

HOUSE OF MEMORY

HOUSE OF THE ROSE

BOOK TWO



BY MICHAELA AUGUST

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House of Memory [House of the Rose Book II]
by Michaela August

Though you live three thousand years, even
ten thousand years, remember that no man
loses any other life than the one he lives now,
nor lives any other than the one he loses
now.... A man cannot lose either the past or
the future: how can any one take from him
what he does not have?—Marcus Aurelius,
Meditations iii. 14

Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

Dave Gibbons, for decades of husbandly support;

The Grumps: Jennise, Margaret, Mel, Pam, and Scottie, for a decade of e-friendship; and Sheri Minamide, for unflagging boosterism.

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Previously, in *Glass Souls*:

When anti-heretic Crusaders massacre the city of Beziers in 1209, most of the vampire Protectors of the House of the Rose perish trying to protect their charges. Cecilia, the Eldest Protector, survives and saves the badly wounded Protector Menelaos.

His memories and powers crippled by a devastating head injury, Menelaos spends the next forty years with Sharibet, Protector and ancestress of the House, in Egypt. Finally, he feels healed enough to attempt a mission, escorting a caravan of House goods through territory held by French crusaders. When raiding knights attack the caravan, he discovers that young cousins Michel and Roland are the reincarnations of Menelaos's beloved wife Honoria and her twin brother, Marcus, who were killed in Beziers.

Michel flees in fear for his soul and vanishes into the protective anonymity of the order of the Knights Templar. Roland, who was Marcus, is seduced by Sharibet and agrees to switch his allegiance to the House of the Rose, and become a Protector. Knowing that Menelaos, who has changed his name to Dominic, is on an obsessive quest for Michel, Roland keeps Michel's secret when false news comes of the younger knight's death. Dominic searches for Michel's reincarnation, hoping to reunite with the soul he has loved for so many lifetimes. As the years pass, Dominic despairs and descends into near-madness, drinking the lifeblood of children in his futile search.

Then Cecilia learns that Michel is alive, in Flanders. Concerned for Dominic's sanity, she conceals the news and sets out to see if she can successfully recruit Michel for the House. When she arrives in the Flemish city of Ypres, she discovers that Michel's sister Mathilde is also a reborn Protector, and that her oldest enemy, the banished goddess Inanna, has been reincarnated as Mathilde's daughter, Blanche.

Cecilia quickly becomes Mathilde's dearest friend. However Michel, now a respected Templar administrator, resists Cecilia's seduction.

When Dominic discovers the truth, he journeys to Ypres and kidnaps Michel, forcibly transforming him into a vampire and returning his past-life memories. In doing so, he discovers that Cecilia has been altering the memories that she returns to the other vampires. As he waits for Michel to awaken from his Transformation, he wages a desperate struggle to protect himself and his beloved from Cecilia's malevolent designs.

House of Memory

Chapter One

In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; Then he openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction, That he may withdraw man [from his] purpose, and hide pride from man. He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword. —*The Book of Job*, 33:15-18

Feast of the Ascension, Thursday, May 13, AD 1260

Chateau du Chancy, near Ypres, Flanders

I must not sleep, thought Dominic, though the very walls were blurring. All would be lost if he let down his guard before Michel woke from the Sleep of Transformation. He had broken every law of the djinni and the House of the Rose to capture and forcibly Transform Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, the man who now lay still and pale as death upon the pallet before him. He had not done it merely because he had loved, over many lifetimes, the soul now incarnated in Michel's body. Only his great need to understand Michel's hidden memory had driven him to this desperate, dangerous act.

He sensed Cecilia's presence nearby, outside this emptied storeroom, her anger a dull red pulse against the fringes of his aura. He had bound her with a geas so she could not kill him, but she was ancient and devious.

Wake up, beloved!

But Michel did not wake. Three nights had passed, yet he lingered between life and death, his heartbeat slow and his breathing nearly imperceptible.

Dominic yawned hugely. Then, as he had done so many times before, he took the sleeper's limp, callused hand in his and whispered the ritual invocation, "Let the gates be opened, let the wanderer return. Let the gates be opened, let the house be prepared..."

Let him forgive me, Dominic prayed to whatever compassionate deities might be listening. "Return to me, O wandering spirit, and dwell in the immortal temple of thy body!" *Let him remember his life as Honoria, and our love, when I was Menelaos. Let him forgive me, but let him remember what we have forgotten!*

Once Michel woke, he should be able to explain the ancient memory Dominic had seen in his blood during their struggle on the road to Ypres: *In a great windowless hall, eleven Apkallu who look like siblings, all 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...*

Cecilia claimed, and the House's own stories repeated, that Inanna, tried for treason by the Apkallu, had been unanimously condemned. In resisting their sentence, she had

broken the earth so that the Middle Sea flooded the Cities of the Plain, the first cities of man. That world and all the Apkallu, except for Ereshkigal, had been destroyed by her rebellion.

But Michel's memory gave the lie to that claim. Had Cecilia excised those memories from Dominic's awareness, from all the Apkallu she had Raised and Named?

Dominic traced the line of Michel's forehead, his cheek, his lips. *So cold...*

Then he felt it: the barest puff of breath against his palm, followed by the slight but regular rise and fall of Michel's chest.

Not dead!

Michel's hand felt warmer, the formerly waxy skin now vital under Dominic's fingertips. Joyfully, he pressed the back of a living hand against his forehead.

In that unguarded moment, Cecilia struck. Her power penetrated his defenses, coiling around his fatigue like sandalwood smoke. —*Menelaos, sleep!*—

He fell onto his knees beside the pallet, his head pillowed on Michel's shoulder, his hand still gripping Michel's. He tried to fight, but found nothing to strike. Distantly, he was aware as Cecilia's coercion slid over him like a warm fur coverlet.

Then it was too late.

* * * *

Cecilia entered cautiously. The stone chamber under the great hall was alight to her Seer's eyes, revealing the golden

glow of Michel's aura, his great spirit-wings furled around him like a cloak of sunlight.

Dominic sprawled across him, his aura marred by his old injuries as if a bronze mirror had been scorched and half melted by intolerable heat. She studied them with weary regret. How often had she seen Honoria and Menelaos curled together with the intimacy of centuries? Now they were both male, one dark-haired, one blond, and both changed almost beyond recognition by their ordeals.

Menelaos had been ruined on that dreadful afternoon in Beziers, when she had lost the rest of the Apkallu under the swords and arrows of heretic-hunting Crusaders. Menelaos-who-was, all the way back to Ninshubur-who-was, had been loyal, his strength and competence serving her as he had once served her hated sister Inanna. Dominic, as he called himself now, had turned on her after she saved his life. His betrayal hurt.

Queen of the East, how you have fallen.

She should have returned him to the Underworld when she had the chance, but then she would have been alone, the souls of her siblings scattered to reincarnate across the world like poppies in a vast barley field.

Dominic's horrific head injury and Sharibet's bungling of his memory return had nullified the deadly geas that she had so carefully implanted in all of the Apkallu. *How much had he guessed? How much did he know?*

He had denied her the ability to use the Word of Death. Restrained by his geas like a prisoner weighed with chains, she had cursed him for reducing her to a mere spectator in

the ritual she had ruled for millennia. 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. He should be *very* angry if he woke in the right frame of mind. Had Dominic fully considered the risks in Transforming an Apkallu powerful enough to break his hold while still mortal?

She would kill him now, she vowed, shaping her power into a dagger of light. One blow, and she would be free—

The blinding pain that accompanied her intention was instantaneous, and she doubled over, gasping. *Damn him!* He had twisted her own power against her. She straightened up, reforming the dagger of light in her hand. How long had it been since she faced a challenge like this?

She reached out. —*Sleep*,— she commanded, opening the blood bond between them. If she could not kill him, she would geld him, and tame him to her hand once more.

* * * *

In the twilight realm between sleep and waking, Michel dreamt of angels. Though his low bed was hard, a shimmering golden coverlet covered him like woven sunbeams. For the first time in a decade, his leg didn't hurt.

There were no candles in the stone-walled chamber, yet the room itself was bright as noon. Lady Cecilia stood next to his bed, her face, grave and sweet as the Virgin's, framed by immense wings of iridescent moonlight. She raised a dagger made of silver and fire.

Does she mean to slay me, then? But there was no fear, only distant wonder.

Cecilia's wings swept down next to him, and surrounded a sprawled figure with white-streaked dark hair and pale curve of cheekbone, nestled against Michel's side.

A wave of violent images returned to him: *... a frantic flight in the rain, stealing a horse, and then, teeth tearing his throat as if the man—no, the demon—pursuing him were a wolf.* What had Dominic done to him? *Am I dead? Is Cecilia the angel guarding the gates of Paradise? Why am I back in the Chateau du Chancy? Why is Dominic wearing such a tattered bronze cloak?*

Cecilia plunged the dagger of light into Dominic's exposed temple. Pressing the hilt between her palms like an invocation of flame, her wings began to beat slowly, growing brighter.

Once, in Acre, Michel had seen a captive python devour a living rabbit. Cecilia's expression reminded him of the single-minded calmness with which the serpent had swallowed its prey, until only a single twitching foot remained protruding from the snake's grossly distended mouth.

He tried to roll away from the brilliant shroud now surrounding Dominic, but he was unable to move so much as an eyelid.

My eyes are closed? How am I witnessing these wonders?

Cecilia's expression remained serene. Dominic still seemed peacefully asleep, his breathing regular. *What injuries did the dagger wreak, that left no mark?*

Please, lord, let me be dreaming. If this was a dream, then his abduction by Dominic from the Templar dormitory was also a dream, and he could wake, soon, to his life.

His life? Memories overwhelmed him.

...night in a ruined temple. Dominic, handsome and dangerous, at his side. The bitter taste of myrrh-laced wine on his tongue as he sounds out the hieroglyphs for Alexander the Great ... In a room with red and yellow painted walls, a younger-seeming Dominic, his hair entirely dark, says, "I am not permitted to tell you more unless you consent to join the House. You'll have to trust your heart—as your brother has already done." Earlier: ... fighting for her life on the deck on a lotus-prowed galley, her bare feet slipping in blood as she swings a bronze sword. She is too badly wounded to use her full powers against the pirates who have dared to attack a ship flying the House's rosette banner ... He stands at the high apex of a stepped temple, inspecting with satisfaction a vast grid of canals shining like copper wire inlaid in the wide brown-and-green plain. As his shaven-headed priests, clad in white sheepskin kilts, sing the evening blessing while playing the instruments he has designed, he whispers in the ear of a brown-skinned, gray-eyed woman wearing the raiment of a queen: a finely woven linen sheath; gold at arm and throat; an elaborately braided wig caught up in gold rings, with a diadem of delicate gold leaves and blossoms. "Ninshubur, Queen of the East, my dearest Speaker of Truth, come lie with me tonight. Forget your duties to your mistress. Let me be the first to love you." His heart leaps as she smiles at him. "Ea, beloved, I will come to you..."

His name was Ea. His life as Michel de-la-Roche en Ardenne was only a fraction of his existence, only thirty years, more or less. He caught himself on the dizzy edge of memory as if standing at the top of a tower above a cliff over a nearly bottomless abyss, every step of which he had climbed. A day, a month, a year, a hundred years, a thousand years, seven *thousand* years...

He stepped back from that chasm, grateful that he had not fallen. But if even he had, he possessed wings to bear him up. His golden coverlet, his aura, stirred.

He had magic. He was magic. He had *created* magic.

But what was this earliest memory? *A high-ceilinged chamber, eleven Apkallu gathered to pronounce judgment on a twelfth, bound in chains before them, her great-winged aura stained red with rage. "You have given the fire of the gods to men!" declaims one of his brothers.* Was that Robert? No, his name was Utu then. *He opens his own mouth to defend his sister...*

Why didn't he remember remembering that?

He became aware of Cecilia as she withdrew the dagger of light from Dominic's skull. She shifted her attention to him.

"Ea, beloved," she said in the old tongue that only the Apkallu knew. "Menelaos has completely botched your Transformation. He tried to Raise and Name you as a mortal. As I have always said, it was unsafe. I'm so sorry. I'll do my best to heal his injuries to you."

But he had already been Raised and Named. He remembered everything perfectly. What was she doing?

He couldn't move, couldn't flinch as her dagger pierced his forehead, insubstantial, painless, ruinous. Cecilia's sweet, implacable command rang in his mind.—Sleep.—

Darkness spread from the shining dagger embedded in his forehead.

* * * *

Oh gods that never were, he is grown strong! But not as strong as he once was. And not as strong as he needs to be, to defeat me.

She had little time to carry out the plans she'd made, waiting for Dominic to weaken. Her first survey of Michel's memories was complete. She would not try to curb his relentless curiosity in this incarnation. As easy to dam the ocean. But his power must be curtailed.

He could not be allowed to recall the end of the trial of Inanna, of course. She found that memory, only a few moment's worth, and set her geas upon it. —*Pain says: forgetfulness. Pain says: I block your memories. Look anywhere else but here. There's too much pain to remember. Death is pain. Pain is death. Don't look.*—And to reset her trap:—Fire burns if you look. Fire engulfs all, if you look beyond the pain: fire channeled from the earth, from heaven, from your own bond to life. Fire eats you up if you dare to see what must not be seen, what must not be spoken, what must be forgotten.—And her last weapon:—When I speak my True Name to you, the bond of life will break.—And she imprinted her name.

Satisfied that this familiar task was done, she returned closer to the present. She had already edited Dominic's memories and found just the right point to let her regain control. It would provide the perfect basis for them to kill one another, since she was forbidden to do it herself, and there was no local Man of the Ax she dared appeal to. She'd already considered asking Josef to fill that role, but he was too close to Dominic, and too frightened of the Templars, to serve.

She sifted Michel's recent memories: *Placing his hand over the mare's nostrils to keep her from whinnying, he whispers, "Let us be gone from this den of sorcerers!" He leads her out into the courtyard...*

Racing across the flat countryside under threatening clouds, he crouches low in the saddle, kicking the mare's sides to keep her at a gallop on the road leading to Ypres. Then he is grabbed from behind in a crushing embrace, and lifted into the air. They are flying! He struggles, whipping his head back trying to smash Dominic's nose, kicking his bare feet at Dominic's legs ... "I'm sorry," the sorcerer says. "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 redoubles his frenzied efforts, but Dominic's grip is too strong to break. "Why didn't you kill Roland," he pants. "The way you killed the others? Why did you spare us?" "Because you belong to us." Dominic kisses 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 lands and wraps Michel in wings of light. "Remember me. Remember everything." His teeth touch Michel's throat...

Then the double strand of memory and remembrance: ...
*as he stands barefoot in the cold mud of the road, in
Dominic's harsh embrace, the veil of the Underworld is lifted
from him, and he remembers: 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 ...*
Eras of lifetimes flash by, "Ea, beloved, I will come to you ... "
All his own memories to the earliest: *In a great windowless
hall, eleven Apkallu who look like siblings ... he rises to speak
in the chained one's defense, and Ninshubur also ... the
waters batter them, stealing breath and life ... and in the
muddy road, the pain explodes.—Fire burns if you look. Fire
engulfs all ... He screams, convulses, rigid and burning...*

This was the point she could use.

Carefully, she took Michel's memories and a similar
memory she had seen in Dominic's blood, and forged them
anew:

*He struggles, whipping his head back trying to smash
Dominic's nose, kicking his bare feet at Dominic's legs.*

*"I'm sorry," the sorcerer whispers into Michel's ear. "But I
couldn't let you go. I want you to love me as you once did. As
I love you. I remember you. 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?" His voice is hoarse. "Let me go and fight me
man-to-man!" The scents of Egyptian dust and sun-warmed*

papyrus fill the air as Sir Jean struggles with the Saracen sorcerer.

Cecilia worked backward, melding the memories.

The scents of Flanders mud and lathered horse fill the cold night air as Dominic murmurs gently: "I remember you. I remember your True Name. I know why you dream of roses and a girl's face in a bronze mirror. Do you wish to remember, too?"

"How do you know—" Michel's struggles cease. "Are you the Devil? I renou—"

"Don't!" Dominic warned. "I can only Name you if you consent. 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 rests his cheek against Michel's ear. "I do not want your soul. Shall I open the way, or not?"

Michel tries to twist free, but Dominic's hold pins him so he can hardly move.

Dominic sighs. "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 rises and grips Michel's chin in preparation for breaking his neck.

"No! Wait!" Michel cries. "I want to remember! Whatever you want! Don't—don't—"

His next words choke off as Dominic wraps him in wings of light. "Remember me. Remember everything." His teeth touch Michel's throat. As he stands barefoot in the cold mud of the

road, in Dominic's harsh embrace, the veil of the Underworld is lifted from him, and he remembers: the steps of St. Nazaire cathedral...

Panting, Cecilia finished the seamless graft. She riffled through the last four days, finding nothing until: *He becomes aware of Cecilia as she withdraws the dagger of light from Dominic's skull. She shifts her attention to him. "Ea, beloved," she says in the old tongue that only the Apkallu know. "Menelaos has completely botched your Transformation. He tried to Raise and Name you as a mortal, before your Transformation. As I have always said, it was unsafe. I'm so sorry. I'll do my best to heal his injuries to you." But he has already been Raised and Named. He remembers everything perfectly. What is she doing? He can't move, can't flinch as the dagger pierces his forehead...*

One more correction to make:

In the twilight realm between sleep and waking, Michel dreams of angels. Though his low bed is hard, a shimmering golden coverlet covers him like woven sunbeams. For the first time in a decade, his leg doesn't hurt.

There are no candles in the stone-walled chamber, yet the room itself is bright as noon. Lady Cecilia stands next to his bed, her face as grave and sweet as the Virgin's. Immense wings of iridescent moonlight sweep around and above her, and she raises a dagger made of silver and fire.

Does she mean to slay me, then? he thinks, with distant wonder.

A wave of violent images returns to him: a frantic flight in the rain, stealing a horse, and then, teeth tearing his throat

as if the man—no, the demon—pursuing him were a wolf or other beast. What has Dominic done to him? Am I dead? Is Cecilia the angel guarding the gates of Paradise? Why am I back in the Chateau du Chancy? Please, Lord, let me be dreaming. If this is a dream—then his abduction by Dominic from the Templar dormitory is also a dream, and he can wake, soon, to his life.

His life ... memories overwhelm him.

...night in a ruined temple. Dominic, handsome and dangerous, at his side. The bitter taste of myrrh-laced wine on his tongue as he sounds out the hieroglyphs for Alexander the Great ... In a room with red and yellow painted walls, a younger-seeming Dominic, his hair entirely dark, says, "I am not permitted to tell you more unless you consent to join the House. You'll have to trust your heart—as your brother has already done."

He catches himself on the dizzy edge of memory as if standing at the top of a tower above a cliff over a nearly bottomless abyss, every step of which he had climbed ... a day, a month, a year, a hundred years, a thousand years, seven thousand years ... But the tower sways, and he falls, falls, falls, the memories sliding and colliding. He stands on the cold muddy road, on the apex of a stepped temple, on the stairs of St. Nazaire Cathedral, before the assembly of the Poor Knights of the Temple...

He screams. He is falling, and he has no wings.

"I am sorry, my brother," Cecilia whispers. "I tried my best for you." Blessed darkness eases his utter confusion...

Cecilia pushed back her hair and wiped the sweat from her face. She had pruned away Michel's dangerous memories, and for good measure, broken his ability to recall at will. Would these changes be enough to give him good cause to hate Dominic?

She would wait and see.

* * * *

In the darkness, a dream came:

Honorio huddles in a maintenance staircase between the inner and outer walls of Constantinople's Hippodrome, unable to run farther. Her arms are curled around her knees, the bricks cold under her buttocks and she prays that the demon will not find this hiding place.

The absolute darkness around her pulses gently with waves of heated color. She clamps her jaws tight to quiet her chattering teeth.

Then, she feels the supernatural warmth of the genii's presence, and sees the brilliance of his ghostly wings shining through her closed eyelids. The scent of roses surrounds her, and she braces herself for death—or worse.

"Tsk! You're ill!" Menelaos exclaims, kneeling a step or two below her. "Foolish girl. Why did you run so long?"

Somehow the stairway is bright enough to show that his extraordinary gray eyes are filled with concern. A hesitant smile tugs at one corner of his bearded mouth.

Honorio cowers from this sorcerous vision. "H-how did you find me?"

"By your aura, of course. Lost one, it is good to meet again." She flinches as his fingertips brush her cheek.

In her feverish state, she is startled to find his flesh is warm, not cold marble.

"Little one, you're burning up!" He briefly lifts her hand, gentle fingers resting on the pulse at her wrist. "And so thin..."

"Are you going to drink my blood?" She wants to be defiant, and show this demon how nobly a woman of Gaul dies, but she can't stop trembling.

He chuckles. His strong arms slide under her knees and back, lifting and cradling her. "I'm taking you to the House, where your brother awaits you. You're safe now." The conviction in his voice is so absolute that she believes him in spite of herself.

Long before they reach the House of the Rose she realizes that her position, face pressed against his broad shoulder, feels comforting instead of terrifying. Light-headed, she imagines that the genii's shining wings are wrapped around her even more securely than his arms.

...and Honoria awoke, curled in Menelaos's arms, her face resting in its accustomed spot on his broad chest.

"Beloved, you've returned to me," he said, his voice breaking.

Sleepily, she reached up and touched his cheek. It was wet, and he was shaking, his fingers digging into her back.

"Menelaos, why do you weep?" She raised herself on her elbow and looked at him, stretched out next to her on the feather bed.

His gray eyes shone with incredulous joy and something else she couldn't identify. He looked tired, and there was a white streak in his hair that she, used to the unchanging visages of the djinni over centuries, did not remember.

