away the panic that threatened to choke him.

* * * *

Wearily, Cecilia said again, "It's hopeless. You heard him: Michel will not compromise. We have to return him to the Underworld." The thought made her sick, but it was the Law.

Dominic snapped. "I want more time with him! How can he give consent if he doesn't know the alternatives?"

"He knows enough," she said, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. She had known it would come to this. "He's answered us three times. He won't change his mind."

"But we haven't tried—"

"What else do you think to do?" she shrieked. "Will you torture him and break his mind? Will you cozen him with sweet gifts? Then, having broken his vows to the Templars, how shall he keep his oaths to the House? He has not consented! He will not! Let him go!"

"I can't!" Now Dominic seemed to crumple as if under a weight too heavy to bear. "How can I let him go? He—"

In an instant she stood on the bed step, holding him in her arms as his breath shuddered through both their bodies. "I know. I know. I tried to protect you from this."

"I want him," Dominic's head fell against her shoulder.

"Shh. I know."

"He's the only person who's made me feel alive since Béziers."

—I know. You don't want my love, or Sharibet's.—I just don't feel—He broke away from her, as if ashamed at his outburst, or their contact, to lean against the post of the bed, facing away from her. "How can I entrust our reunion to the will of the Fates? He is here now. When Michel remembers who he was—"

"It won't matter. Honoria loved *Menelaos*," she said, cruelly, and saw her jab rewarded by Dominic's flinch. "And if you Transform him without his consent, he will think himself a demon. He will neither thank you nor love you. He may even go mad."

Dominic drew breath to protest, but Cecilia forestalled him. "And one more thing: the House will not protect him if he will not agree to serve as its Protector. You must let him go."

"You mean I must kill him," Dominic snarled. "After all these years of searching, and waiting..." His hand clenched on the bedpost till it groaned.

"Yes."

* * * *

Michel was finishing his second Paternoster when the returning pain in his thigh brought the memory of how he had escaped Dominic's malevolent spell in Egypt.

His eyes flew open. Would his prayers succeed again? He started his third Paternoster, tentatively moved first one arm, then the other, then sat up. The air had lost its thick consistency, praise God!

His Templar training stood him in good stead now. Years of reciting Paternosters while working at his assigned tasks gave

him the ability to undress without losing his place among the Latin phrases. Swiftly, he peeled off each knitted leg of his hosen and tied them around his waist.

Dominic and Cecilia were still arguing in the other room. Please God, let them believe him helpless for a while longer!

Assured of secure footing without the woolen stockings covering his feet, Michel gripped the beveled stone frame of the unglazed window, and carefully maneuvered his stiff leg over the bottom of the frame. He sat on the sill for a moment, seeking a grip for his toes on the ridged and fluted stone blocks that sheathed the building. The moon had vanished behind thick clouds. It would rain soon.

Half in and half out of the window, Michel assessed his surroundings. He had come to know the chateau well while overseeing the renovations that Cecilia had ordered.

Cecilia's bedchamber was on the second story at one end of the main building, which consisted of a great hall, kitchen, buttery, pantry, and parlor built over large cellars. A chapel, a plaster-and-timber row of servants' lodgings, and the stables completed the perimeter around a roughly rectangular courtyard. Looking down, Michel saw the thatched roof of the servant's lodgings directly below him, where they abutted the main building in an "L" shape.

Clinging to the chilly stone of the window frame, he carefully drew out his good leg, then inched painfully a few feet to his right, clinging to the small niches and knobs of the building's façade. His bad leg quivered under the strain as he groped blindly for the next handhold. When would his captors realize that he had escaped?

Let me get to the gate, he prayed, continuing to whisper Paternosters.

Then he let go, dropping onto the yielding surface of the thatched roof. Tight bundles of dried reed crackled loudly as he landed on them, and broken ends stabbed painfully into his buttocks. He wriggled down the incline of the roof, then dropped six feet to the ground.

The impact drove through his bad leg like a dozen daggers. He kept himself from screaming with a gasp, pulled himself upright, then hobbled quickly on scraped and bleeding legs across the unpaved length of the courtyard. His bare feet sank into clammy mud with every step. He began to hope that he might escape, after all.

Panting, his shoulder blades tingling with the expectation of pursuit, Michel reached the stables, built next to the chateau's gate.

He opened the stable door, and stepped into warm, manure-scented air. For a moment, he was a boy again, then Michel concentrated on getting his bearings inside the dark building.

Fumbling along the wall, Michel's fingers located thin straps of leather hanging on pegs. Reins! He swept his hand lightly along the pegs where he had found the reins, and quickly located a bridle and—Blessed Trinity be thanked!—a saddle.

He opened the door of the nearest stall, then froze as he heard something. Was there someone in the hayloft? His heart pounding, he listened intently, waiting for an outcry,

but heard nothing more than the sound of his own racing pulse.

He reminded himself that every second he stood hesitating brought him closer to discovery. How long would it take Dominic and Cecilia to discover he'd escaped their ensorcellment?

Michel took a shaky breath, and focused on the large, dark silhouette of the horse in front of him. He thought it might be Cecilia's mare.

Dancing his bare feet out of the way of her hooves, Michel placed saddle and bridle with desperate haste, whispering Paternosters all the while. The lack of light did not prevent him from tightening the girth and lengthening the stirrups with the deftness of long experience.

Then he was finished. Placing his hand over the mare's nostrils to keep her from whinnying, he whispered, "Let us be gone from this den of Sorcerers!" He led her out into the courtyard, where he found the gate locked only by a simple crossbar. Relieved, he strained to lift it, then pushed open the heavy oak-planked gate.

He scrambled into the saddle, welcoming the pain in his leg as a sign of his freedom. He listened for sounds of commotion from the main building.

Nothing. They had not yet discovered him missing. And they would not catch him now.

Let me reach the Preceptory!

* * * *

The sound of hoofbeats broke into their heated argument. Dominic crossed to Tirgit's alcove in two swift steps. "He's gone!"

—Find him and kill him!—Cecilia commanded as he leapt out the window and flew over the chateau's outbuildings, heedless of who might see him.

In the flat countryside, he easily located Michel's aura, shining like a beacon in the night. As he flew under the cover of dense clouds, Dominic saw Michel, crouched low in the saddle, kicking the mare's sides to keep her at a gallop on the road leading to Ypres.

He swooped down, prepared to snap Michel's neck. It would be a swift, painless death.

And yet...

Dominic hesitated. He could not cast Michel's soul adrift in the Underworld without trying one last time. Raised and Named now, Michel would know everything, and could give informed consent. It would usurp Cecilia's prerogative of Raising and Naming the Apkallu, but it was Michel's last chance. His own last chance...

He made his decision. He grabbed Michel from behind in a crushing embrace, lifting him into the air. The mare stumbled in a peculiar, side-stepping walk, then faltered to a stop. Michel struggled valiantly, whipping his head back trying to smash Dominic's nose, kicking his bare feet at Dominic's legs.

"I'm sorry," Dominic said. "But I couldn't let you go. I'm going to unveil your memories now. Whether you will it or not, I am the Opener of the Way."

Michel redoubled his frenzied efforts, but Dominic's grip was too strong to break. "Why didn't you kill Roland," he panted. "The way you killed the others? Why did you spare us?"

"Because you belong to us." Dominic kissed Michel's bearded cheek. "I want you to love me as you once did. As I love you."

"Begone Satan. I renounce you ... and all your works!"

Dominic landed in the muddy road, and wrapped Michel in wings of light. "Remember me. Remember everything."

His teeth touched Michel's throat. At the first taste of blood, he saw: himself in firelight, translating hieroglyphs. A very young Roland, fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with Michel against a gang of older boys, rocks and fists flying. An older Roland, laughing in a crowded room, a cup of wine raised high. Practicing at swordplay and riding at the quintain. Horses of all kinds, and hours spent mucking out stables. Books with jeweled covers and elaborate illuminations on every page. The bloody confusion of Mansurah. A large tent filled with Templars chanting in Latin...