A brief flash—Menelaos, being carried through smoke-filled streets by two other djinni, a crossbow bolt bristling grotesquely from his head. And then ... fighting for her life against a mob of soldiers, standing on the steps of St. Nazaire cathedral, the sun a hot dazzle on pale golden stone, the air stinking of blood and smoke...

Honorio stroked his cheek, smoothed the streak in his hair that marked the site of his injury, and leaned down to kiss him. His mouth was warm, faintly salty from his tears, and wonderfully familiar. Menelaos murmured against her lips. "I couldn't bear to live any longer without you."

He returned her kiss with desperate intensity, his aura brightening until her Seer's eyes were nearly blinded. She was surrounded by his light, his great bronze wings wrapping them both in a cocoon that caressed her skin like soft feathers.

She pressed close to him, chest to chest, thigh to thigh, relishing the solid contact until she realized that something was different. Wrong. The sweet ache that should have been in her breasts was in her groin, where she was ... stiffening?

She looked at her hand, braced against Menelaos's shoulder. It was man's hand, large and square-fingered, dusted with golden hairs, the knuckles scarred, the fingers and palm callused.

A man ... ?

A new wave of memories, recent and painful, hit her: *In the room filled with light Cecilia stands by the low pallet. "Ea, beloved," she says in the old tongue that only the Apkallu know. "Menelaos has completely botched your Transformation. He tried to Raise and Name you as a mortal, before your Transformation. As I have always said, it was unsafe. I'm so sorry. I'll do my best to heal his injuries to you." ... In the cold and muddy road, Dominic sighs. "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 rises and grips Michel's chin in preparation for breaking his neck. "No! Wait!" Michel cries. "I want to remember! Whatever you want! Don't—don't—" ... Dusk in a ruined Egyptian temple, and Dominic reads the lines of hieroglyphs carved into the shadowed walls. "It's passing strange," says Michel. "You are a Saracen and yet I feel I know you." ... in the shabby room in Damietta Michel awakens, disturbed, from a recurring dream of a man, naked, bent over a lute in his lap. The Prime bell clangs as he rises from his hard bed. Why am I always a woman in my dreams? That's wrong.*

Menelaos looked up, puzzled now. "Beloved, wha—"

"Sodomite! Sorcerer!" howled Michel, scrubbing away the vile kiss. Roland, Mathilde, Blanche, Aumery, even acerbic Brother Philippe ... all lost to him now, with his stained honor.

"Get thee gone, demon!" Michel felt power gathering around him, prickling his skin. He caught a glimpse of Dominic's shocked expression before the other man was

engulfed in a torrent of golden flame, and swept off Cecilia's huge bed. It carried Dominic across the room, and flung him against the wall of the solar before dissipating.

As the brightness faded, Michel saw Dominic crumpled at the base of the wall. *Just like a cur rolling in my father's hall.*

He staggered up, feeling immeasurably powerful yet dizzy. He would cut out Dominic's heart with his own damned sorcery. Another rush of power shaped by his will formed a sword fashioned from pale gold fire. His fingers closed around its hilt.

He took a step, and the agony clawed his gut. Hunger had passed beyond starvation in less than a breath. He tried to take another step, but his balance failed. He fell. *He falls, falls, falls, the memories sliding and colliding. He stands on the cold muddy road, on the apex of a stepped temple, on the stairs of St. Nazaire Cathedral, before the assembly the Poor Knights of the Temple...*

The rushes on the floor were dusty and thick. He had no strength to hold the form of a sword of light. He had no strength to hold to consciousness. *Will I wake? I don't care.*

Chapter Two

My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit.
—*Proverbs 1:10-13*

Friday, May 14, AD 1260

Chateau du Chancy

Cheerful early morning sunlight greeted Michel after a night filled with disturbing dreams, like the one that had just woken him. Whoever dreamt of drinking blood through a straw?

His cheeks moved, and thick salty liquid filled his mouth. He swallowed, and realized with dawning horror that he was living his nightmare. As much as he wanted to stop this travesty of nourishment, this blasphemy of Our Lord's sacrifice, his body would not obey him. It tasted so good. Still slightly warm, familiar in a disgusting yet comforting way, even to the zing of orange oil.

If only he had merely overslept Vespers! Brother Philippe might have come to rescue him, and set him back on the path to paradise. Instead he had woken in the solar of the Chateau du Chancy. In Cecilia's bed.

Alive. Transformed. And broken. She had told him so last night. *"Ea, beloved," she says in the old tongue that only the Apkallu know. "Menelaos has completely botched your Transformation."*

He had understood her speech as alien memories clamored at the fringes of his mind—*seven thousand years*—and he had become lost in the whirlwind of *stairs ... tower ... road ... church ... House...*

This morning he could look across the chasm of memory and tell himself: *Ea. My name is Ea. Was Ea. Was Tahat. Was Honoria.*

I am Honoria. Her voice in his head was deep for a woman's, confident, slightly impatient.

No! My name is Michel de la-Roche-en-Ardennes. Brother Michel, Preceptor of the Poor Knights of the Temple in Ypres. Oh, God. How long did I sleep outside the convent walls without permission?

A Transformation took three days. They would expel him for that crime, as well as heresy and sorcery, if they discovered him..

Despairing, he remembered how he had promised the Master of the Templars in Damietta that he wished to suffer all the hardships of the Poor Knights of the Temple for the remaining days of his life. With Dominic's hands ready to break his neck, he had weakened rather than choosing to die true to his vows. He had chosen life, and the bitter fruit of self-knowledge. *Coward. Oathbreaker.*

He would have to live forever with the consequences.

He had caught only glimpses of his many lives, as if he clutched the embroidered patches of a surcoat, but not the whole cloth. What, he wondered, had happened after Ninshubur said, *"Ea, beloved, I will come to you..."*

His head split open. The words he screamed were the same gutter talk he'd used to revile Brother Olivier aboard the *St. Sebastian*. Hands of air held him down, preventing him from thrashing as he drowned in a sea of goosedown. After a while the soft featherbed became his friend, not his enemy, as he lay gasping like a shipwrecked sailor washed up to shore.

"So, you have finally returned to us, Brother Ea," Cecilia, no—his sister, Ereshkigal—said in the old tongue. Against her breasts, clad in a loose gown, she carefully cradled the jar he had been drinking from. "It is good to meet again."

"Is it?" Michel brought a weary hand to his aching forehead. His mouth couldn't shape the sounds. He had an accent in his native language! He would have laughed hysterically, but his first bark jarred his head so badly that he had to stop.

"You are among family now. Welcome home."

This place didn't feel like home. He was dizzy and his tongue was swollen. Had he bitten it last night during his futile struggle for freedom? Where was Dominic? He tried to look around for him but echoes of agony warned him to keep his head still.

"My dearest, Dominic risked your sanity to revive your love for him. I tried my best to repair your injuries, but I fear..." She clucked her tongue.

"Injuries," said Michel, tasting the word as if it were a chunk of rancid salt pork.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, noticing first the miraculous lack of pain in his right hip and thigh, and then that he was naked.

Michel blushed at a replay of the old carnal image from his dreams as a youth: *Menelaos sits next to her, as naked as she, bent over the lute in his lap ... She reaches to trace a slender henna-tipped finger down his nape, where his dark hair curls a little...*

Not a dream, after all. *Oh, God.*

Cecilia handed him an unopened clay jar, its seal marked with the symbol he knew meant 'those who deliver decisions.' He wanted to shatter it onto the wooden floor. The mess it made would be no uglier than the shambles of his life. But he opened the jar, and drank. He needed the strength.

"No one escapes the Underworld unmarked," Cecilia said when he was done. "Yet we continue to find each other, and to live, and serve the House." She had a small object in her hands.

He watched her warily as she brought it up to show him. It was a bronze mirror. "Dominic did not even complete your Raising and Naming ceremony. May I?" At his nod, she said, "Here is your new face, you who are called Michel de la-Roche-en-Ardenne. I have Raised you, and I remember your True Name. Hail to you, Ea, Enki, House of Water, Lord of the Earth, and honor to your long service to the House. We rejoice that you are Found."

The face in the mirror was his own, minus the beard required by his vows. Someone had shaved him while he slept. His skin was pale, more so where his beard was gone.

The oddest thing was a shimmer in the metal. Then his Seer's eyes opened, and he saw the shining gold of his aura, darkened by his recent pain, and the red flickering balefire of his Raising and Naming mark, which should have been a steady flame.

Botched, indeed. No wonder it was torture to try to remember. Had he once known any cure for such an ill? Pain was the only answer. He thought of other things: the delight of his sister Mathilde's saffron-flavored fish soup. The joy in Sir Aumery's face on meeting his new horse. Pain eased. He had found the only cure he was likely to get.

"I don't remember the response, my sister," he confessed. "You must teach it to me anew."

Shining tears tracked down her dear, sweet face. "You must say 'Hail to you, Ereshkigal, you who have kept my memory, and my life, in your keeping for so long.'"

Effortlessly, he repeated her refrain. And waited, feeling there must be more.

She placed her hand in his, and touched the back of her hand against his forehead. "It is good to meet again."

"It is good to meet again," he said, holding back tears of his own.

"I'm so sorry Dominic did this to you," she said through her tears. "Do you still wish to kill him?"

His rage and confusion had cooled. He remembered the tattered cloak of Dominic's aura and recognized monstrous injuries, more grievous than his own. Clearly Menelaos-who-was was too damaged, too unstable to be allowed to live.

Vengeance and necessity both clamored to make his answer yes.

NO! yelled Honoria. *Don't you dare kill him! What if we never find him again? We can't heal someone if he's Lost to us. Besides,* her tone turned to pleading, *the House needs all the Apkallu it can get.* Unspoken was a fierce, unwavering longing to reunite with Menelaos. She knew Michel would never acquiesce to such a union, but it didn't stop her craving. *We love him,* she said baldly, speaking for Michel too.

He didn't grant her the dignity of a response. "Who survived, and who has been Found, since Beziers?" he asked Cecilia, instead.

She bowed her head, her aura dimmed. "Only Menelaos and I survived the sack of the city. Sharibet, Basil, and Leila were safe on the ship, with those we were able to evacuate before dawn."

Out of long habit, Michel began to cross himself. Midway through the gesture, he changed it to the simple forehead touch of the House. "May we meet again."

Cecilia echoed the phrase and gesture.

"How many of the Lost have been restored to the House?"

"Not nearly enough. Only your cousin Roland, who was Marcus."

"In nearly fifty years, you have found no other Apkallu?" Michel didn't intend for his astonishment to express itself so sharply. *Roland, Apkallu?*

"We have found them, from time to time, but too late to obtain their consent. As you yourself know so well, worldly ties are difficult to break after a certain age."

Michel flushed at Cecilia's jibe. "Who has been Found?" he repeated his question.

"Utu returned as Roland's elder brother Robert. He refused us in Acre last year, and died on his voyage back to Artois." She stopped, then said, reluctantly, "Ninharsag ... your sister, Mathilde."

A spike of joy made Michel's heart pound. *Mathilde!* "Does she know?" he asked eagerly. "Have you—?"

"I have not asked her, because of the consumption in her lungs." She bowed her head. "I judge she would not survive Transformation."

"I want to see her."

"You know you can't," Cecilia chided gently. "The Templars are searching for you everywhere."

"Bring her here!"

"She's too sick."

"Damn you!" he raged, standing up on the bed's step, towering over Cecilia. "If there are so few Apkallu—"

Cecilia's aura immobilized him like a bug in amber. "You're so volatile! It's all Dominic's fault. He broke the rule of Consent in going after you. Do you wish to kill him?"

Yes. No. Hell and damnation, he didn't know. *NO!* Honoria said with utter certainty.

He deflated. "Let me down, sister mine. I don't wish to kill him. We are too few, as it is."

The bonds that held him melted away. "I'm sorry," she said, tears in her bright eyes, and held out her hand.

He came down the bed's steps and caught her up in a tight embrace. She kissed his cheek, and he buried his nose in the comforting darkness of her hair. She still smelled of sandalwood. Once she had tried to seduce Michel with that scent, but now it reminded him of home, and family.

Then she wriggled free. "Are you willing to be Appointed as a Protector? The House will want to hold the ceremony as soon as possible."

He had lived—no, *Honor* had lived—to protect the House and its people. Could he turn his back on them now? Of more weight, would they accept him, broken as he was?

Oathbreaker ... They had kept Dominic, despite his flaws. "What choice do I have?"

Cecilia kissed his mouth. "Welcome home, my brother."

* * * *

The Rosenhuis in Ypres was a new building three stories high, with a steep tiled roof, smooth gray stone walls, and arched windows glittering with dozens of round green-glass panes.

In the djinni's suite that occupied half of the second story, Dominic sat in a chair formed in the shape of interlocking bows. He didn't feel the polished wood. He didn't see the calligraphy or the brightly-colored drawings of the book open on his lap. His gaze was drawn to the slice of sky and garden showing through the half-open window. In the courtyard

below, Sharibet's rosebushes were just showing the first pink buds of spring.

He ached in body—Michel's assault had broken several ribs and his collarbone—but by tomorrow morning, the bones would have knitted. How long would it take his heart to heal? He might never recover from Michel's hatred and loathing.

He had searched for Michel for so long. Done unspeakable things. Broken the laws of the House and Cecilia's gravest prohibition. He had been so certain that Michel would return his love if he could remember.

Instead Dominic had made another cripple like himself. The pain of that inadvertent betrayal wracked him, harsher than any bodily agony. *Beloved, beloved, I never meant to harm you.*

He had waited fifty years to taste the sweetness of Honoria's kiss. He didn't care that Honoria's kiss came from Michel's lips. But Michel cared.

Dominic could not blame Michel for his violent rejection. He could only mourn the death of hope. He would never get Honoria back. Just as Cecilia had warned, Michel could not love him as Honoria had.

So be it. Michel was alive. Found. Transformed. Dominic knew exactly where he was—in Cecilia's arms, as she so deliberately let him know with tantalizing glimpses of the softness of Michel's skin, the fine spun gold of his hair. She hoped to punish his disobedience in this way, but she miscalculated badly.

He drew strength from the vision of Michel, alive. If Michel found pleasure in her arms in the way of djinni, Dominic

would rejoice that Michel could feel pleasure, could feel anything at all. He was *not dead*. Anything else was a trifle, unworthy of consideration.

The Menelaos of old—before Beziers—had been an obedient djinn, a patient master of strategy. But Dominic, the man Sharibet had so painstakingly stitched together from the broken pieces of Menelaos, was someone altogether less restricted by the confines of conscience. He would repeat his rebellion endlessly, given the chance. He only regretted the pain he had caused Michel. But even pain was a sign of life.

He would not regret it. He would *not*.

"My lord, are you in pain?"

"Don't worry yourself over me," he said to Tirgit, Cecilia's handmaid. "The bruises are fading."

"That isn't what I meant," she said, impertinent as ever. Her eyes, a changeable blue-green startling in her olive-skinned face, were compassionate and concerned as she set down a jug that smelled of blood and citrus. Pouring from the jug, she filled a goblet and pressed it into his hand. "Drink and heal, my lord."

She knelt gracefully beside the chair, and pinned him with a determined look. Yielding, he drank.

She had been a loyal daughter to him since he had bought her in a slave market on the Silk Road. Tirgit was a reborn daughter of the House, to be rescued and cherished. She never knew he had intended to drink the death of a nameless slave. Would she forgive him, if she knew? Or would she hate him, as Michel did?

"You did the right thing," she said, suddenly.

He couldn't stop himself from saying, "He tried to kill me!"

"He's confused, I imagine, his life overturned. I believe Lord Michel will forgive you, eventually."

"Poor Brother What-a-Waste," Dominic said, sardonically using her nickname for Michel. "He'll come to his senses soon."

Her cheeks reddened. "When you and Lady Cecilia found me, do you remember how I was, those first few months of travel?"

He smiled lopsidedly. "I was tempted to leave you behind, once or twice."

"You were so kind, and I was horrid to you." She laid her head on his arm, and he stroked her fine dark hair.

"After I was captured away from my family, I never let myself weep. Not once. I dared not show any weakness for *them* to use against me. The only thing I had left of my very own was my hidden heart. Then you came, and I didn't have to hide any more."

"So you were free to weep," Dominic said softly.

"And rage. You would never beat me, or..." She swallowed hard. "Lord Michel will come to know you, as I do."

"Should I depart? To avoid reminding him of the indignities I've heaped on him?" The prospect of parting again so soon burned like a wound washed with wine.

To his surprise she drew her belt knife and made a tiny incision on the inside of her wrist, in a place already marked by scores of thin scars.

"Tirgit, child, you don't have to—"

"Let me give you this comfort. It's the only thing I can do for you, father of my heart." She raised her hand, palm up, offering herself without reservation.

Unable to refuse, he bent his mouth to the tender skin and tasted her, seeing himself in her memories: sometimes aloof because of his pain, sometimes protective, always kind to her.

He withdrew, reluctantly. Her love for him remained, lingering like the taste of her blood.

"Thank you." He smoothed her dark hair for the pleasure of touching her. Bending, he rested his cheek briefly against the top of her head. "Thou art precious to me, little one," he said in Arabic.

She smiled at him shyly. "Please stay in Ypres. Perhaps Lord Michel will show you his hidden heart, in time."

He dared not hope for that. But he would stay.

* * * *

The church bells were ringing mid-afternoon None when Dominic's restless pacing through his chambers was interrupted by the arrival of one of the pink-cheeked Flemish maids.

"Lady Cecilia wishes a word with you," she announced.

Finally. He pushed past the maid, his feet pounding on the wooden stairs down to the parlor. He flung open the door to see Cecilia seated near windows that pooled sunlight the color of electrum on the floor.

She wore the same serene expression as always, damn her.

"Well?" he demanded, coming to stand over her.

"Have I managed to clean up the mess you made of our beloved Ea?" she asked acidly. "Of course. But now you know why consent is so necessary. You risked his mind and soul by coercing him, Menelaos. He may never regain voluntary recall of his past life memories. When he tries—it's agony for him, and for me, watching him suffer."

He let her use of his old name pass. She wasn't done reprimanding him, and he didn't feel like trying to stop her. *She wants me to feel the pain, too.* "Does the House rejoice that an Apkallu has been Found?"

"I lay his diminished capacity at your door. If you hadn't held to your stupid obsession—"

"Does the House rejoice *or not*?" He tried to keep his voice even.

"The House rejoices," she said reluctantly. "You can make up some of the damage you've caused by starting the invitations and preparations for his Appointing. Pick some holy day in the next two or three weeks. The non-kin will need an excuse to be safely away from the chateau."

"So soon?"

She glared at him. "He's a Raised and Named djinn. The only thing saving him from the ax right now is that he's living in *my* house, not a House of the Rose. If we can't get him Appointed soon..."

"I'll begin immediately," he said, in very close counterfeit of his former respectful obedience.

"I've come to bring my servants back with me. But perhaps..." She paused just long enough to let him know she was toying with him.

He wanted to lift a lazy eyebrow and ask, 'Have you forgotten what you planned to say?' but deemed it more prudent to remain silent. What had Alexander said? *Pick your battles.*

She tilted her head and Dominic braced himself for a blow, despite his non-response.

But she gathered her temper, and her next statement was cool. "Do not return to the Chateau, just yet."

Despite anticipating just such a command, it still hurt. He didn't want confirmation of his deepest fears. *He hates me.*

"No. He pities you," Cecilia said, cruelly, reading his expression.

"Remembering the djinn I once was?" Dominic shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

Cecilia folded her hands. "It worries the people of the House—with good cause!—when the djinni fight amongst themselves." Her smooth girlish face showed weariness. "I will be returning shortly to the Chateau. Send Tirgit to me. I will let you know when you may return."

"Yes, lady," he said, bowing. What he kept in his hidden heart, Cecilia need not know.

Michel. Alive. Half sane. What wonderful news.

* * * *

Tirgit entered the parlor, her heart in her mouth. She stood before Cecilia, her hands folded at her waist in the old gesture of homage. "My lady, it is good to meet again."

"It is," agreed Cecilia, with less than her usual graciousness. "Brother Michel is doing well enough, considering the poor introduction he received to our life. You did him a great disservice by summoning Dominic here."

Tirgit winced at the reminder. "I'm sorry." From long experience, she knew that only humility and compliance would placate Cecilia in this mood. But was she still angry?

"How old are you, Tirgit?" Cecilia watched her with a cool assessment that fluttered Tirgit's nerves.

She had not seen that look since she had been freed from slavery. "I'm not sure, lady. Fifteen, perhaps sixteen?" she replied, casting her gaze down to the tips of Cecilia's leather slippers, which emerged coyly from the rich blue folds of her gown.

Was she to be married off? Would Cecilia want her to help start a new House, a family, in one of these booming European towns to increase the House of the Rose's reach, and territory? She was prepared to do her duty if she must, but after having traveled with Cecilia and Dominic from Samarkand to Hind to Egypt to Italy and now, to this flat, cold, northern country, she didn't want to spend this life far from the circle of their powerful affection.

Or will she just send me away in disgrace? In her turmoil, she scarcely heard Cecilia's next words. "—a great favor to the House, to Lady Sharibet, and to me, if you would consider it, Tirgit."

Tirgit's eyes snapped open. "I—lady, what?"

Cecilia smoothed the patterned brocade of her gown over her lap. "There is no one else. Fausta's daughters are far too young. You are the only suitable Raised and Named girl within a fortnight's journey. You know the way of djinni. The sooner you can go to him, the better the chances for a child."

In amazement, Tirgit realized what Cecilia was asking. *She wants me to be Michel's concubine.* A newly-made djinn had a brief period of fertility after his Transformation. There was always the hope that a child conceived in that time might be a reborn Apkallu, enticed back from the Underworld to the House by love.

She remembered her enslavement: *Brutal hands spread her legs, and her anger burns hotter than the pain for a while. But it hurts, it hurts and she can't make it stop ...* Tirgit swallowed.

The first slave dealer had been honest in advertising her as a virgin. With the others, only her youth made the lie plausible. The rapes usually slowed a few weeks before they sold her again, to allow the bruises and torn flesh to heal. She remembered the stink of the fish oil the women used to smear on her abraded flesh to prevent scarring, and the stale-urine reek of the men. Skinny, fat, young, old, they had all smelled the same to her.

When she saw how Dominic studied her, before buying her, she had been certain of her fate. Yet he had never touched her that way, never forced himself upon her, and she loved him for it. After she had been Raised and Named, the memories of previous lives as a woman, wife, and priestess

had counterbalanced much of her fear. And Lady Cecilia, with her clever fingers and perfumed skin, had soothed away her nightmares, re-teaching the pleasure of touch. Tirgit might flirt with the young men at church, but always where it was safe, where Lady Cecilia or Lord Dominic could protect her. She was prepared to do her duty to the House by marrying and having children, but she hadn't planned to ever enjoy lying with a man.

Now ... to bring a Lost one from the Underworld, she must open herself to love. Could she do it?

"Are you all right, child?" Cecilia said, sounding concerned. "You know I don't want to force you."

Tirgit shook her head. She knew Cecilia would never send her to Lord Michel's bed if she did not consent, but if she did not, then what? Michel would lose his only chance to father a child of his flesh, and Cecilia might send Tirgit away, to be married to a suitable man of the House, never again to see Cecilia or Dominic.

She had already defied Cecilia once. Did she dare do it again?

She forced away memories of pain and subjugation. The act of sex had never taken very long. Surely, the life she enjoyed now was worth a few minutes of enduring what, to be honest, she had already endured many times, and if she did this thing for Cecilia, perhaps she might be forgiven. No one would blame her if no child resulted, or if the child were not Apkallu.

"I—I will do it, lady." Tirgit's voice quavered.

She was rewarded by Cecilia's smile. "You are a good and loyal girl, Tirgit. Thank you."

Tirgit tried to ignore the sickness she felt at the prospect of feeling Michel's weight pressing down on her, of his pinning her, penetrating her. She was no longer a slave. She was agreeing to this out of her own free will. He would not be forcing her.

"Come, let us return to the chateau. I will have the maids prepare a bath."

Guided by Cecilia's touch, Tirgit allowed herself to be led out of the parlor, into the bright sunshine of the courtyard, where saddled horses waited for them. She concentrated on reminding herself that Michel was a very handsome man. This past year, she had seen for herself his kindness, and his courtesy. He would not mistreat her. He would not *deliberately* hurt her. She was certain of that much.

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Chateau du Chancy

Michel, still somewhat aroused from Cecilia's kissing and fondling that morning, spent the afternoon of her absence reacquainting himself with powers he hadn't used in fifty-one years. He clearly remembered being able to move objects simply by stretching out a wing of his aura. He had thrown Dominic across the room! But his delicate control was so clumsy.

In the great hall outside the door to the buttery, he shattered a set of dishes and dented a set of pewter cups. After an hour, he sank to the floor completely exhausted,

slumped amidst herb-scented rushes and brightly-painted earthenware shards, ready to curse with frustration.

It had been just the same after his months of recuperation from the dreadful injuries he received in Al-Mansurah. When the Templar infirmarer had finally given permission for the splints and webbing to be removed from his leg, Michel had spent nearly a week trying to learn to walk, as unsteady as a year-old child. He would have fallen nearly as often as a toddler, too, had it not been for his squire, Aumery.

There was no Aumery to support him now. All of the servants had been removed on his awakening. Thank God, exercising his powers didn't hurt like trying to walk with a handful of metal fragments embedded in his thigh. Only practice would return him to the level of skill that Honoria had enjoyed during her long life.

Michel rose wearily to his knees, gathered up the shards, and piled them neatly in a corner for the servants to take out to the rubbish heap later, after they returned. Then he went into the pantry and brought out the next bowl to practice with. *I used to know how to do this.*

* * * *

He waited at the solar's window, noticing with some relief that Dominic was not among the party when Cecilia and the servants returned at twilight. He and Dominic would have to reach a truce soon for the sake of harmony in the House, but a tight, hot lump of resentment filled his heart at Dominic's differences from Menelaos.

The Menelaos of Honoria's memories would never have terrorized de Sens and his knights, as Dominic had done on the shore of Lake Manzala. He would never have broken the laws of the House to abduct a candidate for Transformation, or raped another's mind by Raising him without true consent. And especially Menelaos would never have done these things to his beloved.

Honoria's regret whispered over and over, *His left hand is under my head, and his right hand does embrace me...*

No more. How had this brutal transformation occurred? What force had warped Menelaos out of true? *No one escapes the Underworld unmarked.* But Menelaos had not died. Michel could not understand this change, any more than he could understand why he himself had consented to break his vows.

He hid in the solar as servants, most of whom were Flemings and not of the House, set up the great hall for dinner, shared the meal, cleaned up, then retreated to their thatched cottages outside the main building of the chateau. It wasn't until late in the evening that Cecilia joined him, sharing a pitcher of lamb's blood, while a subdued Tirgit poured for both of them.

Feeling acutely uncomfortable, Michel spoke a silent Grace over his food, if blood could properly be called food. Trying to reconcile his faith as a Christian with the knowledge of his many lifetimes made his head ache. All he knew was that it felt wrong to eat without saying Grace, so he would say Grace. Let the theological implications sort themselves out later.

As he sipped, Cecilia related the news passed on to her by Fausta de la Rose in Ypres. The Templars were still searching for him, and the city was filled with rumors. The most common rumor, Michel was dismayed to hear, was a speculation that he had embezzled money and fled with laden saddlebags. Another favorite was uncannily close to the truth: a faery princess had abducted the handsome Preceptor, and borne him away to her underground palace, where a hundred human years would pass in the course of a single night.

Dismissing rumor, Cecilia turned to business, reporting a problem with increased demand amongst the prosperous merchants of London for vials of scented oil to soften the skin of their wives and daughters. Transportation of almond oil from the Mediterranean to England often resulted in half the shipment going rancid. The House in London had tried to use lanolin as the base oil, but the greasy smell of wool required the addition of a prohibitive amount of floral essence. How could they increase production while keeping costs down?

Michel listened intently. In the matter of the almond oil, he could offer a simple solution from his days as Marshall of the Templar Preceptory in Pezenas: ship the nuts to England still in the shell. An oil press could easily be purchased or made locally.

Cecilia was pleased with his suggestion, but instead of bidding him stay with her for the night, as he halfway expected with a guilty thrill, she only kissed his cheek. "Tirgit will show you where you are to sleep." She closed her door on both of them.

Michel found himself weary as he followed Tirgit to the other chamber on the second story. There was a bed made up, a candle burning, and signs of hasty removal of someone's possessions. The predominant smell was of soap. *Menelaos*, Honoria whispered with a stab of longing. But Dominic wasn't in the room. He had just lived there recently.

"Why am I staying in Dominic's chamber?" he asked Tirgit, refusing to go further until his question was answered.

"Lord Dominic is staying at the Rosenhuis for now," she said, gaze downcast. Her aura was dimmed and drawn so tightly into her body that only a faint, glowing outline remained. "This is the only other chamber suitable for a djinn."

She moved to the bed, and turned down the covers. She circled back to him and, standing to one side, said, "Let me help you disrobe."

"I can do it myself—" he started to say, but she freed her hair of the veil, pins, and bindings that hid it modestly. Black, loose curls fell below her waist.

"Let me help you," she said, then hiccupped. Her aura fluttered with the racing of her heart.

What was going on?

She's come to be your concubine, Honoria whispered. *She's here to increase the House*. Honoria's memory showed him: *Jehanne de la Rose, six-months pregnant, carries the lapis-lazuli cup of the covenant before the assembled kin to a thunderstruck Raymond Soleil...*

"Tirgit," he said, quietly. When she flinched, he wondered when she had developed a disgust of him. She had flirted

boldly at their first meeting. Now? Now he was forsworn. He had failed to keep his Templar vows. How could any of the people of the House trust him? How could he trust himself? He turned away to find a safer place to sleep.

She slipped between him and the door, looking very young despite the smooth curve of breasts half-hidden by the embroidered silk chemise under her gown.

"It's my wish—and the wish of the House—to bear you a child, lord," she said in a choked whisper.

Michel was ashamed by the sudden stirring of his prick, reawakened by his newfound vigor and the release from the crippling pain of his mortal existence. Cecilia had prepared him for this, he realized, by rousing him with her kiss this morning.

"Are you here of your own free will?"

Tirgit bobbed her head, but didn't look at him. "P-please, lord. Allow me. I want to, really I do!"

The usual appeal of her lively wit and rounded hips had vanished in the presence of this stiff, terrified version of Tirgit, offering herself like a sacrificial victim.

We remember what it's like to be a young girl-slave at the mercy of powerful men, don't we? Honoria challenged.

Michel took a deep breath, and imposed control honed by long practice of Templar discipline. He had been celibate for ten years. One more hour would make no difference. "I will not eat thee," he said in Arabic. "I will not touch thee, save at thy desire. But I would like—" Desire surged through him like a storm at sea. "I would very much like to have a child of my own."

House of Memory [House of the Rose Book II]
by Michaela August

I was never allowed to risk giving birth, Honoria added. *Let her give us a baby!* The emptiness in her arms was a ghostly ache in his own flesh.

"I would be honored if you—" He stopped, and realized that even as a djinn, he could still blush. "But only if you truly wish it."

Chapter Three

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. —*Genesis 2:25*

"I do consent. I want this." Tirgit bowed her head.

She should start over. First, the formalities: "It is good to meet again, Lord Ea. My True Name is Lal-hamun. Remember me!" She kept her gaze down, and her hands on her thighs. They were ice-cold, and unpleasantly sticky with nervous sweat.

"It is good to meet again," Brother—no, *Lord Michel* replied. Then he smiled at her, transforming his rather stern expression. He noticed the pitcher she had placed on top of the linen chest after she cleaned the room and changed the sheets. He poured two cups of wine, releasing the scents of cinnamon and Burgundy wine into the still air of the room. He brought both cups to where she stood, back pressed into the door.

"I think you need this," he said sympathetically.

She agreed. She managed not to spill any of the wine before she swallowed, but her hands still trembled afterward.

He took the cup from her and set it down. "You look tired."

Time to come to bed, her mind added, helpfully. She closed her eyes, trying to prepare herself. It was time to do her duty.

But instead of pressing her, he stepped away and seated himself on the bottommost of the steps that led up to the

bed. He was close enough to talk to her, but far enough away to reassure.

He stretched out his long legs, apparently entirely at ease sitting on the bed-stairs.

Fascinated, she stared at his ears. He seemed less ... *intimidating* ... when he wasn't towering over her. She gulped down another mouthful of wine, coughing at its astringency. Girlhood in Muslim lands had not prepared her for the Flemish habit of drinking wine or ale with every meal, and she usually watered her beverages heavily.

He cleared his throat and looked away from her. "Honoriamembers—I remember—our last meeting. You were Eugenia, Chief Perfumer at the House in Constantinople in the reign of Basil the Macedonian. I came to learn from you, for you had learned the new Arab technique of distillation."

Tirgit remembered Lady Honoriam's visit very well. The red-haired djinniah had been the tallest woman she had ever seen. Eugenia, though not the tiniest person in the House, had barely come up to the level of Honoriam's bosom.

Lady Honoriam had spent nearly a week serving as Eugenia's apprentice, patiently performing the humblest tasks. She had been entirely focused on observing and learning—there had been a stillness at the core of Honoriam's intensity, an utter concentration. Occasionally, her eyes would unfocus, and Eugenia feared that she had bored her illustrious student, but then Honoriam would ask a question that revealed the keen intellect behind the dreamy expression. It was disconcerting, but only to be expected of the soul once called the God of Wisdom.

With wine sending waves of warmth to her fingertips, Tirgit began to relax.

Lord Michel still sat comfortably, the cup held loosely between his hands. He was so big! With broad shoulders and heavily muscled arms, he was as blond and pale-skinned as the other people in this flat country, but the strange flesh was simply a new garment worn by a soul she knew well.

Tirgit released a slow breath, feeling her nervousness recede. Michel was not a stranger. Even if tonight's activities were uncomfortable, she could trust him. They had known each other for centuries, after all.

She drained her goblet and walked toward him. As if her arm floated through warm water, she reached out languidly to touch Michel's hair. It was as soft as it looked.

Her pulse jumped as he caught her hand and kissed it, first the palm, then the tender, sensitive inside of her wrist. His eyes half-closed, he slowly kissed each fingertip, then turned to look up at her.

She giggled, and tugged at his hand, urging him to join her on the bed. They climbed up together. Balancing on the top step, he reached for her eagerly, pulling her gown and chemise over her head. His own clothing followed in a hasty shedding.

Then, sitting thigh-to-naked-thigh, he kissed her. His mouth was surprisingly soft, and it felt nice. She liked how he stroked her back and shoulders while he was kissing her, as if she were precious.

She kissed him back, returning his caresses. The first gentle warmth between her legs intensified as he stroked her

breasts reverently. She finally permitted herself to simply enjoy until he pushed her back onto the mattress. The soft billows of the featherbed rose around her, smothering her as he settled his weight on her, pressing her down.

In a moment, her legs would be wrenched apart and the pain ... Suddenly, she couldn't breathe. She shoved at him blindly, aware of his heaviness, his size, of his member pushing urgently at her belly, wanting to tear inside her.

Of course fighting him wouldn't help. It *never* helped, but she was choking, smothering—"No!"

With a distraught groan, he rolled off her. "I'm sorry!"

He was apologizing to her? "No! You didn't—I'm just—" She struggled up to a sitting position. The warm wine-glow evaporated as she wondered what to do next. Her heart was still pounding.

She could leave now, and crawl to her pallet in the little chamber behind the fireplace. But then Cecilia would know that Tirgit had failed her once again. And she would rob Michel, who was being so kind, so considerate of her, of the opportunity to have a child because she was weak and terrified of pain.

Tirgit fisted her hands, digging her short nails into her palms. She had to go through with this. Perhaps if they started again, but more slowly? Would that try Michel's patience too much?

He rolled slowly onto his back and said hoarsely, "Tirgit, we can stop now, if you like."

"No!" she said. "No. If I stop now, I'll never..." *Have the courage to return.*

"Did someone hurt you before?"

"I was a slave until Lord Dominic found me."

"Ah." There was a world of understanding in Michel's acknowledgment. "Honorias—that happened to her, too. And I—*she*—did not experience the worst of it." He paused. "Are you certain you want to go through with this?"

"Yes," said Tirgit. He understood! Perhaps it would be enough...

Michel folded both arms behind his head. "Did you enjoy kissing me? How I touched you?"

The candlelight revealed the flush that rose from his collarbones to his clean-shaven cheeks, and Tirgit found herself charmed. The sick fear subsided.

"Yes." That much was true.

Michel looked relieved. "Then perhaps I should just lie here, and let you work your will. You can take," he said, bright red now with unexpected shyness, "as long as you want. As long as you need. I shall do nothing, not even kiss you, except by your command."

To have him at her mercy ... It might work. But, gods, he was so *big*, a powerful warrior in his prime, and his member was now fully erect. It was going to hurt. Even if he wanted to be gentle, it would take a great deal of force to make *that* fit in the narrow space between her legs.

"You won't move?" She crept closer to him.

"I give you my word as a knight." He seemed to feel some pain, but she couldn't imagine what. "Promise me in return that you'll be merciful."

Tirgit smiled, and rested her hand on his chest. "I promise." His heart was galloping beneath her palm and his pulse jumped in the hollow of his throat.

How had it been in all those other lives, when she had enjoyed making love with a man? Why did it feel so different in this body, so awkward and strange?

She stretched out beside him, and kissed him: eyes, cheek, forehead, and finally, his mouth. He responded, but kept his hands behind his head. Then she kissed his throat, and she heard him gasp.

He liked that! She lingered there, nipping tentatively. He groaned, moving involuntarily. The tingling warmth began to rekindle. She liked being in control, of knowing that she could do anything, touch anything...

She began to stroke his skin, moving her hand over his chest, the hair nearly as silky as the hair of his head, but a darker, richer gold. There were interesting scars over his ribs, white with age. She moved her hand to his flat stomach, then lower. He sucked in his breath as her hand hovered over his member, and every muscle tensed.

"Mercy!" he whispered, looking up at the bed's high canopy. His jaw muscles spasmed.

He was hovering on the edge of spilling his seed, she realized. She had to act quickly. Memory guided her as she straddled him, guiding him by hand. She breathed deeply as she accommodated him in slow stages, but the expected pain did not strike. There was no burning, no tearing. Just the sensation of being stretched, of being filled completely. She

breathed a triumphant chuckle, feeling powerful and bold atop him.

"May I touch you now?" he pleaded.

Giddy at the lack of pain, she laughed as he laid his hands on her breasts.

He began to move beneath her, and she matched his rhythm, riding him as his fingers did wonderful things to her nipples.

He was breathing heavily, and his movements became faster, more frantic. Tirgit braced her hands on his shoulders, feeling sensation coil where he was touching her. Just a little more, and she would—

He groaned loudly and thrust up into her, his back arching. His hands clamped her hips, his movements short, jerky. One thrust, two, three, and he relaxed, his hands falling to his sides. "God's Bones!" He opened blurry eyes and smiled blissfully.

She smiled back. Briefly. She was grateful that it hadn't hurt, but she had started to feel herself responding, started to hope for something more ... She climbed off him, and curled against his side.

He stroked her hip, then trailed his fingertips over her belly and slid them gently between her legs. He kissed her deeply, tenderly, and she opened to his touch, letting the pleasure build and crest into a long swoop down into the starry dark, as if she were a bird freed into the night sky.

Tirgit returned to her senses curled in Michel's embrace, aware that he was ready for her again. She turned in his arms, pressed breast to breast, hip to hip, and kissed him.

This time, she welcomed him inside with no hesitation.

* * * *

Michel awoke hours before dawn, still accustomed to rising for Matins, though he would never sing the dawn office again in the company of his Templar brethren.

His loss was offset by the pleasant strangeness of waking up with an armful of soft girl. He buried his nose in her rose-scented hair, quietly celebrating the end of his long celibacy.

And yet ... He couldn't reconcile the present with the past. Why had he made the decision to live despite his Templar vows? His memory kept circling to that moment. *Dominic's right hand rises and grips Michel's chin in preparation for breaking his neck. "No! Wait!" Michel cries. "I want to remember! Whatever you want! Don't—don't—"*

It nagged him like his old leg injury. Why had he surrendered?

He drew the coverlet up over Tirgit's bare shoulders. Deeply asleep, she was pressed against him, her head pillowed on his bicep, her arm loosely draped across his waist, her presence in his bed a stark reminder of the changes in his life.

Becoming a djinn again felt right, as if he had finally returned to his natural state. So why was he beating his breast about leaving behind his tiresome mortal life of duty and prayer and pain?

So what if he broke his oath to the Templars? Hadn't he ever broken a promise before? The memory was elusive. *Inanna, the young woman, sits at his table, drinking beer*

through a straw. Her minister Ninshubur, speaker of truth, stands at her back ... Too much beer later, he vows: "I will give these mes to my daughter, Inanna. In the name of my power, in the name of my temple, I will give the divine formulas to shining Inanna, my daughter."

He tried to summon more, and felt a throbbing pain. The headache that kicked in tore the gossamer threads of recollection.

It wasn't as if he regretted his decision, but simply that he was ashamed. He had wanted to expiate his sins, not commit more. Well, what was done was done, and he would try to keep to his honor in the future. After all, what was one slip in the span of centuries?

Logical as it was, that argument sounded hollow against the self-disgust in his heart. Why had he forsaken his vows in the face of death at Dominic's hands, when he had willingly entered Al-Mansurah's deathtrap with his brother Templars? What was the difference between the two tests?

Dominic wasn't in Al-Mansurah. Honoria's mental voice sounded exhausted. *Go back to sleep.*

* * * *

Tirgit left his bed two hours later with a lingering kiss and the promise to return at nightfall. She seemed to have entirely overcome her fear of him; her aura glowed rosy with satisfaction as she dressed and slipped out of the solar to attend Cecilia.

Michel spent the morning down in the chateau's cellar, safely away from prying eyes, practicing the lighting and

snuffing of torches using his power. At the end of three hours, he could reliably spark a fire from three yards away. Fine control of his aura in this body required different tricks than it had in Honoria's.

Of course, Honoria had been trained since her Transformation until her powers had become second nature. Michel, on the other hand, had reached the ripe age of twenty-seven in blissful ignorance of his abilities. He tended to choke off the flow of energy when his mind kept insisting *This is sorcery!* rather than perfectly normal energy channeling.

He broke his fast in the solar with Cecilia. As Tirgit waited on them, twinkling whenever she met his eye, Cecilia began a gentle interrogation of Michel, drawing out the details of his boyhood and travels to the point where he and his cousin had encountered Dominic in Egypt. She spoke bitterly of Roland, who had served as a Protector for a decade now but had refused to be Raised and Named.

Michel was sure she hadn't meant the message he received: that, even without full memory, Roland ably served the House. Perhaps there was some hope for *him*, after all.

Cecilia, perhaps sensing his change of mood, deftly returned to the topic of Michel's career among the Templars, seeming pleased at the recitation of his responsibilities. Cynically, Michel agreed with her assessment that a Marshal's training would serve a merchant house well.