Dominic reached back, lifting the veil of the Underworld, opening Michel's past: Honoria stands on the steps of St. Nazaire cathedral, the sun a hot dazzle on pale golden stone, the air stinking of blood and smoke ... Raymond-Soleil's Appointing feast, Menelaos's thigh warm and solid under her hand...

And earlier still ... through Honoria's centuries and childhood, then earlier memories, and finally, to Michel's incarnation as Ea, one of the original Apkallu. That should

have been the end of the Raising and Naming, but Dominic found another memory earlier than Ea's, a memory that should not have been available: *In a great windowless hall, Apkallu who look like siblings, with Cecilia's dark hair, blue eyes, and facial structure, confront a chained Inanna, her divine aura dimmed to angry scarlet. Ea rises to speak in her defense, and Ninshubur also. Enlil stands, clears his throat ... then the earth groans, the walls shake, and a mountain of brown water slams through the chamber. There is nowhere to flee. Inanna screams Ea's name. He and Ninshubur try to reach her, but the waters batter them, stealing breath and life...*

Pain exploded through Dominic's skull as Michel screamed, convulsed, and went rigid in Dominic's arms. Fiery blue and gold stars wheeled across Dominic's vision as Michel's aura flared, mingling with Dominic's in an inferno of power that would have killed them both if Michel had not still been mortal, and his aura immaterial.

Even so, Dominic fell to his knees, fighting to dampen whatever was trying to ignite his aura to killing strength. Only the scars that had earlier crippled him saved him now by slowing the energy release. And only his long experience of pain under Sharibet's tutelage let him endure the agony.

Michel sprawled next to him, throat smeared with blood, his breathing shallow and his aura dim.

Impelled by rage and terror, Dominic finally managed to force his flaring wings down, damping and reducing them as an eagle might fold its pinions. The compulsion of the geas began to fade. Another minute or two, and it was gone.

Someone had set a guard over these memories, he realized when he could think again, a trap triggered during Raising and Naming. If Michel had been a djinn, they would both be dead now.

But why?

Kneeling on the grassy verge of the road, he gathered Michel's limp body into his lap. Barely alive, his aura was flickering, fading.

The gathering clouds began to release their burden of rain in frigid, stinging drops but Dominic scarcely noticed.

Ereshkigal had always insisted that only she, as the oldest and most powerful of the djinn, had the skill to Raise and Name the Apkallu, since Inanna's Flood had stripped them of their original lives and memories. Now he knew the reason for her insistence. Had she set this fatal geas to prevent them from remembering that lifetime, that trial where they pleaded in Inanna's defense?

Ereshkigal had always claimed that Inanna was tried and unanimously condemned for stealing their secrets and sharing them with her mortal subjects, and when convicted of her crimes the first time, she had destroyed the world by flood.

Inanna's second transgression came in the days of the kingdoms of Sumer. She had stolen the *mes*, the sacred keys of knowledge, from Enki, Lord of Wisdom, and had again given the secrets to her people. Then, Inanna had stolen the word of Death from Ereshkigal. The Apkallu feared she would likewise give that power to mortals. And that could not be permitted.

Condemned, Inanna had refused to accept her sentence, calling down fire from heaven with her power. When the surviving Apkallu finally Found and Raised their reborn siblings, they stripped Inanna of her rank as Queen of Heaven, and cursed her never again to be Transformed, nor Raised, nor Named.

How had Michel, alone among the Apkallu, accessed the lost memories of the time before the Flood? And why did his memories differ from Ereshkigal's version?

Dominic made his decision. He must Transform Michel, and use him to pursue the truth of his memories. Michel would awaken a djinn, already remembering all his lifetimes, remembering how Honoria and Menelaos had loved one another, and they would seek the answers to this mystery together.