They were discussing the future of the House in Ypres, currently just a toehold of a single couple and their children. Cecilia was entertaining the possibility of switching the focus

of this House of the Rose from perfumes to specialty dyestuffs aimed at Flanders' burgeoning wool trade, when Josef de la Rose, Master of the Ypres House, was announced.

"Good," said Cecilia, sitting back and tucking her sleeves back from her hands with a regal gesture. She gave Michel an amused smile as Josef entered the room. "He should be pleased to meet his new Protector."

Short, dark-haired and golden-eyed like so many of Sharibet's descendents, Josef looked out-of-place in the ankle-length surcoat of a prosperous Flemish burgher. Over one shoulder he carried a rather large satchel. He bowed automatically to Cecilia, then to Michel.

"It is good to meet again. My True Name is Enki-am-dirig. May you remember me!" He spoke rather challengingly, staring directly at Michel.

Michel blinked, and waited hopefully for a memory, any memory, to explain why Josef was named "The Lord of Earth Prospers Me." Honoria was silent on this topic as well.

Too much time stretched between them. He had to say something. "Enki-am-dirig, it is good to meet again. I am glad my name remembers you." His ears and neck burned with embarrassment. "Unfortunately, I don't, that is, I can't..."

"What Lord Michel means to say," Cecilia interrupted smoothly, "is that, due to the irregular nature of his Transformation and Dominic's failure to Raise and Name him properly, he does not have access to all his memories. This is not meant as any slight to you—"

Josef took a deep breath and shakily launched into a prepared speech. "Indeed, as well as greeting Lord Michel,

the irregularity of his Transformation it is precisely why I am here." He opened his satchel and pulled out a ceremonially incised double-bladed hand ax. The edges of the ax gleamed with recent sharpening, and quivered with the trembling of Josef's arms.

"While the House rejoices at the Finding of one of our Lost ones, the report of our sister Tirgit is that the Templar Preceptor—" he bobbed his head in Michel's direction—" was Transformed by Lord Dominic against his will, and without swearing allegiance to the H-House. I c-cannot a-a-allow this violation of the Law of the House to continue. Lord Michel must swear, or, or, or d-die."

Even as Josef pronounced this dreadful fate against him, Michel sympathized with his plight. How he had found the courage to come alone to confront them, he could not fathom.

"Master de la Rose, be at ease. I am most willing to swear whatever oaths you require, and I assure you that, however unorthodox Dominic's methods were, he did obtain my consent to be Transformed."

Josef gulped. "It is well. I am glad to hear these things from you. It's really only one oath. Do you swear that, in return for the shelter of the House, you will only drink what blood the House willingly gives to you?"

Cecilia leaned forward, eyes glittering. "You might wish to notice, Josef, that Michel has not yet accepted any shelter from the House. He has been in *my* house, and while he is here, I am the guarantor of his behavior."

"As you guaranteed Lord Dominic's behavior?" Josef shot back. "Lady, he's living in *my* house with my young daughters!" He caught himself before saying anything else, leaving Michel to wonder what Dominic had done now. "But that's another matter I wished to bring up later."

He turned back to Michel. "Do you make this promise to me, and to the House?"

"I do," Michel said easily.

Josef swallowed, and the amplitude of his fear diminished. "So witnessed. Welcome to the House, Lord Michel."

"I am glad to have returned," Michel said.

Wincing, Josef took another breath. "Now to the other matter. Lady, reports have come to me of irregularities committed by Lord Dominic, even before this last disturbance."

Cecilia sat back in her chair, tenting her fingers. "What do you wish me to do?" she asked in her sweetest voice.

"Lady, *he's living in my home.*"

What magnitude of irregularity could cause Josef that degree of anguished intensity?

"Well, he can't stay here for now." She dismissed his complaint with an airy wave of her hand. "He's gotten what he wanted. He'll be no more trouble."

Josef took a firmer grip on his ax. "I accept your promise of responsibility in this matter, lady. So witnessed. Now as to the invitations Lord Dominic is sending to the local Houses for Lord Michel's Appointing, I m-must protest that he has issued these invitations without confirmation of the House's

willingness to hold an Appointing. Y-You had no right to merely assume that the House would consent."

He held firm in the furnace of Cecilia's glare far longer than Michel would have guessed he could.

"My apologies to the House, Master Josef," she said, her expression smoothing into its accustomed sweetness. "You are correct. I neglected to present the candidate for Appointing to you before instructing Dominic to begin preparations. My intention was only to arrange things as quickly as possible."

"Of course, of course" said Josef, spreading his hands, gracious in victory. "But the formalities..."

"Very well," Cecilia intoned. "Will the House accept a new Protector? I affirm that his True Name is Ea, and that he is one of the Apkallu. He has been Raised but has not yet mastered his powers. I shall oversee his training."

Josef's bow was deep. "The House rejoices at the Finding of a Lost Apkallu. It is good to meet again."

Considerably calmer, he added, on an apologetic note, "My House may have only two of the kin, Lady Cecilia, but we *are* the House of the Rose. It is my duty to preserve our tradition."

She gave him a tight smile. "You have done so admirably. Tirgit, please bring Master Josef some wine. Will you sup with us?" Cecilia moved straight into small talk, ignoring the echoes of tension that still swirled through the solar.

Tirgit came back to life from her frozen immobility and bustled about.

But Josef was shaking his head. "I should not stay. The final information I must impart to you is that the Templars are like bees whose nest has been disturbed. They are turning the city over, stone by stone, searching for Brother Michel. Not a day passes but that one of their sergeant-brothers arrives at the Guildhall, poking his nose into things and asking questions. There have been rumors that they plan to start a house-to-house search soon, so I do not want to stay away too long. You might wish to post a lookout, in case they approach the Chateau."

"Will they try to search here?" Cecilia asked incredulously.

"It is certain they will, lady," Josef affirmed.

Michel, discomfited by Josef's news, wondered what would happen to him if the Templars discovered his whereabouts. If they seized him, it wouldn't take them long to discover that he was no longer human. And they would know of his connection to the House.

No wonder Josef was worried.

* * * *

The weather was finally growing warmer, but in the house of Mathilde le Pelletier, cruel winter still reigned. In her sumptuous bed she lay, a prisoner of endless days of agonized coughing and aching joints, half-suffocated, alternately sweating and freezing as her fever rose and fell. Tisanes of mint, chamomile, horehound, and cherry bark failed to soothe the burning in her lungs. Only Cecilia's medicine eased her suffering.

"My sister, you must drink it," urged Cecilia, pressing the cold rim of a cup, redolent with licorice and poppy, to her lips.

After the first musty sip she tried to refuse another, but Cecilia insisted. Weakened from being bled yet again by the physician, Mathilde yielded, and drank, and fell into troubling dreams. *At her husband's bedside she wipes bloody foam from his lips as the last of his life rattles in his lungs. (As it will soon rattle in yours, whispers the voice of doom.) The walls waver, and "Have him drink," Cecilia orders. Mathilde offers him the drugged cup. He drinks, and rises from his bed, his cheeks rosy, but a terrible accusation in his eyes. "Whose child is that?" he demands, pointing at Blanche, waving chubby baby hands at him. Yours, she tries to answer, but the lie swells in her throat, choking her. She can't speak, can't breathe ... She's drowning in salt water, drowning in her own blood, battered by turbulent waters in the dark...*

She tried to breathe. Somewhere there must be air!

"Shhh, my sister. You will feel better soon," crooned Cecilia, stroking her forehead, face, and arms. Stroking the inside of her body, too, with many, tiny, loving hands. There, she must still be dreaming.

Outside her husband's house in Ypres, Roland weeps as he prepares to mount his horse to depart on Crusade with the Count of Flanders, but this time, he turns back to her, and presses a string of blue beads into her hand. "Remember me!" As if she would forget...

At a wedding feast with people she doesn't know, who yet are kin, in a great hall made of golden stone, Cecilia presides at a high table. Michel is there, but somehow, he has become

a red-headed woman with great angel's wings of gold. She would laugh, if she had breath.

The dream shifted again. She stands at the top of a great stone tower. Spread at her feet is a city of strange, square buildings, white-washed and dazzling hot. Beyond the griffin-guarded tile gates stretches a vast plain of barley fields divided by canals, and mountains teethe on the horizon. Her fringed linen gown, barely more than a chemise, leaves her arms bare. On her wrists, wide bracelets of gold set with lapis and carnelian glitter in the sunlight, warm and heavy against her skin. Below surges a sea of brown faces and shaven heads. "Ninharsag!" comes the cry from many throats. "Lady of the Mountains, bless us!"

After that she slept, dreamlessly, surfacing occasionally to worry about odd things. Had her apprentice, Ludo, sent the fox furs to the Sieur de Reineville as contracted? Had Blanche remembered to pack her summer gowns before going to live with her in-laws last winter? How was Michel getting along without clothes, shoes, or his staff to support his crippled leg?

She awoke slowly, alerted by the scent of sandalwood even before she forced her eyelids open that Cecilia sat by her bedside.

Her friend wore a pale blue wimple pinned with sapphires set in silver. Her head was bent over the pages of an open book. Not for the first time, Mathilde noticed that she resembled one of the carved female saints on the church portico.

Cecilia glanced up, her impassive face transfigured by a smile of surpassing sweetness. "You're awake!" She rose from

her chair, and came to sit on the bed, tracing an affectionate finger down Mathilde's hot cheek.

"How—how long?" Mathilde was unable to draw a full breath, as if her gown were laced too tightly for movement or speech.

"Most of a week. I have been greatly troubled on your behalf, my good-sister." Cecilia put a surprisingly strong arm around Mathilde, helped her to a sitting position, and offered a steaming cup fragrant with herbs but not—thank God!—syrup of poppies.

"What ... news?" asked Mathilde, fighting for breath, hoping that Cecilia had heard something about Michel's whereabouts.

"A shipment of silver fox came into Bruges from Reval in Livonia for you. I hope you do not mind that I asked my kinsman Josef de la Rose to make arrangements to have it delivered to your storehouse here. Your apprentice Ludo did not object to our aid."

No news of Michel, then. Mathilde tried, and failed to suppress her disappointment. "That was ... very good ... of you. I'll ensure ... Ludo pays you ... the tolls. And customs ... fees."

Cecilia made a dismissive gesture. "Not to worry. You must recruit your strength, first. Oh, and I did not have the chance to tell you before you fell ill—"

"Yes?" interrupted Mathilde, eagerly.

"—but my brother Dominic arrived unexpectedly for a visit." Cecilia smiled as she said this, but Mathilde sensed that her friend was not pleased.

"Your ... brother?" she wheezed. "Older?"

Cecilia inclined her head. "Headstrong, I fear. He was supposed to stay in Venice to conclude a contract, but he left as soon the trans-Alpine passes opened."

"Oh?" Mathilde wondered what had impelled Cecilia's brother to undertake such a long and difficult journey.

Cecilia wound the chain of her silver necklace around a fingertip. "I will introduce him when you are able to receive visitors."

Mathilde forced herself to grin. "Handsome?"

"Very." Cecilia mouth twisted wryly. "You will have to take care not to fall under his spell. He has a weakness for golden hair."

"I want to give ... a gift. A collar of silver fox for him. And one to line a hood ... for you. For your black hair..." Mathilde struggled for breath. An ominous tickle began, deep in her lungs, and she tensed, anticipating the ache that the coughing would bring.

"That would be a generous gift, and will serve us well when winter comes again." Cecilia's hand slipped behind Mathilde's shoulders, supporting her. A cup of mint tisane, lukewarm now, pressed against her mouth.

She swallowed obediently, though she knew from experience that no herb could prevent her from coughing, if the beast in her chest wanted to claw its way out.

But the cough never came. As she drank, she became aware of a strange warmth radiating from the other woman's touch on her back. It seemed to curl inside of her, like the

fumes of mulled wine, warming and soothing, loosening the painful knots that had cramped for weeks.

The bedchamber seemed brighter, as if Cecilia were giving off a light of her own. But when she looked directly at her friend, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

"How do you feel?"

Much better. Mathilde took a tentative breath. Her lungs filled with the bedchamber's stuffy air, sweeter than all the perfumes of Arabia. "I can breathe again!"

Cecilia returned her smile. "That gladdens me. Is there anything else I can do for you before I return home?"

"Yes," Mathilde said, deciding to be direct. "I beg you: If you know what happened to my brother, if you had anything to do with his disappearance, please tell me!"

It seemed that the room dimmed, like a cloud veiling the face of the sun. "I swear to you," said Cecilia, taking Mathilde's hand. "I did not lure Michel from the preceptory, nor did I abduct him, nor did I kill him."

"Is—is he dead, then?" Mathilde's transitory well-being dissipated in distress.

To her relief, Cecilia shook her head quickly. "I—The Templars have not reported finding his body."

Though she had been born a noblewoman, many years of marriage to Ypres' most prosperous furrier had taught Mathilde to discern meaning in what people did not say as much as in what they did. Cecilia's strangely specific denials had not disavowed knowledge of Michel's whereabouts, nor had Cecilia denied seeing him since his disappearance. Mathilde wished to ponder this, but Cecilia was talking.

"May I send a young maiden of the House of the Rose to tend to you when I cannot? Yvonne de la Rosa has some Moorish training in the physician's art. But she is a good Christian, I assure you," she added. "She is even now enroute to Ypres. She has some accounting skills, as well. She could help you keep that useless Ludo in line. I pray you will allow her to enter your service."

"I thank you." Perhaps this Yvonne might be able to help her regain her strength where Flemish physicians had failed.

She leaned back against the pillows. She hated feeling so weak and tired. Wistfully, she remembered her girlhood, and racing Michel on their ponies. Nowadays, even when the fever retreated for a while, she could hardly climb down the steps to the workroom and storerooms on the ground floor without becoming breathless and dizzy.

Loving fingers touched her brow, and Cecilia's presence flowed over her, serene as moonlight. "Shall I read to you? I have a new book, verses from a poet of Troyes."

Mathilde felt the cold embrace of the shroud winding inexorably around her limbs, heavy as lead weighing her down. *Michel, where are you?*

* * * *

The next fortnight passed in a flurry of activity. Michel was able to come out of hiding when the first of a steady trickle of young men from nearby Houses arrived to prepare for the Appointing. He was passed off to the chateau's servants as just another cousin, albeit a blond one, and put to work.

As the cellar was cleared of stored goods, there was much hammering and sawing in the great hall, and the air was filled with the fragrance of freshly cut and planed wood. The maids carefully swept up heaps of pale curled wood shavings to use as tinder, and piled odd-shaped scraps of wood next to the kitchen sheds for kindling.

Michel, in addition to carpentry, wrote letters in cuneiform characters, using Honoria's memory of language and characters, to those Houses in Europe which would not be sending representatives to the Appointing:

Ea, Enki, one who delivers decisions, sends his greetings to the beloved people of the House in (city name), and bestows his blessings upon you, hoping that this letter finds you all well and prosperous. I am returned to you once again, having been known in this life as Sir Michel de la Roche-en-Ardenne.

It is with the greatest joy that I write to inform you of my intention to take the oath of Protector on the third Sunday after Pentecost this year of Our Lord 1260, which corresponds to the second day of Rajab in the 658th year after the Hijira. I pray you will accept me as your Protector once again, and that you will forgive the urgency of my Appointing.

Written by my own hand on (date).

In the afternoons, Cecilia drilled him in the use of his powers. In the evenings, they would partake of a communal meal in the great hall with their rapidly-growing population of guests. The representatives of the Ghent and Bruges Houses arrived first, followed shortly thereafter by visitors from Antwerp, Liege, Paris, and Troyes. There was laughter, and gossip, and even singing.

Then Michel would retire to the bed he now shared with Tirgit, and find sweet delight in her arms before they slept.

In the short lulls between tasks, he worried about his future. It would not be prudent to return to Flanders for a generation, not until those who had known Sir Michel de la Roche-en-Ardenne had grown old and died.

He didn't mind leaving the country, but he wished that he could let Mathilde know he was still alive. She had to be wild with grief. Cecilia, returning from one of her frequent visits to Ypres, reported that his sister had taken to her bed after his disappearance. Only a preparation of Cecilia's costly syrup of poppies had managed to quell her coughing and soothe her enough to sleep.

He wanted to be able to help her. Shouldn't he know some healing magic that would cure her ills? But he couldn't remember anything, and took out his frustration with a hammer. The kin were very impressed with his enthusiastic if clumsy carpentry, and he made friends easily, once they got over the shock of his half-memory. He might not remember their names the first time he met them, but he got them right thereafter.

The days passed quickly, but Michel was all too aware it was only an interlude.

Chapter Four

If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth. —
Numbers 30:2

Chateau du Chancy

Trinity Sunday, May 30, AD 1260

At long last, the day of the Appointing dawned. Stragglers from the London and Cologne Houses had arrived the day before, along with cartloads of food purchased from the butchers, grocers, and bakers of Ypres. The air was pungent with the scents of spices, roasting meat and vegetables, and the great hall was stacked with visitors' pallets and bedding. As all the Flemish servants left for Sunday Mass and a day and night of leisure in town, the kin resumed their practiced preparations for their own sacred celebration.

Michel was making the acquaintance of Geoffrey de la Rose, Master of the London House, as the door opened and a ripple of unease went through the gathering in the great hall. Dominic's trim figure, all in black, nearly disappeared into the dazzle of afternoon sunlight. Then the door closed and he was merely a man, warily receiving the not-entirely friendly attention of the kin. Michel froze, overcome by Honoria's emotions at the sight of her beloved Menelaos. Only Tirgit rushed up to welcome him.

He turned back to finish talking with Geoffrey, who was full of pride and anxiety about his son, a newly made ship-captain, but the man had already faded into the crowd.

With an effort, Michel started toward Dominic. *He's no longer Menelaos, as I am no longer Honoria. And both of us must make peace with that.* As he came close, the great bronze wings of Dominic's aura drew in protectively. Michel realized that he, too, had drawn in his wings, and with an effort, relaxed. He came within touching distance and reached out, palm up. "Hail, Ninshubur," Michel said, in the ancient language of the House. Like so many things in the past two weeks, it felt strange and at the same time utterly familiar. "It is good to meet again."

Dominic's aura pulsed, and then, slowly, as if he expected Michel to attack, he grasped the proffered hand. "Hail, Ea, and the morning light shine upon you. It is, indeed, good to meet again." His fingers curled around Michel's hand and would not let go.

Michel felt a surge of pity. Dominic looked hopeful, desolate, and very lonely. "Peace be with you," he said. Surprising himself as well as the other djinn, he leaned forward to give a quick, chaste Kiss of Peace.

Dominic flinched. "Don't feel sorry for me."

"I don't. In fact, I'm very angry with you! But ... I hope we can come to a truce."

"Truce?"

"Can we live amicably?"

"I mean you no harm," Dominic said, touching the spot on his cheek where Michel had kissed him. His gaze was hungry.

Michel stepped back. "Not any more than you have done?"

Dominic forbore saying whatever else he had planned, and said instead, "Very well, if it is a truce you want, I will make a truce with you. Furthermore, I beg your pardon, most humbly, for forcing your consent to be Transformed, Michel de la Roche-en-Ardenne."

Michel dipped his chin, his back rigid. "Then we have a truce between us, for the good of the House. And I—" The next words were difficult to speak. "I beg your pardon for—"*kissing you*, "—attacking you unjustly, when I awoke. I was ... confused."

"Has your confusion passed?" Dominic asked, ironically.

Michel, stabbed by Honoria's memory of Menelaos, who would never have shown such raw hurt or anger to *her*, did not reply.

Dominic's nostrils flared. Then he said, "I accept your apology." As if he couldn't help himself, he went on. "I have one question for you. Have you chosen simply to deny that you were once Honoria?"

"Honoria is *dead*," Michel grated. *Liar*, she whispered in his mind.

"Dead to *me*, I see," Dominic said, his face averted. "Well, but you are alive, and that is worth more than any penalty I might be called upon to pay."

"Even your own life?"

"There is no torment in the Underworld, nor any care, nor love. I would die for you with more joy than I have lived without you." His aura fluttered like a dying heart.

Michel covered his eyes. He could not bear the other's suffering, nor dredge up any part of the fury he had felt on waking and realizing the luck of the Underworld had deserted him. *Them*.

Damn, agreed Honoria.

"Ah, Dominic. Tirgit advised me you had arrived." Cecilia waded through the crowd and raised her cheek for his kiss. "You're just in time for the enrobing. Come along," she said, drawing them past the hearth toward the stairs.

Tirgit smiled lovingly at Dominic as they passed. To Michel, she winked and murmured, "I can't wait to see you in *the Garment*."

"Saucy girl!" Michel retorted. But his heart was lighter as he climbed.

Of course the disrobing and the ritual bath came first. The chateau's bathing facilities were primitive, everyone agreed. But the kin made merry, passing buckets of heated water fire-fighting style to the wine tun set up in Michel's chamber. Tirgit scrubbed him with fragrant soap, and dried him with soft cloths. Then she left him alone with Dominic to be wrapped in the fourteen-foot-long fringed linen Garment of Divine Kingship.

Dominic gave a sheepish shrug as he shook out the garment that had been cobbled together for Michel's hasty Appointing. It was the requisite fourteen feet long, and linen, but instead of being a master-weaver's work of art, it was a patchwork of bed sheets fastened with basting stitches. The fringe was made of mostly gray horsehair.

Michel grimaced at his image of Fausta de la Rose's beds stripped bare, but stood still as Dominic wrapped it around his torso, under his right arm, over his left shoulder, and tucked it under his right armpit. He shifted uneasily, and smoothed a fold of the make-shift garment.

Dominic misread his unease. "Everyone worries that the robe is going to fall off—do you remember poor Raymond-Soleil? Which reminds me—" He opened a small pouch tied at his waist, withdrew something, and offered it to Michel with stiff formality.

Michel accepted it, then stared uncomprehendingly at the object: a gold fibula in the shape of an eagle, wings tight-furled, glittering with inlaid garnets. Honoria recognized it with a breathless gasp—*mine!*—even before Dominic faltered.

"This belonged to ... You—she—used it to fasten her own garments at Appointments."

A cold shock rippled through Michel's body as the gold lay in his palm, warm from contact with Dominic's skin. *Unlucky!*

Stifling his first impulse to fling it away, he closed his hand around it so tightly that the bird's fierce beak drew a drop of blood. "This never belonged to me. Her. *She had it with her when she died.* Beziers—Cecilia told me it was burned to the ground after she escaped with you."

Dominic rocked back from Michel's vehemence. "I had it copied by a jeweler in Alexandria. Sharibet hoped it might bring back some of the emotion in my memories. But I never felt anything until I saw you."

"Stop! Just stop," Michel commanded. "What you are asking for *can never be.*"

"But I—"

"This has not been spoken. It shall never be spoken. As long as I am Michel, and you are Dominic, what you desire cannot be. If you persist at nibbling at me to change my mind, I will have to kill you for insulting my honor."

Dominic stepped back, holding his hands out from his sides to show he was unarmed. "I make no claim for the future. I ask for nothing. Take my gift or don't. *But don't forbid me what I feel!* I lived for forty years without those feelings. Whether joy or despair, that I feel anything at all is a miracle."

Why, wondered Michel, if he was so angry, did he want to weep? He gathered his composure and forced his fingers to relax, to hold out the counterfeit fibula. "Would you do me the kindness?"

He stood immobile as Dominic fastened the pin through the linen folds, acutely aware of the other djinn's hand brushing against his upper arm and neck. The bare skin of his flat chest tingled and he missed—*Honor* missed—the tender sensation of Menelaos's fingers holding her breast. *That can never be!* he shouted silently at the ghost in his heart. Using every shred of discipline that the Templars had ever taught him, he neither withdrew nor leaned into the touch. He simply stood, looking straight ahead, until Dominic was done.

"There. With any luck, it will stay up until the ceremony is over." Dominic gave a crooked smile. "In some things, the old ways are not the best. Don't tell Cecilia, but I prefer the clothes of this age." He indicated his own garb, a sober tunic and surcote.

The woman's garment is more comfortable, chimed in Honoria, unfazed by his fury. Michel forced himself to return Dominic's smile, though his cheeks felt stiff. "Shall we go? Everyone is waiting."

* * * *

Michel descended the curving stone steps. At the final turn of the spiral stairs he and Dominic emerged into the lightless vaulted stone chamber, fully the size of the great hall above.

All the torches had been extinguished in anticipation of Michel's entrance, so he opened his Seer's eyes. The auras of nearly thirty kin illuminated the darkness, but the silver resplendence of Cecilia's aura outshone them all.

Michel paced through the small crowd and took his place next to Cecilia on the newly-built dais, which breathed out the scent of oak. Dominic stood on his left. In apprehensive silence, the people of the House waited in what was, to them, impenetrable darkness. When the waiting tension reached its height, Cecilia cried out, "Let there be light!"

All three djinni used their power to ignite the pitch torches placed around the underground chamber. Michel's hard work this past fortnight paid off as he accomplished lighting his assigned torches, one after the other. One of the young cousins began to play a wailing melody on a flute, accompanied by a single drum, throbbing like a second heartbeat in Michel's chest.

He half remembered another tune, much simpler, and the feel of bone, vibrating against his lips. Had he composed that

melody? But his memory failed again, leaving only a fading impression, like a lingering kiss.

When the music finished, Cecilia spoke in the House's language: "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."

Michel bowed to the onlookers, his hands clasped respectfully at his waist, and felt their cheers wash over him like the waves of a choppy sea.

"Sons and daughters of Sharibet, will you accept him?" Cecilia asked.

The oldest mortal present, sixty-year-old Beaumont de la Rose, Master of the Paris House, limped forward to recite his part. "Lady Cecilia, all of us who belong to the House, born into it or adopted, trust in the loving care of the Apkallu, for you have protected us and rescued us from the forgetfulness of the Underworld for sixty-eight centuries."

The old man paused for a thin round of ululations, then continued with the formula: "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 answered. "He shall answer your questions himself, but I affirm that he is one of the Apkallu, called in this life Sir Michel de la Roche-en-Ardenne. After I recognized his *melam*, his aura, he consented to join the House, and survived his Transformation. He mastered his powers as a djinn, and he has been Raised and Named. He has had many

names in many lives in service to the House, but his True Name is Ea, Enki."

Michel swallowed, remembering a stiflingly-hot tent in Egypt, the scent of stale incense, and the Templar Marshal's stern question: *"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?"*

He had meant to keep that promise. It still troubled him that he had broken under Dominic's duress. Why had he failed? How could the House trust him to keep his new promises faithfully if he could not keep the old under threat, or—as Honoria had judged—temptation?

Thirty throats interrupted his maundering with their shouted refrain: "It is good to meet again!"

Michel shook himself. "I stand ready to answer your questions."

Beaumont began the ritual 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." He had no time to ponder: *Who am I?*

"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?"

Michel's gaze flicked to Josef de la Rose, who bore the double-bladed ax that symbolized the safeguards the House had set up against rogue djinni. It still looked very sharp.

"I will be tender, and faithful, and treat you with a father's care," Michel responded. *Marshal Renaud fixes 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?"* Michel's gut twisted with guilt.

Beaumont gestured to Fausta, carrying her four-year-old daughter, Katherine. The youngest available mortal of the House had been carefully drugged to sleep through the ceremony. They advanced toward the dais, stopping near a small table holding a large bowl.

Fausta dipped a brush into the bowl's contents with one hand, holding the sleeping child against her breast with her other hand. Michel stepped forward to the edge of the dais and bent. With nervous concentration, Fausta drew the brush across his lips, leaving a slash of red ochre, smelling faintly of almond oil under the rusty scent of the ground mineral.

While she marked Cecilia and Dominic in turn, Beaumont 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."

"I will remember you," Michel said in unison with Dominic and Cecilia. *I hope.*

While Fausta returned the brush to the urn, Beaumont raised his hand in an admonitory gesture. "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 yelled.

"We accept your promises, Ea, Enki, now called Michel. Be as faithful to us as we are to you."

Michel felt a surge of anticipation—or was it terror?—for the next part of the ceremony. He had not tasted Tirgit's blood all the nights they had slept together. Now, finally, that prohibition would end, if he passed this final test.

Tirgit, clad in one of Cecilia's gowns, walked proudly to the dais, bearing the cup of the covenant as befit her honored status as the djinn's concubine. She addressed Michel with confidence: "In respect of the promises given and received, we offer you the safety of our House, the power of our Names, and the service of our lives in turn. We shall remember you as you remember us." She raised the gilded chalice reverently, then turned to face the assembled family.

The master of the Paris House took the lead. "I am called Beaumont, Named Har-sagila. Remember me!" He touched Dominic's knuckles to his forehead. Dominic bit the much-scarred end of his knotted ring finger, and Beaumont let his blood drip freely into the cup Tirgit held. Cecilia kissed the wound and bound it with a salve and strips of cloth. The next

celebrant repeated the actions, and the next, until all thirty men and women present to witness Michel's Appointing had contributed their blood.

Then Tirgit shifted the cup into her left hand and turned to face Michel. She offered her right hand to him. "You know me in this lifetime as Tirgit, but my True Name is Lal-hamun. My lord Ea, remember me." She took Michel's hand and touched his knuckles to her forehead.

Cecilia steadied Tirgit so she didn't drop the chalice. Dominic braced Michel, who was glad of the support. He drew Tirgit's fingers to his mouth, broke the skin, and took his first taste of human blood in this life. Overwhelmed, he bent nearly double as he experienced the accumulated images of her lives in rapid succession, and soared on the wings of her generous, loving spirit. And there was something else—

Tirgit's hand vanished from his mouth. Instinctively, he grabbed for it, reluctant to break the wondrous communion, and felt Dominic's arms tighten like bands of iron across his chest.

"It is enough," Dominic whispered fiercely. "Let her go."

Michel, still resonating from the experience, with Honoria shrieking incomprehensibly as well, opened his physical eyes to see the kin watching him, waiting to find out whether he would master his reaction to Tirgit's blood, or not. Would he care that a sharpened ax awaited him at the end of bliss? But it wasn't the blood that fascinated him. What had he *tasted* in it?

As if a door opened, Honoria's voice came into focus. *We did it! We did it! We did it!* The pictures of what she meant

rolled through his mind. He shouted at the discovery, a roar of triumph, and his exuberance broke Dominic's hold. Before the Man of the Ax could move, Michel seized Tirgit and lifted her high.

He was laughing. He had to stop laughing to speak. He put Tirgit down, gently. "It is well," he managed to say. He was dimly aware that Dominic was holding Josef and his ax with frantic strength.

"I am well," he said to everyone. To Tirgit alone, he said, "Mother of my child, I will always remember you!"

She staggered, nearly dropping the cup. Her eyes widened.

He grinned at her, foolishly. "I saw it. I tasted it in your blood!"

As the witnesses finally realized what he meant—an Apkallu's child!—he accepted the sloppy cup from Tirgit. "I will remember all of you," he said, loudly, and drank, hardly noticing the taste or the texture of their gift.

When he finished, Dominic clapped him on the shoulder. He had passed his test.

Cecilia helped a beaming Tirgit to sit. Dominic took the cup from Michel. The musicians played something joyful. *I will treat you with a father's care*, had new meaning.

He wished he could hold Tirgit's hand through the rest of the ceremony. He couldn't pay any attention to it. Ritual responses, empty pillows that should have held crowns, the denunciation of Inanna—all passed by him in a blur. When it was all over, Michel licked the ochre from his lips, still smiling.

He was an appointed Protector, but, more importantly, he was a father.

We have a baby!

* * * *

The feast that followed Michel's Appointing should have ended relatively early, since with so few kin in attendance, there was less news to share and only one betrothal to arrange. However the musicians were still playing enthusiastically as Cecilia congratulated herself, climbing the wooden stairs to her solar. The House would find no fault in Michel as Protector, and she would not have to send either djinn to the Underworld.

Oh yes, she thought. That is my gift, spinning gold from straw. I have always found a way to turn disaster to my advantage.

Hearing Beaumont de la Rose's breathing grow labored behind her, she paused, extending her hand with the warmest smile she could summon. She was grateful. Wracked with a painful inflammation of his joints, Beaumont had not required much convincing to accept the Final Gift.

The old man's death energy would be her gift to Dominic tonight. The damage to his aura would be further healed, and he would have the strength to join with her in the mind-to-mind, body-to-body communion of djinni. She hoped he might someday become entirely whole again. But after ten years traveling the Silk Road with him, she knew exactly how to work around his shortcomings.

She opened the door to the solar, and stopped. Books filled Dominic's arms.

"I did not expect you leave the feast quite so soon." There was an open leather bag at his feet with the other volumes he had bought since coming to Ypres.

Beaumont stood at the door, panting. "Lady Cecilia?"

Dominic's face darkened at the sight of the old man. "I trust you will enjoy his company more than mine," he said. He put his books in the bag, tied the flap down, and picked up the bag.

"Where are you going?" she asked, confused, as he started walking toward the door.

"I promised I would remain your consort only until Honoria was Found again and Appointed."

She had thought he meant once Honoria was reborn as a woman. Rage choked her like a handful of diamond shards, sharp and glittering. "You know you can't consort with Michel. Even were it allowed, he loathes you."

So swiftly that she might have imagined it, he veiled the stark pain in his expression. "I'll sleep well in the great hall. It will be warm, and filled with family."

"But who will keep you warm in the way of djinni?" she asked, reining in her rage.

"No one." His expression was hard. "I'm finished killing for your sport, Cecilia. Find another to share your bed, for I will never do so again." He shouldered past her, and was gone.

Cecilia drank the sour wine of rejection. He didn't love her anymore? Perhaps she ought to erase his life like a monk rubbing pumice over parchment. She could erase this whole

country, loosing the forces of the unstable earth beneath them all. Its siren song called to her. This flat river plain longed to rejoin the sea and bathe in cool salt water again. It begged her to sing it into motion, into new existence.

If she yielded, her failures would be erased. But the rest of the family here would also be killed. She would only have to find them again, and Raise them, and hope that they would love her better in their next lives.

Her anger ebbed. *Let Dominic go. Half-crippled troublemaker!* She had only consorted with him because Arjumand, the only other male Apkallu Found since Beziers, had insisted on cleaving to Sharibet, refusing to be Raised and Named. It troubled her. Two djinni now treated her with distrust. Was she to blame for this? In whittling away the memories and powers of her former siblings, was she also excising their love and loyalty?

Or was her control slipping? Did they remember something they ought not? She would keep a careful eye on them, and act swiftly if need be.

As of tonight, she had another option. Michel had proved himself virile with her maid. Cecilia felt a thrill of anticipation. He could provide a full joining in her bed. No longer would she have to settle for the desperate half-measures that she had sought with Dominic. But first, she had an obligation to fulfill.

She took Beaumont's hand, smiling benevolently, and led him to the high bed. "You request this gift of your own will?" she asked, as the ritual she had written long ago demanded.

"I do. I have said my good-byes to my children. My wife, who might have mourned my passing, instead awaits me in the Underworld. Release me from this pain."

"I will remember you, Har-Sagila. Now, I release you." Cecilia drew him into her arms and put her mouth on his wrinkled throat.

She drank his blood, sating herself on his life and the rush of his memories until his soul broke free of his body. She rushed away with it, exalted with the love and trust that had brought him to her for the release of his pain.

* * * *

The musicians had finally packed away their instruments. Michel had wanted to play each one, but knew better than to interrupt the artists.

He had a hard time keeping his hands off Tirgit, too. She was giggling, kissing his chest as he fumbled open the door of the chamber he shared with her.

She stopped abruptly as soft candlelight revealed Cecilia, naked, in their bed.

One expressive jerk of Cecilia's chin, and Tirgit scuttled away and down the stairs without a sound of protest.

"What are you doing?" It was a mild question, under the circumstances, but Cecilia's eyes glittered with anger, as if he'd insulted her.

"We are to be consorts, now," she said, her voice lilting. Her expression, however, did not soften.

"We are? I thought you and Dominic..."

"We're done. I'm angry with him for the way he bungled your Transformation."

"He did a fine job with the Appointing, though."

Cecilia waved away his objection, then patted the sheets. She waited, her expression sweetly patient.

Michel seated himself on the linen chest opposite the bed. Finally, he said apologetically, "It is strange to contemplate being consorts when I know you are—were—my sister."

"But no longer," Cecilia said. "Time and the passage through the Underworld change everything. You wanted me when we first met, did you not?"

"Did I?" Her sandalwood scent stole through the room. "Or was that just an enchantment you laid upon me?"

"There was a slight glamour," Cecilia admitted. "But even I cannot fashion an inclination where it does not already exist." She sat up, her dark hair foaming past her shoulders, her white breasts small but lovely.

He bit his lip. "I find you very beautiful, and entirely sisterly."

What a liar you are! Honoria said. *Look at your aura.* He blinked his Seer's eyes. His great golden wings were indeed straining forward, longing to entwine with Cecilia's silver wings.

"I ... Tirgit is with child."

"I was glad to hear it," Cecilia said automatically. "But how does that concern our consortship?"

"Because I am going to marry her." He knew they were just brave words even as he spoke them.

Cecilia laughed. "Don't be a fool, Michel. You're a Protector now. You can't marry a mortal girl."

"She is pregnant. And my responsibility," he insisted.

"The House will honor and care for her and her child. You don't need to."

He set his jaw, rose to his feet, and loomed over her. "My only child will not be raised a bastard."

She sighed. "Don't be such a Frankish barbarian. Do you not intend to honor your promises to the House?"

He scowled. "Of course. But what does that—"

"Surely, you remember that each region has a pair of djinni, one male and one female, serving as Protectors? So that the spheres of men and women are equally accessible?"

"I remember," he admitted grudgingly.

"It is our duty to protect the House." She put a finger to the corner of her mouth in a coquettish display, and let a tendril of her power curl out, stroking the edge of his wing.

Though he did not consciously respond, his aura curled around hers, like clasped hands of frost and sunlight.

She smiled. "To be consorts, you will need to share my bed to establish a blood bond. Once, but I would prefer it more often, of course."

His aura pulsed with desire. He recoiled slightly, his mind still at war. "What of Tirgit? I don't wish to see her dishonored in the eyes of the world."

Cecilia folded her hands demurely. "She and I understand the difference between djinni and mortal. Do not fear that I will deprive you of her comfort. And If your child is one of the Apkallu reborn, then Tirgit will be eligible for a Crown of

Service. You may have her as a consort once the babe is weaned, if you wish." There was little likelihood of such a possibility, as she knew too well.

"Whether the child is Apkallu or not, I won't have him seen as a bastard in the eyes of the world."

She came down from the bed, and stood before him, clothed only in her hair. The top of her head barely reached his collarbone. "Michel, I know this is difficult for you," she said, gently, letting her wings extend to embrace him fully. "How would the world see the marriage of a knight to a servant girl? Shhh. Don't say it. We both know." She set her finger against his lips. Her breasts were soft against his belly. "The child will be loved and cherished by the whole of the House. The world's opinion doesn't matter."

Michel's shoulders slumped, his heart aching for this child he could never claim, never bring to his father, never introduce to Mathilde. "Very well."

She stood on tiptoes to kiss him. The spark that ignited between them was immediate, intense. He *had* been lying to himself about the nature of his regard for her. He deepened the kiss, pulling her against him, tracing a tentative caress on her hair.

But Cecilia did not want tenderness. As his touch moved, feather-light across her cheek, she turned her head and bit the soft skin at the base of his thumb, not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to startle him. He gaped at her, and she kissed him fiercely, demanding his strength. She was not Tirgit, who needed to be held as tenderly as if she were made of blown glass.

She unwrapped the folds of his long Garment, dropping it carelessly to the floor. She stooped, and he gasped as she took his prick into her mouth. Her aura was so bright it nearly blinded him. After minutes or hours of her skilled torment, he groaned and lifted her up to kiss again. She pulled him toward the bed.

"No," he growled, turning her in his arms, so that she faced the bed, her back to him. His hands cupped her breasts, squeezing them roughly, pinching her nipples till she squealed. He nipped her neck and she bent forward, thrusting her hips against him, offering herself.

"Now," she demanded.

His hands left her breasts, and went lower, almost forcibly spreading her legs, using his fingers to open the way. He entered her roughly from behind. His hands slid over her shoulders, returning to her breasts as he began to thrust into her, reveling in the slick warmth.

Cecilia laughed in triumph. Lowering her head, she bit through the skin on his forearm, tasting his blood. She made noises, either of pain or of ecstasy. He couldn't tell.

Bite her, and you'll know, said Honoria. Simultaneously annoyed, appalled, and aroused even further, he followed her instruction.

—It has been too long, my brother,—Cecilia said, mind-to-mind. He felt the exquisite pain she felt as he drank from her.

Swept away by a wave of pleasure, their thoughts and experiences blended. He saw her most recent memory: *"I will remember you, Har-Sagila. Now, I release you."* Cecilia draws the old man into her arms and puts her mouth on his wrinkled

throat. She drinks his blood, sating herself on his life and the rush of his memories until his soul breaks free of his body...

Rage, keen and fierce, kindled in him—she had murdered one of the kin, not an hour ago!—but his anger served only to push them both over the edge. They tumbled down into the abyss together, somewhere between falling and flight.

In the aftermath, he returned to his senses to find Cecilia standing in his embrace, her face pressed against his shirt, their wings wrapped tightly around each other. She was weeping. And laughing.

I foreswore myself for this? he thought, with revulsion. He had taken pleasure in her memories of killing!

It was a good death, Honoria insisted. *A surcease from suffering. He would have requested it as his right.*

It's still murder!

—This is the way of djinni,—Cecilia interjected, her breath too uneven to speak aloud.—Do not mistake it for anything else.—The way of djinni, just like the way you let me fuck you standing, like a common whore?—Michel shot back.—At least we didn't defile the bed I share with Tirgit.—

Her speechless hurt rolled through their link, and Michel felt instant remorse for having named her a whore in his mind to lessen the shame of succumbing to his own lust.

"I'm sorry." He smoothed her hair.

"No. If only you hadn't been so damaged by Dominic's bungling, you would understand. I wish..."

She wishes me to take casual murder for granted? And revel in it? How much farther can I fall? Lord, save me from myself.

Chapter Five

For the life of the flesh [is] in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it [is] the blood [that] maketh an atonement for the soul.

—*Leviticus*, 17:11

Chateau du Chancy

Feast of St. Barnabas, Friday, June 11, AD 1260

Cecilia finished writing, signed the letter, folded it and sealed it. She set it on the pile of similar letters stacked at the lip of the slanted writing table. Before picking up the next sheet of Spanish paper gleaming white in the afternoon sunshine, she stretched, listening to Dominic's sorry attempt to teach Michel how to play his lute.

Michel obediently plucked and pressed the strings as instructed, but the sounds that emerged did not resemble the melodies that he had once been able to produce. She did not interrupt them, although she could teach Michel much more quickly, if she had the time. Instead, she was forced to deal with further repercussions of Dominic's imbroglio in Transforming him.

She had written to all the Houses in France to discover how to establish a new identity for Michel. From the return mail, Aurelio de la Rose in Auvergne seemed to have found the best opportunity: a vacant fee, a bribable clerk, and an overlord too fond of drinking and hunting to notice that his vassal never swore fealty in person. Today she had been

advising all the other searchers to stand down, and Aurelio to go forward.