He enfolded Michel in his aura, shielding him from the rain and touching the essence of his being. Closing his eyes, clearing his mind of all but the required symbols, Dominic began the ritual of Transformation.

First, he pictured the sacred ladder, trying to solidify the image. This shining, delicate structure represented Michel's present body.

Now came the delicate work of Transformation...

Dominic concentrated on severing the initial rung of the ladder, feeding all the power he was capable through the body of the golden-haired man in his arms.

Was it always this difficult to unmake the ladder of mortal life, Dominic wondered, and reweave it into the pattern of a djinn? Or was he still diminished?

No. He was fully healed. He could see auras again. He had found Michel. He had survived the geas-fire. He had all the strength he needed. He poured his love and energy into Michel's unconscious body, stabilizing the faint rhythm of his heartbeat, all the while using his powers to unknot and replait the shining double helix of Michel's essence.

Finally, it was done. Dominic opened his Seer's Eyes and saw that Michel's aura had ripened to burnished gold. The seeds had been planted. Dominic prayed they would take root in Michel's body over the next three days and nourish him with the fruits of immortality.

Dominic rose shakily to his feet, his tunic sodden and heavy as a coat of mail. Michel lay unconscious in his embrace, but he was still alive.

If Michel survived his Transformation, there would be hell to pay. Cecilia might speak the Word of Death. The House might cast them out. Michel might awaken hating Dominic, as Cecilia had predicted. Or he might remember the love between Ea and Ninshubur, Khonsu and Tahat, Honoria and Menelaos.

But whatever happened, as enemy or ally, Michel would not be indifferent. The void in Dominic's soul would at last be filled.

* * * *

Cecilia waited by the open window, empty of any emotion but pain. Her link with Dominic was silent, blocked.

As rain began to fall, spattering onto the sill, Dominic's dark shape emerged from the mist. He dragged a burdened

horse through the gate toward the stable, disappeared within for a few minutes, then, carrying his burden, flew up to join her.

She closed and latched the shutters quickly, wiping moisture from her cheeks as Dominic laid Michel's body onto Tirgit's pallet. She still could not sense anything through her link. She knew how he must grieve. She ached with the loss herself.

She bowed her head, and opened her Seer's Eyes, prepared to speak the traditional farewell: "May we meet again."

The words died on her lips. A golden glow surrounded Michel, turning him into a gilded effigy. He still lived. And worse yet, he had started Transforming.

Her own aura flared with rage, filling the room with incendiary light. "You didn't kill him."

Dominic's aura pulsed with reddish strength. "I couldn't."

"But the Law—" Beneath her anger, she felt fear like a small icy draft in a room filled with a roaring fire. He had disobeyed her. Defied her. How could she do what had to be done next? If she killed both of them she would be left alone.

But the Law was her law, and she had kept it most faithfully of all. She couldn't permit him to break it. That road led to anarchy, and further loneliness.

She formed a fist of air around Dominic's head.

But Dominic moved, almost too quick to be seen. He stood in front of her. Deliberately, physically, he struck her.

Pain exploded through her cheekbone, through her skull, through her aura. Shock, betrayal, heartbreak, and sheer

disbelief turned her bones to water. *You hit me!* She couldn't speak, couldn't move. Her face felt stiff, both numb and hot.

"You tried to kill me, you lying serpent. Don't do that again, or I won't stop with one blow."

She crumpled to her knees. His voice was so dead, so unfeeling. This was worse than she had imagined. *He knows something.* She gathered her power to speak the Word of Death that would kill every living thing in the chateau except herself—

Dominic's hand closed around her throat at the same instant that his aura surrounded her in a prison of light, restraining her arms. "Don't even think it," he growled.

She tried futilely to push through his power with her own, but his hand was choking her. As she began to heave for breath, Tirgit entered the bedchamber.

Her handmaid gave a soft cry of alarm as Dominic, expressionless as a stone, turned to look. She fell gracefully to her knees, forehead to the floor, in the manner of her childhood homeland, abasing herself as if Dominic were the highest among them. "Lord, please spare my mistress' life!"