Her hand ached slightly from writing so much. It was vexing to have to beg for help in this scrambling way, especially when she was not yet sure she had done the right thing in letting either of them live. They were getting along well enough, but...

Dominic sighed and put his hand over Michel's fingers to still the dull plunking. "Don't they teach squires to compose verse and play a lute in addition to the arts of war?"

Michel snatched his hand away. Then he retorted with a forced chuckle, "Only the southerners teach their knights to behave like courtiers. We Flemish nobles are a rougher breed. My uncle used to tell my aunt she ought to be grateful that we didn't blow our noses on the tablecloth."

Before Dominic could say something heavy-handed, Cecilia interjected, "And yet, you can be courtly when you wish to." She trimmed her quill with a gilded penknife. "Quite the diplomat. I suppose that was your Templar training?"

Michel put down the lute, all pretense of merriment fled. "Indeed. They are most thorough."

Cecilia pursed her lips. "So I have come to understand. Five weeks and they are *still* searching for you." She set aside her quill, matching his gravity. "You must leave Flanders soon. Although your Brother Philippe and his cohorts have come here several times, without success, each day that passes exposes you to greater danger."

"But where will he go?" Dominic took up the lute, fingering its strings silently.

Cecilia tapped another letter lying on the slanted surface of her desk. "The London House has been requesting a Protector. Tensions growing between the King and Simon de Montfort threaten to escalate into civil war."

"There are Templars in London, too," Michel said. "It has a large Commandery."

"Are there any knights or sergeant-brothers stationed there who know you by sight?" asked Dominic.

"Not that I'm aware of, but the Templars move men swiftly. I've corresponded with the Master of the London Temple. He's very astute. He might—"

"The Templars are seeking a man with a crippled leg. Thanks to Dominic's surgical skills, you no longer walk with a limp. Without your beard, you look younger. Of course, the people of the House will vouch for you," said Cecilia. "If we can get you away from Flanders, where you are known by sight—"

Tirgit knocked on the door to the solar and entered immediately. "Lady, I beg your pardon for interrupting, but Geoffrey of London is here to see you on a matter of urgency. He waits in the hall below."

Cecilia tamped down annoyance. Not another crisis! "Of course, child. Send him up."

Quick footsteps pounded up the stairs. Geoffrey of London charged through the door, then collected himself. A richly dressed middle-aged man, tall for one of the kin, he bowed respectfully with his hands at his waist, and said, "Lady! It is good to meet again. And Lord Michel, Lord Dominic."

"It is good to meet again, Master Geoffrey," said Cecilia.
"What brings you here in such haste?"

"Lady, we are in need of aid from a Protector. Or more than one. I received word two days ago that the Hansa city of Stralsund arrested a number of merchants in their port, also seizing servants, personal possessions, and cargoes. As well as other ships of London and Norwich, they've taken my son and his ship, the *Rose of Yarmouth*. We have petitioned King Henry to issue a writ of arrest against those merchants of Luebeck, Rostock, Hamburg and Wismar currently residing in London, and to hold their chattels and goods until such time as our men are released and our possessions returned to us." He took deep breaths. "The king has not seen fit to answer us. Yet. Such an insult to the House must not go unavenged."

"You want your son back, safe," Michel said.

"Naturally. But the cargo the *Yarmouth* was to pick up was largely beeswax."

As Michel blinked, she sent,—An expensive commodity.—

"I recognize your need, Master Geoffrey," she said, not relishing the task ahead. "I will be ready to go with you as soon as I make a few arrangements here."

Geoffrey opened his mouth, as if about to ask a question, but Dominic asked first.

"Why not send me? I've not been of any use here."

She turned to him and patiently explained. "I need you to watch over Michel, who is still being sought by the Templars, and his sister, who deserves the protection of the House in her final illness." *And I do not trust you to do anything right by yourself.*

Geoffrey bowed. "Lady, though I rushed to you, you need not depart today. The *Rose of Harwich* is loading cargo in Bruges even as we speak, and will not be full-laden until Monday."

"Then we have time to do things right," she said, with a sideways glance at Dominic. "Join us for supper, Master Geoffrey. We'll discuss this matter further."

He murmured thanks and departed.

"So we are to lose the pleasure of your company," Dominic said, a little too blandly.

"And I yours," she returned, matching his ill-hidden hostility.

Under Dominic's fingers, still holding the lute, strings squeaked in protest.

She stood up, gathering the letters from her desk. "While I am gone, Michel, I am sure you will recognize the necessity of staying hidden until the documents establishing your new identity arrive from Auvergne. When they arrive, study them well. I'll make preparations for you to join me in London as quickly as possible."

"As for you," she said to Dominic, "if you decide to attempt anything else that might result in a visit from the Man of the Ax, don't expect me to intercede for you. I don't need to tell you," *but I'm going to*, "that the House is watching you very carefully."

He merely bowed.

"I still want to tell my sister good-bye," Michel said.

She stepped near to him, and kissed his clean-shaven cheek. "Dearest, please promise me you won't. I know it's

painful. She misses you, too. But it's better for her, in her precarious state of health, not to suffer another upset. Do you promise?" She caressed his leg with her aura, in the area where he had formerly been injured. As she hoped, the reminder of his surcease from pain mollified his defiance.

"All right."

"Promise?" she insisted.

"Yes, I promise I won't contact my sister," he said, reluctantly.

She kissed him again, this time on the lips. "I'll see you after dinner tonight?"

He melted, just as she hoped. "Yes," he said, lust kindling.

She kissed him again. He was so *governable*. Ignoring Dominic, she left the solar. There was much to do before she left for England.

* * * *

Outside Ypres

Friday, June 18, AD 1260

"My lady," Yvonne's voice broke into Mathilde's musings. "Are you sure this is safe? We're still within sight of the city walls—we could turn around and ask Ludo—"

"No." Mathilde shot her maid a quelling glance. Yvonne was a dark, slender girl of fifteen, but with an air of competence beyond her actual age. Cecilia had given the girl many quiet-voiced instructions during her last visit, before her sudden departure for London.

Mathilde still wasn't certain what 'family emergency' had drawn Cecilia to England. But, feeling so much better after

Yvonne's efficient nursing and Saracen medicines, she had decided to set to rest her nagging doubts about Cecilia's involvement in Michel's disappearance.

On Sunday, she had ventured out to church for the first time in nearly two months, and on Monday, she took a firmer grip on her business affairs. Her apprentice Ludo was honest, but he did not have the experience—or the wit, she admitted to herself—to negotiate the best terms with her suppliers and customers.

Tuesday and Wednesday she had worked, and rested. Thursday she had forced herself to wait. Cecilia might have turned back from her voyage.

Today she was riding to the Chateau du Chancy in secret, taking only her maid.

After her long convalescence, she felt stiff and awkward on horseback, and her joints ached like an old woman's, but Sweet Virgin, it felt good to escape the stuffy confines of her house! The sunshine lay like a warm cloak on her gown, and the breeze was rich with the scents of grass, flowers, and the pungent, musky scent of newly-manured fields.

The cramping constriction in her chest did not threaten today, though she could feel it hovering like dark wings on the edges of deep breaths.

The farther they traveled, the more Yvonne's good cheer was eclipsed by anxious frowns. She peered nervously behind every hedge and copse lining the road, as if expecting a troop of bandits to spring out. Her fretfulness communicated to her palfrey, normally a placid beast, which began shying at insects and shadows.

It was true that, riding without an escort of armed men, Mathilde risked abduction and forcible marriage. A rich widow was a splendid prize. But her instincts warned that if she arrived with a bevy of attendants, she would never discover the truth.

They rode for another half-hour through fields green with growing grain, before Mathilde spied the square profile of the Chateau's walls up ahead.

The gatekeeper, another dark youngster who must be of the de la Rose family, was visibly astonished at her arrival. "You're Lady Mathilde le Pelletier?" His gaze darted to Yvonne.

"Yes," Mathilde said, in her firmest tone. "I wish to see Lady Cecilia."

Who was, of course, not there, but Mathilde hoped to be offered wine and an opportunity to question the chateau's servants in Cecilia's absence.

"Lady Cecilia's gone to London," the gatekeeper said, scratching at black wiry hair underneath his cap. He shuffled his feet, as if he wished to deny her entrance, but dared not.

How very interesting. He's acting like an apprentice caught pilfering. "Oh?" Mathilde did her best to sound both surprised and disappointed.

"Didn't Yvonne tell you?"

Yvonne said something extremely curt in a language that sounded all consonants, and a flush darkened the gatekeeper's features. He said, much abashed, "Oh, yes, of course. I'll—I'll announce you to Lord Dominic."

"I would welcome the chance to meet him." *I'd like to see what kind of brother allows his sister to travel across the Channel alone.*

"Lord Dominic!" called the gatekeeper, dashing across the courtyard to two men practicing with sword and shield in the courtyard. They wore helmets but no armor, only long, padded gambesons, and moved through a brutal dance so quickly that their motions were a blur of silver and painted wood.

Mathilde stopped her horse under the gray stone arch, afraid to break the concentration of the combatants any further. Their strokes came so fast and so close they would surely kill one another if they missed.

The gatekeeper seemed to have no such fear. "Lord! The Lady Mathilde to see you!" At his shout, they stopped and lowered their swords without injuring themselves or the young man.

The slimmer of the two removed his helmet, revealing sweat-matted dark hair and eyes curiously light against dark lashes and brows.

His tall, well-muscled sparring partner seemed unaffected by his previous exertion, but his posture showed shock briefly before he smoothly sheathed his sword, bowed to Dominic, and departed toward the hall, without removing his helmet to show his face. But he'd been sword-fighting, with no trace of a limp...

I've done the right thing by coming here.

Her mind buzzing with speculation, she jumped when Lord Dominic appeared before her and bowed. "It is good to meet

again," he said. His voice was deep, and as smooth as his features.

I should have expected Cecilia's brother to be handsome! Then his words registered. "I beg your pardon. Have we met before?"

He chuckled. She liked his laugh. Warm, worldly. "To my regret, no," he said. He had a beautiful smile, too. And dimples.

Mathilde blinked and returned his smile. "I—I am pleased to meet you." She had a fleeting impression of great, coppery wings in the periphery of her vision, but when she looked directly she saw only trampled grass and the plastered walls of the chateau's outbuildings. *Am I overtired already?*

Dominic said, "Is something troubling you, Lady Mathilde? You know my sister is not here." He spoke with only the barest trace of an accent.

"I would be most grateful for some water," she said weakly.

He escorted Mathilde and Yvonne into the chateau's great hall. As she entered, Mathilde examined it curiously. It was scrupulously clean, the floor-rushes sweet with the scent of lavender and rosemary. The long trestle table and benches were nicked and darkened from long use, but the hangings on the wall were new, made from costly indigo-dyed wool not yet grimy from soot and dust.

"If you will please be seated, I will ask Tirgit to bring you refreshments while I wash my face and change into clothing suitable to receive a visitor of your rank," Dominic said, still smiling.

He vanished upstairs. Then Cecilia's maid appeared, skirts lifted in one hand as she descended. "My lady Mathilde! Welcome," she called. "May I offer you spiced wine and wafers? How does your health? You look so well!"

Tirgit helped her to one of two beautifully carved chairs set by the central hearth. The banked fire was a comfort in the chill of the hall. Cecilia's maid bustled to and from the buttery, smiling broadly, but her attentive pose was spoiled by the nervous glances she kept casting in the direction of the stairs.

Thoughts whirling, Mathilde sipped at the wine, steeped with cloves and cinnamon, and politely munched a sweet wafer though it could have been flavored with sawdust rather than ginger for all she tasted.

She had been right to come here. They were hiding something. Something important. *Michel*.

"Lord Dominic!" Tirgit broke off in the middle of a rambling account of the family crisis that had prompted Cecilia's trip to London. Her expression, rather to Mathilde's amusement, was that of a reprieved prisoner.

Dominic had been handsome in a sweaty gambeson. He was magnificent in gray velvet a shade darker than his eyes. A heavy silver chain set with polished stones—garnets, or perhaps rubies—gleamed against his broad chest. "Tirgit," he said affectionately. "Have you been entertaining our guest well?"

She bobbed a curtsey, her smile revealing her own return affection. "Yes, lord."

"I pray you will forgive her if she has been—as is all too likely—impertinent," Dominic said, to Mathilde.

"Cecilia spoke of her as a kinswoman," Mathilde said.

Her kind truth was rewarded when Tirgit's smile broadened into an impish grin. Dismissed by Dominic with a wave, the girl fairly danced away.

It was not difficult to turn her attention back to Cecilia's brother. He had seated himself in the other chair and was resting chin on hand, attention focused. "Now, why are you *really* here?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" Again, there was a sense of shimmering light in the corner of her eye.

His gaze caught hers, and she found herself unable to look away. Warmth flowed over her like invisible sunlight, and she answered without intending. "I was hoping for news of my brother—"

"Sir Michel?" Dominic interrupted her. He laughed harshly and his face changed out of recognition. His silver eyes turned to tin; his dimple vanished and the smile that had been so warm now made her shiver in fear, and pity.

At her startled twitch, he said, "You're not the only one to seek him here. Brother Philippe has called twice with a squadron of armed men in tow."

"But—" Mathilde frantically tried to re-gather her scattered wits, unable to escape his strangely compelling glance.

Dominic's expression gentled. To her shock, he placed his hand over hers, as if he were her husband, or her brother, and not a stranger. Mathilde heard Yvonne's gasp, but she

didn't pull away. There was something very comforting in his touch.

"If a contingent of armed Templars couldn't find him, why do you think you can? They searched *very* thoroughly, I assure you." Dominic exhaled. "I swear to you, Cecilia had nothing to do with your brother's disappearance."

That strangely specific denial again. Mathilde frowned. "What about you, Lord Dominic? Did *you* have aught to do with Michel's abduction?"

It was a guess, but her arrow found its mark. Dominic's lips thinned, and he leaned back. When he pulled his hand away, she felt colder. She waited with the patience of a merchant used to complicated negotiation until he spoke again.

"This is a dangerous conversation," he said, finally, looking at Yvonne.

When it became evident that he wasn't going to add anything else, Mathilde felt anger kindle. *Very well, then. He seems chivalrous. Perhaps I can shame him into telling me.* She stood up before him.

His dark brows rose. "Lady Mathilde, what—"

"Please." She tried to keep her tone humble. She dropped to her knees, humiliation burning her throat. "I beg you to tell me if you know anything. Alive ... injured ... dead ... I can't bear it. I have to *know*. I'll swear an oath of silence, anything!"

She dared a glance upward. He looked uncomfortable and yet sympathetic. "I *have* to know!" she insisted.

"Lady Mathilde," Dominic said softly, "Do not ask this of me. Please, stand up."

"So you *do* know what happened to Michel." She sank lower, until her forehead nearly touched the rushes. "Please, Lord Dominic. Please help me. *Tell me.*"

"I cannot."

He laid his hand on the thick cloth of her wimple as if he were administering a blessing.

"Don't!" ordered another male voice, this one painfully familiar, and breathless from running down stairs. "Don't kneel to *him!*"

Mathilde raised her head. Her heart in her mouth, she beheld her brother, rushing toward her. He had shaved off his beard, and he looked almost as young as he had been when he departed on Crusade with Roland. He moved freely, as if he had never sustained an injury in Egypt.

"Michel!" She pushed herself up from her knees, scrambling to regain her feet with undignified haste. "Michel. You're alive!" She reached for him and he opened his arms to her.

He looked so happy to see her, his dark blue eyes alight. *Damn him!* She rocked him back on his heels with the force of her palm to his naked face.

"How could you?" she screeched, seething with rage and relief. "It's been nearly two months. I thought you were *dead!*"

His hand went to his reddened cheek. "I *wanted* to tell you!" he shouted back. "I wanted to see you! Talk to you! But—"

He couldn't speak, and even if he had, she couldn't hear for the sound of her own sobbing. He was alive. The oaf!

He rocked her in a tight embrace as she wept. He smelled of myrrh, and roses.

The coughing started with an unbearably cruel tickle to the left of her heart. As fluid filled her lungs, and sprayed out red from between her lips, she knew she'd wasted in anger her last chance to speak with him. There was no room for breath, though she coughed with all her strength. She was drowning on dry land.

At least Blanche is safely married, if I have to die. And Michel is alive.

* * * *

Dominic brought Michel a clean linen cloth. Held to Mathilde's mouth, it was dyed scarlet in moments. His sister was dying in his arms. "No! Dominic, how do I—?"

"She's hemorrhaging, lord," Yvonne said calmly at his right shoulder. "You must take a tiny hand of air and close the tear in the blood vessels of her lung."

"What? I can't—"

Dominic rested his hand on her back. "My fine control is still intermittent. You must do it."

Mathilde convulsed, choking. *She'll die anyway. You can't hurt her worse*, Honoria observed.

A hand of air? *God help me! Paternoster qui es in caelis ...* The familiar Latin cleared his mind of panic. He formed a hand from his aura, and plunged it, insubstantial, into his sister's chest. There was, at first, no sensation. Then as he

imagined his hand of air more and more solid, he began to feel the inner workings of her body. His hand of air moved without resistance, until it met a void which should have been a density.

Was that the tear?

He clamped down on the edges, but Mathilde kept coughing and choking. Should he search further?

"She's coughing less blood, lord. Keep up the pressure." Yvonne's instruction calmed him more. It seemed hours later that she said, "Let your grip relax. We'll see how she does."

Letting go by tiny increments, he waited for Mathilde's next spasm. But nothing happened. Her breathing was harsh, and her face, like his tunic, was covered in blood, but she was still alive.

He realized he was sitting in one of the chairs by the hearth, holding Mathilde in his lap. When had he sat down? He looked up as Tirgit placed an open jug of lamb's blood in his physical hand. Now he was hungry. He drank it down, as Yvonne wiped Mathilde's face with a fresh cloth.

"She should be better now. When she wakes, I'll give her some strengthening herbs," the young physician said. "Praise to you for your magic, Father Ea," she added in the House's language.

Magic. He would have felt elated, if he hadn't been so exhausted.

* * * *

Mathilde woke slowly into the warmth of a summer afternoon. Birds sang outside, and someone nearby was

writing with a scratchy pen. The featherbed under her was unbelievably soft. Her chest hurt, but it was the old familiar ache, not the beast ripping her open from inside. She had survived.

Lord Dominic put down his quill. He stepped to the door, called for Yvonne, and came to stand by the bed. "You're very lucky."

"Michel," she croaked. "I want to see—"

"You *want*," he said, with infinite scorn. "He saved your life, you know."

He had? As she breathed, bringing air into her tired lungs, she understood that something tremendous had happened. "How?"

He gave an impatient laugh. "Give thanks for your life and drink Yvonne's tisane."

The girl pattered into the chamber, bringing a cup of hot, pale green liquid. Mathilde accepted her ministrations. Worn-out from the effort, she fell asleep again almost immediately.

* * * *

When awareness returned again, she heard voices.

Michel was saying, "I could heal her more. I could—"

"Cecilia made you promise not to contact her."

Mathilde suppressed a spurt of anger. Just as she'd suspected! Cecilia *knew*.

"She came to me!" Michel protested. "She's my sister! Our sister. Can't you see her aura? She's sick, yes. But I can heal her with my magic."

"You think so? Then tell me, O magician, just how would you do it?"

Magic? Aura? What were they talking about?

"I'd—I—" Michel spluttered, then said, pleadingly, "You could tell me. Or Yvonne. Or I could try to remember—"

Sorcery? That Yvonne would know? A cold chill walked up Mathilde's spine. This was worse, far worse, than if he had merely succumbed to lust for Cecilia. His soul was in real danger.

"You'd require healing yourself, afterward. Don't torment yourself with trying, Michel. Give over this fruitless ambition."

"Like you did?"

Dominic gasped as if he'd been dealt a fatal blow.

Michel went on. "Give me no advice you're not willing to abide by yourself. By God, I won't be separated from her again."

"You can't swear to that," Dominic argued, weakly. "She'll have to return to her life."

"But she can't. She knows about us." Now *that* sly tone Mathilde remembered from the mouth of a boy caught with cherry juice and crumbs in his budding moustache. What secrets was he hiding now?

"Fool. She's awake," Dominic said, the word 'fool' sounding like a lover's caress.

"Mathilde," Michel's voice sounded by the bedside. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you where I was, but—"

She opened eyelids heavier than anvils. He still looked too young, years of pain erased from around his eyes and lips.

"What secret?" she whispered, not daring to try her own voice.

"Mathilde, if you had to leave everything behind to join me, would you do it?"

"What?" Whatever she had been expecting him to say, this wasn't it. "Why?"

"Would you?" he persisted. "You could join the House of the Rose with me."

"Templars?"

He was smart enough to know what she meant. "I did not leave them of my own will." His gaze flicked to Dominic, who stood by the door, disapproving. "But I can't go back, either. The House is my family now."

"Like Roland."

He still blushed like a boy, too. It was answer enough. "We—I—could cure your consumption," he whispered. "You wouldn't have to die."

Sweet temptation. "Sorcery?"

"Not precisely."

She snorted the same way she did when she caught her apprentices lying.

"I can do *this* ... " Michel helped her to sit up, wallowing in the too-soft featherbed. He stroked her back with a slow, firm touch, and warmth kindled inside her chest as if healing sunlight were chasing away the deep aches and tightness where consumption gnawed away at her.

Cecilia had touched her just so, Mathilde thought hazily, buoyed by surcease from pain. "How?"

Michel's arms tightened around her. "I can't say any more. Not unless you agree to join the House. Only believe me when I say that the Devil holds no dominion here, Mathilde. My—our—power is not evil."

"Price?" Deliberately, she pushed out of Michel's embrace, feeling as slow and heavy as if she swam, fully dressed, in the ocean.

Michel placed his hand on his heart. "I solemnly swear on my immortal soul that no one here is practicing sorcery, nor do we traffic with the Devil. Your soul is in no danger if you join the House of the Rose."

She put out her hand, and clasped her brother's callused fingers, which closed around hers, warm, solid, reassuring. "Deal."

Dominic and Michel blinked at her, apparently dumbfounded by her agreement. Mathilde exhaled, testing for the tickle deep in her left lung. Death's shadow had fallen over her today, but Michel offered her hope of seeing, another winter, another spring—and God willing, her grandchildren someday.

She expected Michel to kiss her hand, but he did not. Instead, he touched her knuckles lightly to his forehead in a gesture foreign yet respectful. "It is good to meet again."

Then Dominic murmured a word, and her heart began to beat, painfully hard. It was the name from her dream.

Ninharsag.

* * * *

She had agreed! Michel longed to use his powers immediately to erase the great ugly red splotches that marred the bluish-white purity of Mathilde's aura, but his sister was already overexcited, her eyes round and wild. Although he had just helped her, he wasn't quite sure how to do more. "Rest now. We'll continue in the morning."

"NO!" she wheezed. "What—who—Ninharsag?"

The name Dominic had spoken.

The other djinn stared blandly back, refusing to admit any wrongdoing. So much for keeping the secrets of the House! "She's one of us now, Michel," Dominic answered his unspoken accusation. "She deserves to know."

"Then you tell her," he said. He remembered that he had known what the word meant, once upon a time. But no more.

"Ninharsag means 'Lady of the Mountains.' It is your True Name," Dominic told Mathilde.

"Name's Mathilde," she insisted.

He couldn't bear the scrape of her voice. He stepped to the stairs and bellowed for Yvonne to bring another soothing tisane. When he returned to the bedside, Dominic was holding Mathilde's hand.

Fury clove him in twain: one half wanted to beat the Dominic senseless for daring to touch his sister; the other half wanted to rail at his perfidy for touching another woman. Both halves demanded violent action. Only a thread of reason kept him from mayhem.

"No more for now," he said with heroic restraint. "Mathilde, you must rest. When you're stronger, we'll tell you more."

"Promise!"

"Of course," he said, bending to kiss her brow. "Here's Yvonne to help you sleep."

The girl fussed comfortingly. Leaving Mathilde in Yvonne's good hands, Michel dragged Dominic out of the solar. Once they were on the landing, with the door closed, he growled, "She's had enough for now. Why do you always stir up so much trouble?"

Dominic's grin was lopsided. "Because someone has to."

Michel brushed past him, headed for the chamber he shared with Tirgit, now that Cecilia was gone.

"She deserves to know the truth," Dominic said quietly, but with intensity. "Neither of us escaped the Underworld unscathed. Maybe she can, if we arm her well enough in advance."

"This from the man who said, 'Cecilia made you promise not to contact her'?" He wouldn't turn around to look for Menelaos. He wouldn't.

"But you ignored me, and she consented to join the House at your urging. Besides, she dreamed of the name already."

"Dreamed?"

"One of the ways our past comes through to haunt us, even before the veil of memory is torn open."

He had dreamed: *Menelaos sits next to her, as naked as she, bent over the lute in his lap ... She reaches to trace a slender henna-tipped finger down his nape, where his dark hair curls a little...*

What dreams had Mathilde suffered? He hadn't even taken into account that she was Apkallu when he'd invited her into

the House. He just wanted his sister near him. Alive. Healed. He was getting more for his bargain than he'd anticipated.

* * * *

Saturday, June 19, AD 1260

Mathilde woke to sunlight and luxury, feeling better than she had for months. Years. She stretched, and took a cautious breath, and didn't feel the need to cough. *God is good.*

The scent of sandalwood in the sheets reminded her of Cecilia, and Mathilde realized whose chamber this must be. She raised her head, and looked around with interest at her surroundings. The posts of the bed were angels whose wings, overspreading, held up a night-blue velvet canopy the exact shade of Cecilia's dark eyes. Cecilia, who had used magic on her. Who had given her—

"Oh, lady, you're awake," said Yvonne, smiling. "Let me help you to the chamber pot."

"You knew," said Mathilde, not moving.

Yvonne's expression of sweet helpfulness didn't change, but her eyes showed an awareness, as if they were windows on the 'house of many mansions' the gospels spoke of.

"You knew Michel was here. And you didn't tell me."

Smoothly, Yvonne said, "I couldn't. 'Who knows our secrets must be silent, one of us, or dead.'" She gave a bright smile. "Now you're one of us! I'm so happy!"

"I'm glad you're happy. I release you from my service."

Yvonne revealed her shock, embarrassment, and resignation, then her expression smoothed to its usual

serenity. "As you wish, Lady Mathilde. Would you like my help—"

"No."

"Yes, lady." She straightened, and gave a curious bow, hands clasped at her waist. "It has been my honor to serve you."

"But you serve Cecilia first," Mathilde said. "Return to her with my thanks for your physic. However, I never want to see your spying face again."

Yvonne bowed again, this time with hands tight-fisted at her sides. When she was gone, Mathilde struggled to get out of the enveloping feather bed. Her bladder aching, she did need that pot.

Before she'd gotten further than sitting on the edge of the bed, one foot tentatively reaching for the step, Tirgit bustled into the room.

"Lady Mathilde! Yvonne tells me you've dismissed her! May I help?"

Mathilde, needing to breathe hard, and not daring to, nodded.

When the messy business was finished, and Tirgit had helped her wash, and dressed her in a clean chemise smelling of fresh air and lavender, she sat limply in Cecilia's chair by the desk.

Tirgit, having bundled up Mathilde's wrinkled, sweaty chemise and the wash cloths, stood with head bowed. "Lady, forgive me for asking, but why did you dismiss her? She's done you nothing but good."

"She swore to serve me in all things, when Cecilia brought her to me. She lied. 'No man can serve two masters.'" How could her good-sister give such a two-faced gift? And keep such secrets as it would be death to know? What else would Mathilde have to learn?

"Yet you accept my help?"

"You're Cecilia's and never pretended any different. Though I do wonder why she went to London without you."

Tirgit blushed a fiery red, and her hand went, telltale, to her belly. "Um, I—"

Yet another unwanted revelation! "Don't feel you need to lie to me, child. Who's the father?"

Tirgit's gaze hooded. With careful dignity she said, "It's House business, lady. I won't lie, but neither is it my place to tell you all." She picked up the bundle of laundry. "I'll bring your breakfast shortly. After you've eaten, Lord Michel and Lord Dominic want to talk with you."

"No more than I want to talk with them," Mathilde replied. *Lord Michel? What have I gotten myself into?*

* * * *

Michel waited impatiently for Tirgit to reappear. It was comforting to know that Mathilde was here, under the same roof, but he wanted to see her, to talk with her, and to reassure himself that she was better.

Finally, Tirgit opened the door. He rushed up the stairs, happy to see Mathilde sitting by the window, bathed in sunlight. She smiled, then her gaze went past him and she lit up with delight.

Dominic followed him into the solar.

His own joy diminished. "Well, and good morning to you," he said with false heartiness.

"And to you both. I trust you will have many answers for me today."

She listened quietly to his rather jumbled explanation of Transformation into djinni and of remembering dozens of lifetimes. When he related how Dominic had abducted him from the Templar dormitory, her eyes narrowed at the other djinn. To Michel's secret relish, Dominic's aura shrank under the weight of her displeasure.

It wasn't until he mentioned Tirgit's condition that Michel felt the weight of that displeasure himself. "You're the father? Michel, how could you?" Mathilde looked greensick at the thought.

With a touch of sympathy, Michel realized she was seizing the single firm detail in the fantastic tapestry he had just woven for her. "I'm going to marry her," he defended himself.

"You've betrothed yourself to a foreign maidservant? Why, in Heaven's name, would you do such a stupid thing?"

"Because she's carrying my child," he explained.

Her frown didn't vanish. "Be that as it may, why marry the girl? Fornication is a sin, true, but for a man of your rank to marry a servant!"

"Because it's the only child I'll ever sire, Mathilde."

"How do you know that? Unless these people have made you a eunuch, or unless you really intend to hold to your vow of celibacy this time, you may father others."

"No." He took a deep breath. *God's Bones!* After all these years, his sister still had the uncanny ability to make him feel twelve years old again. "There will be no other children for me, Mathilde. That is the price I paid when I became a djinn."

"So, there is a price. I knew it!" she said, in a low voice. "Michel, what else?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, stupidly.

She shot him an impatient look, and turned to Dominic. "What else will I lose after my Transformation?"

Michel felt a pang of jealousy as Dominic inclined his head, indicating his willingness to answer her questions. How could Mathilde trust the word of a stranger over that of her own brother?

"You will become a drinker of blood," Dominic said, matter-of-factly. "You will outlive your daughter, and her children, and her children's children while you remain untouched by age. Eternal youth seems a wondrous gift, but it is also a heavy burden."

"How—" she stopped, and moistened her lips with her tongue. "How old are you, Lord Dominic?"

"Fifteen centuries, give or take a few decades." He gave her the slightest of smiles. "Before the Lady Sharibet found me and Transformed me, I served in the army of Alexander the Great."

"I don't know if I can believe you! How can I know that you speak the truth?"

"Have you ever seen things from the corner of your eye, Mathilde?" Dominic asked. "Like angel's wings?"

She blinked. "I've never confessed such a strange fancy to anyone, not even the priest."

"But you have, haven't you?" Michel leaned forward, eagerly. "You can see them!"

"Sometimes," Mathilde admitted. "But if I try to look, I don't see anything."

"Try it now," Michel urged her. "Look at me—really look at me—and tell me what you see."

Mathilde took a deep breath, and looked past Michel, deliberately putting him in her peripheral vision. She gasped.

"What do you see?"

"Wings," she said, wonderingly. "You have great wings. They look like sunbeams."

"You have them also." He took her hand. "Yours are white, with a shimmer of blue, like the light on the sea. And—" he stopped.

"And what, Michou?"

"They show the corruption of your illness."

Her fingers tightened around his.

"I believe I can heal you. I'd have to do it before your Transformation, so that you'll be strong enough." Michel glanced at Dominic, hoping for reassurance.

The other djinn refused them comfort. "It's not a certainty. You might not survive, Mathilde. Are you willing to risk it?"

She sat, her head bowed while her aura waxed and waned like a sky filled with scudding clouds. "I have already joined the House. If I die, no one profits," she said, finally. "If I do nothing, then my death is assured. I will take the chance."

"Lady of the Mountains," Dominic said, softly. "You were ever the boldest of us all." He smiled at her, and Mathilde blushed.

"Dominic, what do you intend?" Michel asked, flexing the wings of his aura so that wind swept through the solar.

"Today, I intend only to offer your sister an escort back to the city, since you cannot do so." He gave Michel a slow and wicked lover's smile.

From the corner of his eyes, Michel saw Mathilde's sudden movement. Was it unease? Or quickening desire? *Damn!*

Chapter Six

To the right worshipful lady, Mathilde le Pelletier, dwelling in Ypres

Right worshipful and very most beloved mother, I recommend me to you and pray that your health be improved by Lady Cecilia's care. I wish that I could see you again in this life before we are called to judgment.

My father-in-law has granted me permission to respond to your letters. It is right that I tender to you my most humble thanks for your condescension in writing to me, says my honorable mother-in-law, and for all the favors you have done for me in my life, and to honor you for your steadfast work on behalf of the Body of Christ in Ypres.

I am well, and Evrard has given me two kittens to be my own creatures. They will be good ratters, I am told. My cats I have named Heaven and Earth, because they drive me to move both in order to have time to play with them.

I miss Ypres, and the good works we did there. Madame de Bressoux has seen fit to correct my embroidery, my stillroom listing, and my kitchen management, but she begins to be pleased with me, for which I heartily thank God as she teaches me to do.

Evrard's brothers are very lively and healthy boys, and it is my honor and duty to care for them, when the nursery maid is ill, which she often is, being of a bilious disposition. But a good Christian maid, as she should be, says Madame.

I hope you will tender my most respectful greetings to my uncle, the most honorable Brother Michel. Has he heard from Sir Aumery? I hope he is grateful for the wondrous strong steed with which you gifted him. We, that is, my father-in-law, hope to persuade grandpere to lend us one of his studs come spring in order to improve the stock here. Do you think he would agree? Sieur de Bressoux is certain that grandpere will find it a good idea.

My time to write to you is coming to an end. I would miss you greatly, were it not a sin. I hope you remember me and write again.

Your loving daughter, Blanche, written by my own hand on the Pentecost Sunday, May 23, AD 1260

Saturday, June 19, AD 1260

The County of Flanders

"After your Transformation, you will have to leave everything behind—your business, your daughter," Dominic said as the church spires of Ypres grew slowly in the distance. He had ridden silently for most of the way, but Mathilde was keenly aware of his watchful presence, like a bonfire at her elbow. "How will you explain your disappearance?"

Mathilde's voice was steady as she replied: "My daughter is married and living near Liege. My will is already drawn, leaving the business to my husband's nephew, who is a merchant in Ghent." She smiled to take away the sting from her next statement. "I have been preparing myself for my imminent death, you see. My affairs are all in order."

"Given your social standing, it will be quite difficult to counterfeit your demise."

Mathilde smiled at an absurd vision of herself in her coffin, struggling not to move or—Heaven forbid—cough as mourners kept vigil. "Perhaps I could embark on a pilgrimage to atone for my sinful, worldly life. Such a tragedy. Poor Lady Mathilde, struck down by the hand of God as she approached the holy shrine of Saint Someone-or-other."

Mathilde expected him to be shocked at her blasphemous words, but Dominic only chuckled. "That's a clever plan, but we should invent another which would cause less of a stir."

"Lord Dominic, you don't know my neighbors. Any event, no matter how small, is cause for a 'stir,' as you put it. In fact, the only event guaranteed to cause more stir than my death would be my remarriage." Her cheeks heated, and she wondered at her own boldness with a man she had just met. *An immensely old, extremely handsome and powerful man, with beautiful eyes...*

He watched her with interest and speculation. Had he sensed her secret desire? "In fact," he said smoothly, "What if you married someone of the House of the Rose?"

"Are you presenting yourself as a suitor, my lord?" she asked, giving her best flirtatious glance. *He's quick, too.*

He countered, "Would you accept me if I did?"

Excitement blossomed as she considered the matter. "If you have told me the truth this day, I can see no reason to refuse you," she said. *And many reasons to insist. I haven't felt this alive in years.*

"I am glad to hear it." Dominic exhaled, just beginning to look stunned at the enormity of her scheme. "We could merge your business with ours, and no one would question your

leaving Ypres to live with your new husband in, say, London. Or Venice. I'll have Josef draw up the betrothal contract as soon as possible."

"You do me great honor, Lord Dominic," she said, primly.

He gave a crack of laughter and seized her hand, dimples showing deep. "You'll be a managing wife, won't you?"

"God willing," she said, happy that he understood her humor.

But he grew serious too swiftly. "Gods, do you know how unusual it is to have so many Apkallu reborn within a single family?"

Only yesterday she had had no idea there were such beings as Apkallu. "Who else have you found?"

"Besides you and Michel?" Dominic asked. "Roland, of course, and his older brother Robert, but he refused our invitation. All of you tall and golden-haired and impossibly stubborn."

"I can see you've spent time with Michel."

Half his mouth smiled. "Your cousin Roland is just as bad."

"It's hard to imagine any of us as Ap-Apkallu. What does that word mean, anyway?"

"After the land of Sumer was smashed like a cup by Inanna's fist," he said, as if reciting from memory, "the people of the House made a covenant with the gods who survived. They were revered as the Apkallu, the seven sages who survived the Flood and brought civilization to man in ages past. The term makes a convenient distinction between djinni from before the Flood, and those made after."

"The Flood..." Mathilde murmured. "Did you know Noah?"

Dominic snorted. "It didn't happen as the stories say. Nothing ever does. But yes, there was a Flood. And yes, people survived it."

"Cecilia," Mathilde said, awed. Was she afraid the tale was true? Or that it was not?

"Cecilia. Sharibet. Her daughters. Countless nameless others."

"It's hard to believe."

"It was a long time ago," Dominic said in a way that forbade further comment.

Quite willing to change the subject, Mathilde asked, "How is Roland? When did you see him?" For some reason—nostalgia?—she wore the string of faience beads he had sent, concealed under the sober material of her borrowed gown.

"He serves the House as Protector in Constantinople," Dominic replied. "I haven't seen him for a decade, but I trained him when he first became a djinn. He learned quickly but had some peculiar notions."

"Which notions took a catapult to dislodge, no doubt," Mathilde agreed. She remembered how Roland had convinced himself of his undying love for her. He'd been so young, so eager to prove his manhood. How had he changed in the passage of time? Eternal youth would have been kind to him. "He wrote me that he had a lady. The same Sharibet—?" she said, hesitantly.

"Yes. He was her consort in his last life, as well."

Mathilde blinked. Lives? A dozen questions clamored to be asked. "You said my True Name was Ninharsag. Did we know

each other, um, before? Do—do you remember me?" *Were we lovers?* But she did not dare ask him that question. Not yet.

"I remember you," he said, with a formal inclination of his head. "Lady of the Mountains, you reigned as a goddess in the first cities of man." He gave her the same slow, wicked smile he had given Michel earlier, and added, "A goddess of fertility."

Her poppy-dream returned to her. *Below surges a sea of brown faces and shaven heads gazing up at her. "Ninharsag!" comes the cry from many throats.*

"Oh." Her face grew hot as warmth kindled between her thighs. She tore her gaze away from Dominic, and pretended a deep interest in the apple orchard they were passing.

"Ah, and the last time you knew me?" she asked, faintly, after she had scraped up courage in the face of his amusement.

"Beziers, fifty years ago. You were called Anna of Waiblingen." His mirth vanished, leaving him blank and cold as a statue. "We—nearly all of the Protectors—died trying to defend the kin from French Crusaders who were out to crush Cathar heretics."

A deep shiver ran through her. *That's the true price.* Neither Michel nor Roland nor even her fascinating escort would consider it a price, though. Trained as warriors, it was simply what they did. She loved peace, and the challenges of commerce and motherhood.

Could she kill? Could she become a warrior in defense of these strange people who claimed to remember her for a hundred lifetimes? *If I survive this Transformation, I'll be*

forced to fight, to kill. I must be willing to die in battle. Again, and again, and again.

* * * *

In a daze, Dominic rode into the golden sunset. How had he gotten himself to this pass? Betrothed! To Mathilde? Worse, how had he let Mathilde's unspoken expectations go unrefuted?

Hot glances told her interest. Newly restored to a semblance of health with no guarantee of long-term survival, enamored of a strange man, who was yet soul-kin—how could she not respond to him? The wonder was that she had let him escort her to her door, and no farther. But her eyes and hands had promised, *next time...*

His palfrey began a rough, eager trot toward the Chateau's gate and grain-filled stables. He let the horse have its head. The sooner he got the interview with Michel over, the better.

* * * *

"You *what?*" Michel didn't roar, or scream, but Dominic was grateful he wasn't armed.

He had waited until after supper to deliver the news to Michel, who now stalked across the candle-lit solar to loom over him with the extra inches of height and meat-fed muscle he had gained since his stripling days in Egypt.

"It's a brilliant solution and she proposed it herself," he explained. "It offers the House many benefits, and very few risks. There's no reason not to do it."

Fury hardened Michel's features. "I should thrash you—" His aura wings buffeted Dominic with no physical effect, save to remind them both of the pleasures of djinni lovemaking.

Michel screamed, and his last blow was all too tangible.

This time Dominic was better prepared, and as he hurtled into the wall, his own aura wings protected him from the impact. He picked himself up from the floor and formed a long staff to act as a barrier between his body and Michel's anger. Just because Michel was correct was no reason to allow himself to be dismembered.

"Lords!" Tirgit burst into the room, shaking and pale.

"What are you doing?"

"You bastard!" Michel was ranting now, calling him that and more unsavory Frankish names.

Tirgit thrust herself in between them, facing Michel with her hands at her waist. "Lord Michel," she called, as if rousing him from sleep, or nightmare. "Lord! Attend me!"

Michel stopped, sobbing for air. "Do you know what he's done? You cur! You villain!"

"Lord Michel!" Tirgit said, shocked.

"No, not you! Him!"

"Whatever he has done, or not, you may not misuse him," Tirgit scolded. "The House has need of all its Protectors."

"He wants to—he's going to—my sister!"

Tirgit set her arms akimbo. "If he has found favor in the sight of Lady Mathilde, you should rejoice as the House rejoices when its Protectors consort!"

"You want me to rejoice? I'll kill him. I'll *kill him!*"

Dominic didn't need Tirgit's imperious gesture to realize it was time for him to escape. He sidled through the door, down the stairs, and across the length of the Hall to the buttery, where a cache of the clay-stoppered jugs marked for the use of djinni were stored. He grabbed one, broke it open and drank desperately, hoping to stave off an imminent bout of the shakes.

One thing was certain. Michel was not indifferent to him. On a day of bittersweet victories—Mathilde found him desirable enough to marry!—that was the Pyrrhic crown.

* * * *

Thursday, July 8, AD 1260

Mathilde, dressed only in her chemise, stood in front of Cecilia's polished metal mirror, propped on the linen chest. She had retreated to the Chateau du Chancy's solar to disrobe in preparation for another healing session.