"Why?" Dominic's voice was cool, as if Cecilia's struggles to breathe, to live, were beneath his notice.

"For the love I bear her. Please! For the love I bear thee, father of my heart!" Tirgit began to cry.

"For writing that letter, I owe you a debt," Dominic said at last. The clamp around Cecilia's neck eased. Breath had never tasted so sweet, or victory so bitter. She bent over, gasping, as Tirgit scrambled over to her.

"I thank thee, lord!" Still weeping, Tirgit gathered Cecilia in her arms.

"Never try to kill me again. Or Michel," Dominic said with the voice of coercion, his aura imprinting that command within her mind. "Or in that same hour you'll see the Underworld you claim to rule."

Shaken, wholly off-balance, she pushed Tirgit away, then fought until her mental strength failed. But she could not dislodge Dominic's geas. Fear grew until it extinguished her rage, leaving behind only cold embers.

When she stopped struggling, Dominic lifted Michel into his arms. "Follow me," he commanded her. "I don't want you out of my sight for an instant."

She obeyed. She had no choice.

* * * *

Candles flickered, sending shadows scuttling over the damp stone walls of the Chateau du Chancy's cellar.

In an empty storeroom, Michel's body lay on a pallet. His heartbeat had slowed, and his breathing was nearly imperceptible.

Kneeling at Michel's side, Dominic began the ancient invocations for a newly-Transformed djinn by casting grains of incense onto the coals of a brazier standing at the head of the pallet. As thick coils of fragrant smoke rose, Dominic chanted: "Let the gates be opened, let the wanderer return. Let the gates be opened, let the house be prepared..."

Earlier, he had cut open Michel's leg and removed the crippling fragments of metal. Then, the barely bleeding wound

stitched and anointed with salve, Dominic and Tirgit had given Michel the ritual bath, shaved him, and dressed him in a new tunic to signify his rebirth.

Tirgit, looking badly shaken, had spoken only once, while drying Michel's muscular body with a towel. As she patted gently around the bandage on his neck, she asked, almost inaudibly: "Lord Michel is going to cause a lot of trouble, isn't he?"

"Yes." Let Michel forgive me when he wakes, Dominic prayed. Let him remember our love.

He touched Michel's forehead, lips, and heart with salt, water, and oil in turn, then completed the ritual with a tender kiss upon Michel's lax mouth. "Return to us, O wandering spirit, and dwell in the immortal temple of thy body!"

* * * *

At first, Cecilia fluttered on the periphery of the cellar like a moth against a lantern as Dominic performed the sacred rites of Transformation. Restrained by his geas like a prisoner weighed with chains, she cursed him for reducing her to a mere spectator in the ritual she had ruled for millennia.

How much had he guessed? How much did he know?

She sank down on a cushion to begin her vigil. As the hours wore on, she had time to think. She wondered whether Dominic had considered the risks of Transforming an Apkallu powerful enough to break the bonds of air while still mortal.

Cecilia smiled. If Michel awoke with strength enough to master Dominic, it would be another weapon to her hand.

But Dominic's betrayal hurt. She had loved him, cared for him, and he had turned on her. His injury had shattered the reverence that she had so carefully inculcated in all of the Apkallu. She should have slain him when she had the chance, she thought for the hundredth time.

Now the Word of Death was denied her, but there were other ways of ensuring the outcome she desired. She had loyal allies, both within the House and without. Michel himself might be one, if he woke. She would play her part—meek, defeated—until Dominic lowered his guard, as he must eventually.

She had time. She had learned patience day by day over millennia. And she alone knew the secrets she kept.

What her enemies didn't know would defeat them, as it always had.

~The End~

To Be Continued in the next volume of The House of the Rose series, *House of Memory*

Historical information, snippets from the cutting room floor, photos of locations, and a glossary can be found on our Web site: www.michaela-august.com

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