Slowly, she lifted the hem to survey her body. It was not vanity that drove her, she told herself, but merely a desire to assess the progress of the treatments she had been receiving these past three weeks from her brother and Dominic.

The magic they performed left both giver and recipient exhausted for a day afterwards, but she had noticed the tickle in her lungs receding in the aftermath of each session. This week she had finally felt vigorous enough to take an interest in activities that she had merely plodded through last autumn and winter, when she had only wanted to burrow into the warm softness of her featherbed and never emerge again.

Biting her lip, Mathilde bunched up the embroidered hem of the chemise. The pitiless reflection of the bronze mirror revealed limbs that looked as withered as a starving peasant's. Her body, once sleek and rounded, was now wasted from disease, all stark lines and sharp angles.

When she had seduced Roland, she had been afraid of many things, but she had never experienced doubt of her beauty, her small waist and curved hips, her firm high breasts.

But now ... Mathilde turned slightly, frowning at shadows under her ribs. *What will Dominic think of me?*

Her breasts sagged and her hipbones were a knife-edged cradle around a belly slack with childbearing. Blanche had not been her only pregnancy, but her husband's seed had been weak, and none of the others had come to term. Mathilde had wept each time that blood and pain ended in tiny, stillborn corpses. In the mirror today, she saw the shadow of her skull beneath her face.

I don't want to die. But the cold finger of mortality drew gooseflesh along her spine. Even if the tales Michel and Dominic had told were true, and there was neither Heaven nor Hell, but merely an endless cycle of death and rebirth, death was still a separation from all that she knew, all that she loved. She had to believe her brother's magic was working, and that Dominic would find her attractive.

A rap on the door interrupted her musings.

She let the hem of her chemise drop, once more concealing the ravages of age and disease. "Enter!" she called, pushing away her doubts. "I'm ready."

* * * *

An hour later, Michel heard a distant voice say, "That's enough."

The warning was easy to ignore. He stroked the length of his sister's prone form with his aura, feeding her his strength with every pass of his great wings. She slept deeply under Dominic's command, her body absorbing Michel's life and returning it in a shimmering iridescence, like dappled sunlight striking the surface of a giant pearl. He strove to erase the dark shadows of illness until he felt insubstantial, as if muscle and bone were dissolving into the light. *Just a little more, and I can make those shadows vanish...*

"Michel!" The voice was louder now, intruding on his concentration. He hunched, and gathered his wings for another pass, only to find them bound. He tried to move, to reach Mathilde, but he was held captive in warm bronze light. Separated from her. "No!" Michel heard his own hoarse whisper, though he had tried to shout.

"You have to stop now. You promised you wouldn't drain yourself," Dominic said, his voice shaky.

"No, please..." Michel tried to reach the darkest shadow on Mathilde's aura, the one that hovered just above her left lung, but Dominic's arms surrounded him, wrapping him in an embrace every bit as firm and unyielding as the wings that held his weakened aura captive. The other djinn stood behind him, supporting him as the full aftereffects of treating Mathilde hit, and strength drained from his knees.

Michel surrendered, too weak to fight the memories clamoring in Honoria's consciousness, as she remembered all the times that she had leaned on Menelaos. *Ninshubur, Khonsu, Menelaos ... lover, husband, wife, warrior—always there, always strong, always loyal.*

He sagged now against the broad chest behind him, letting Menelaos's—no, Dominic's—strength bear him up. He was safe. *His left hand is under my head, and his right hand does embrace me...*

"This would be easier if you allowed me to establish a blood bond with you," Dominic said quietly, breath warm on Michel's ear.

Goose-flesh prickled the skin of his arms and thighs. He shrugged off Dominic's embrace. "No."

Dominic's aura darkened from bronze to copper, radiating hurt.

"Not yet," Michel added before he could stop himself, every instinct screaming to offer comfort. Almost immediately, he regretted his implied promise. Honoria's memories were too chaotic, still uncomfortably influencing Michel's feelings. He needed time to reconcile himself to his crippled memory. Time to raise walls between who he was now, and who he had been. He wasn't Honoria, not any more, though she lived in his mind like a copper flame.

Dominic did not try to touch him again, but Michel felt the familiar mingling of their auras.

"Michel, I know you don't want—" Dominic stopped, before he could reveal what he himself wanted. "But this will be a

difficult Transformation. If we are to succeed, we must be of one mind."

The unconscious form of his sister reposed on the bed before him. Her long golden braid curled around her pillowed head like a halo, and her breaths were slow, shallow. The dark patches marring her blue-white aura had definitely dwindled in the week since they began their treatments. But they were still present.

The Transformation would need to be completed soon, before Cecilia returned to forbid it. Her latest letter had been filled with details of her upcoming audience with the king, the packing and planning required before they took up residence in London, and her plans to return to Ypres in a fortnight hence.

Michel turned to face Dominic. Even though he saw only concern in the other djinn, he felt nauseous at the prospect of sharing blood, of baring his feelings, his very soul. But it had to be done.

For Mathilde's sake.

"I—agree," Michel said. "I just—need some time to prepare myself."

Dominic's expression was solemn as he inclined his head, but his aura brightened until it was nearly as golden as Michel's own.

* * * *

Mathilde woke slowly, surrounded by the comforting scents of dried lavender and sun-bleached linen. Late afternoon sun shone in the windows of Cecilia's solar.

She rolled over, feeling simultaneously exhausted and energized, as she always did in the aftermath of Dominic and Michel's treatments. Her sleep had been laced with dreams—memories, she supposed, that grew more vivid each time—of other times, other places.

Worshippers in sheepskin kilts. A white city with stepped towers on a vast brown plain ... The rise and plunge of a ship's deck beneath her legs, and the weight of a sword in her hand. A man's howl of agony as she swings the sword and it bites deep into his side ... The freezing ache of waist-deep snow, and the weight of a body slung over her shoulder as she struggles forward, heading for a thin curl of smoke that rises above a distant line of trees. The scent of seeping blood, delicious and troubling at the same time. She hears the rhythm of a heart pressed against her shoulder blade begin to falter. Hold on, just a little longer....

Mathilde blinked up at the intertwined wings holding up the canopy overhead, wondering whether the person she had tried to save had lived or died. But it was no use: she couldn't even recall whether she had been a man or a woman, mortal or djinn, when she pushed through the deep snowdrifts.

A teasing shimmer of golden light in the corner of her eye distracted her. She turned her head to see Michel sprawled next to her, slack-limbed and unconscious. He looked exhausted. With an effort, she propped herself up on her elbow, and traced a gentle line over his brow and down his cheek. His skin was cool to the touch, and he smiled faintly, but did not stir.

"Let him sleep," Dominic said in a low voice.

Startled, Mathilde noticed the other djinn sitting in Cecilia's chair, a book open on his lap. There was no danger here, but the fact that he kept watch over them warmed Mathilde nevertheless.

She became conscious of how thin her chemise was when Dominic's glance turned warmly appreciative. With an effort, she reminded herself of her reflection in Cecilia's mirror earlier. *He's just being kind. I'm no longer beautiful.* Her fingers knotted together.

He startled her by saying, practically, "Once you dress, I can escort you back to your home. Michel's likely to sleep for hours. He pushed himself too hard today."

"Never a half-measure." She stroked Michel's cheek again, just to express her fond gratitude, and to see that faint smile.

She caught Dominic's expression as he looked at Michel, and felt a twinge. Instinctively, she knew something old and deep and painful lay between this man and her younger brother. It was a puzzle she could not solve today, so she wobbled slowly down the bed steps.

Dominic rose but did not leave. Instead, he held Mathilde's gown up as if helping her dress was the most natural thing in the world. It became hard to breathe, but in a way that owed nothing to her disease.

"I—I'm sure Tirgit can—"

"I insist." With ease indicative of long practice, he bunched her long gown up and dropped the heavy material over her head, guiding her arms through the sleeves. She stood in turmoil, not daring to move as his fingers deftly pulled and arranged the loose folds. Then he gathered up her long braid,

and wound it around her head in a heavy crown, sliding the carved bone hairpins painlessly against her scalp. The drape of her coif and wimple followed. Her gaze rested helplessly on his lips, slightly smiling as he concentrated on pinning the fabric in place under her chin and over her hair with more practiced skill than Yvonne had ever shown.

How would that sculpted mouth feel on hers?

"There," he murmured, stepping in front of her with an appraising glance. "Now your neighbors won't think you've spent the afternoon in my bed."

A wave of heat rushed up from her belly, and her face flamed. Even the roots of her hair felt hot. She couldn't look away from his mouth. She wanted to feel those lips against hers, but she was torn between lust and the fact that Michel lay sleeping peacefully only a few feet away.

Something dangerous flashed in Dominic's silvery eyes. Mathilde took a half-step toward him, finding his mouth, firm and skilled. Another wave of heat swept her, and she wound her arms around his waist, drawing him closer.

She kissed him for what seemed forever, lips and tongues meeting in sensation both familiar and exciting. His strong arms holding her close. Then, all too soon, he stepped back.

"You're bold, even for an immortal magician," she scolded. But she couldn't help smiling.

His breathing was as unsteady as hers. "I should ... take you home now."

"Yes." She did not try to hide her fierce reaction to his kiss, as if the ground had begun shifting beneath her feet while she yielded to him. "Although I'm sure Vrouw

Mergelhynek will be watching to see when I return from my visit with my dashing foreign suitor. And whether I invite you into my house."

"Do you want to invite me?" The question hung in the dim air as Michel stirred uneasily, then fell back into deeper sleep.

"Yes," said Mathilde, feeling as if she were made of light, and fire. "Yes, I do."

He gave a dazzling smile. "I'll summon Tirgit to watch over Michel."

* * * *

The ride back to Ypres was silent at first. It was so pleasant to enjoy the sun shining on cloud towers rolling in from the sea, and to contemplate the possibly foolish and definitely sinful action she was about to take with a man she scarcely knew.

But I do know him. She felt the warm air on her face. *I've probably known him for a dozen lifetimes.*

Ah, memory. She would have to take it on faith until after her Transformation. How had she, who had grown businesslike over years of helping her husband with his fur-trading, come to accept such a heretical mish-mash of past lives and pagan gods so readily? *Because it feels like the truth?* Her fingers tightened on her palfrey's reins.

"Having second thoughts?" Dominic's tone was dry.

Was he anticipating a rejection? "No! It's just that—" Mathilde bristled. She wasn't a shy virgin. Nor was she the experienced widow of popular lore. Did bedding a husband and her cousin Roland mark her as *experienced*? *Why, at*

eighteen centuries, Dominic must have had ... Her mind ground to a halt at the contemplation of how many lovers such a long life might afford. "It's just that I'm wondering..."

Dominic pulled his horse closer to hers, and she felt oddly comforted by having him within arm's reach. "Wondering what?"

"Michel assured me that I'll be cured, and that I'll survive the Transformation. But he's always been—" She hesitated, wondering how to phrase her doubts so as not to cast her brother as a liar. "In any venture, he's most likely to see only the *best* possible outcome."

"You don't?" All hint of teasing had vanished.

"I prefer the truth, even if it is unpleasant," Mathilde said, firmly. "If your treatments can't really cure me, I want to know."

"And you trust *me* to give you that truth?"

"Yes."

Dominic sighed, a long exhalation that made her heart sink. "Mathilde," he said, sounding weary. "The healing that Michel and I have been administering to you isn't medicine, or even magic, really. It simply lends you some of our life so that you can heal yourself."

"Lends life?" She had never heard of such a thing. Illness cured itself, without or without the aid of bleeding and foul potions. *How would you heal with magic?*

"That is a matter of djinni," he said. "Something you will learn after Transformation, if you can overcome the illness in your lungs. That depends on how far the disease has advanced."

"Tell me more of Transformation." She was almost—*almost*—sorry that Dominic was answering her questions so frankly.

"Transformation is chancy thing." Subtle lines of tension in shoulders and neck belied his casual shrug. A stranger might not have seen beyond his cool façade, but she had spent the past weeks in his close company, learning his moods and expressions.

"My illness only increases the risk?"

He acknowledged her incensed query with a lift of one dark brow. "It is not optimism on my part to say you have a chance of surviving. But there is a greater chance that you will not. Of course we will do all we can to prevent your death, not least because we have missed your presence among us. But should Michel fail in the attempt to Transform you..." His gaze dropped to the ground between his gelding's ears, but what it focused on was obviously farther away and longer ago.

Dominic's comment triggered suspicions she had formed over the past weeks. She had spent so many hours in his company, aware of his sadness as he watched her brother. Her heart pounded, and apprehension made her queasy. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* "Lord Dominic? You say you've known me—known *us*—and yet..."

He shifted in his saddle and turned to face her, warily.

She plunged on before she lost her courage. "Yet Michel has never mentioned you in any of his stories."

"Is that so?" Expression leached out of his face, leaving it as blank and perfect as a sculpture.

But she had honed her inner senses under the steady infusion of power she had received from both djinni. She felt the strong emotions swirling behind that stony façade.

"I found it an unusual omission," she said. "But I know my brother. He's a terrible liar. He'd rather leave out an unpleasant truth than spin a comfortable falsehood."

"What do you suspect he's omitting?" The charming man who had kissed her an hour ago had vanished, leaving only a proud shell whose pretense of disdain did not fool her for a minute.

"I want to know what connection you had to Michel in your past." There, she had finally asked it. All these weeks of pretending not to notice the barely-concealed longing, the troubled glances...

"We have been husband and wife in nearly every one of our incarnations for three thousand years," Dominic said. "Honorias perished in Beziers, as you did. No one escapes the Underworld unmarked. But she returned so changed..."

Mathilde was speechless, feeling the impact of his words as if she'd fallen from her palfrey. *Michel was a woman?* And yet, and yet ... hadn't she suspected something of the sort?

"Mmm?" she murmured, just to keep him talking.

"You should know I coerced him into joining the House." Dominic's gaze now focused on the walls of Ypres, rising up out of the green-gold fields of ripening grain ahead. "I could no longer live without him. And he will never let me—I know Michel isn't Honorias, even though they share the same soul. But I wish..."

She watched him narrowly, troubled by his halting confession. Did she really want to become the lover of a man who was enamored of her brother? And more horribly: *Does he only want me because I resemble Michel?*

They rode through the gate and the city's narrow streets in uncomfortable silence, the horses' hooves striking puffs of dust from the rutted dirt. It hadn't rained in nearly a week, and Mathilde found the wilted state of the kitchen gardens adjoining the houses entirely fascinating.

Her nerves were fizzing by the time they finally arrived at her home. Dominic had not said another word, nor even glanced at her. Her teeth dug into her lower lip as she slid hastily from her saddle before he could come around to assist her, and the pain helped her to focus.

She realized she still wanted him, despite his entanglement with Michel. She liked how his dark brows rose in emphasis when he spoke, and the deep tones of his slightly accented voice made her tingle. He might be troubled, but he hid it well under his effortless air of power and sophistication. Next to him she felt plain, gawky. What could he possibly want in an ill, aging, bony Flemish widow?

Had he changed his mind about wanting to bed her?

As Gert, her stableboy, ran out to take their horses, Dominic returned her scrutiny. "I will leave, if you ask me to," he said for her ears alone.

"Do you want to leave?" Mathilde gathered up her courage and stepped closer to him.

"No. But Michel will never approve of your liaison with me," Dominic said, with a short laugh. His gray eyes were molten with hunger as he looked down at her.

It doesn't matter who he hungers for. I might be dead next month. Her desire for him, which had cooled on the ride from the chateau, rekindled. "My brother is not my guardian. He has no say in rejecting my suitors, much as he might wish to," Mathilde answered, softly. She reached for his hand. "You must choose to stay, or go."

"I want to be with you." His long, beautiful fingers wrapped around hers tightly, and she longed to feel them against the skin presently concealed by her modest garb.

Just before they entered her house, she glanced up and saw her friend Katrin van Merglehynck, watching avidly from her window across the street. *So much for my reputation as a virtuous and godly widow.* She laughed, and didn't release Dominic's hand.

Chapter Seven

Who [is] this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant? Behold his bed, which [is] Solomon's; threescore valiant men [are] about it, of the valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, [being] expert in war: every man [hath] his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night. —*Song of Solomon* 3:6-8

Thursday, July 8, AD 1260

House of Mathilde le Pelletier, Ypres

The hours that followed were a revelation to Mathilde.

Her late husband had been heavy-fleshed, as befit his status as a wealthy merchant. In lovemaking, he was clumsy, fondness substituting for skill. Roland had been lean and vigorous and worshipful, but her anxiety that their trysts might be discovered had left her little energy to enjoy his embraces.

Now, as the long summer day slid into golden-blue twilight, she found herself liberated from the past. Hip to hip, mouth to mouth, touched everywhere at once by clever hands of air, she smiled even as she gasped in pleasure.

She did not fear discovery, nor the shame of an unwanted child. She was free for the first time in her life to fully enjoy the experience of a lover treating her body as if it were a fine instrument, played with expertise.

Moving feverishly, she kissed the soft skin at Dominic's throat and felt him respond. So she did it again, wanting to

please him as much as he was pleasuring her. This time, she grazed the edge of her teeth against his skin.

He gasped then, and roughly pinned her to the yielding featherbed.

"Please ... oh, please, Dominic. Now!" she pleaded.

But the name he whispered as he entered her was, "Michel!"

* * * *

Afterwards, with Mathilde deeply asleep in the crook of his arm, Dominic lay quietly, thinking.

Even now, a smile lingered at the corners of her mouth and her warm breath tickled his chest. That smile had never faltered from the moment he removed her gown and chemise, through the slow dance of their bodies as he did his best to drive her to ecstasy. She smiled even as she lay beneath him, writhing, begging him for release.

He stroked the soft golden strands of hair tangled around her body. It had been the purest sensual delight to free it from its tight pinning and braiding, and to feel that thick, soft mass (... *so like Michel's*, whispered a dark voice in his soul) between his fingers.

He had found his own pleasure in her arms, though it was only a faint echo of what a true djinni joining would have been. Not that he was capable of such. On the other hand, he hadn't been forced to kill anyone. Nor had he had been subjected to the agony of another djinn's wings invading the injured areas of his own aura, unprotected and unbuffered by death-energy.

In the meantime, he was here, and so was Mathilde, sweet, tender Ninharsag. She would demand nothing from him, and would accept as a gift anything he chose to give her. His memories, barren ground that they were, still held an admiration of her endlessly generous affection. Perhaps she could heal him where Sharibet and Cecilia had failed, his soul instinctively recoiling from their demands and domination.

He turned on his side to study her profile and stroke her golden hair again. Honoria might be lost to him, but perhaps Mathilde might ease his pain, his loneliness.

He was forced to close his Seer's eyes after only a glimpse, but he noticed her aura, marred by her illness, curled around him as she slept in his arms. So little time remained before Cecilia returned, banishing any chance of Mathilde joining their ranks as a djinniah!

In two weeks, he and Michel would attempt her Transformation, though Dominic's every instinct protested that it was too soon, too dangerous. He tightened his arms around her until she stirred, making a low sound that was not quite a moan.

Oh, all the gods that never were, let her survive!

* * * *

Chateau du Chancy

Tirgit looked up from the shirt she was hemming as Michel groaned. Lord Dominic and Lady Mathilde had left about an hour ago, but Michel was still deeply asleep.

He spoke suddenly, and her blood ran cold. It was Byzantine Greek from the early years of the Empire, and he

was pleading with someone. She knew that tone. She had used it often enough, with varying degrees of success, in her own years as a slave.

She was of the House. She knew how fortune could change, life to life. Today, Michel was a powerful Apkallu, but he had not always been such.

Putting down the half-finished shirt, she lay down beside him, arm looped protectively around his waist. "I'm here," she whispered, pillowing her head on his shoulder. "Don't be afraid."

* * * *

Heart pounding, breath burning in her overtaxed lungs, Honoria runs for the shelter of the Hippodrome. If she can make it that far without being caught, she can lose herself in the maze giving access to the many tiers of seats.

Find an exit on the other side, and she can vanish in the neighborhood beyond the stables, eluding the thing that hunts her now.

Desperate with terror, she pushes through the crowd gathering in the plaza around the Hippodrome's entrance, enduring angry protests and the occasional sharp elbow. Finally, she reaches the shadow of the great stadium's arches. She pauses, risking a look back, wondering where her pursuer is.

There! Every muscle in her body tenses in cold shock as she sees him scanning the crowd. Looking for her.

Throat dry, more terrified than she has been since the day her parents were slaughtered, she scuttles into one of the curving tunnels of the huge oval amphitheater.

She sprints with terror-fueled strength, her shoulder blades prickling. Any second now, those long fingers will grab her ... She makes it a quarter of the way around the inside of the Hippodrome before her strength finally drains away.

She stumbles, falling hard, pain jarring through her knees and wrists. Where can she hide, to rest for a few minutes? She forces herself up, her hand pushing against the cool brick wall to propel her forward.

As she staggers down the endless hall, ignored by spectators brushing past her as they hurry towards their seats, she sees a darkened doorway, leading to rough stairs used by the stadium workers.

Her legs give out when she tries to climb the steep steps. Sobbing with fear and anger at her own weakness, she crawls up the unlit staircase on her hands and knees, her limbs heavy with fever and fatigue.

The light from the dim hallway below fades as the staircase turns sharply between the inner and outer walls. Soon she is moving in pitch blackness. She forces herself to ascend a few more stairs on her numbed knees and scraped palms, just to be sure she is out of sight.

There she huddles, unable to go farther, curling her arms around her knees, the bricks cold under her buttocks.

The absolute darkness around her pulses gently with waves of color. She clamps her jaw muscles tight to quiet her chattering teeth as fever chills shake her. Then she feels the

supernatural warmth of the hunter's presence, and sees the brilliance of his ghostly wings shining through her closed eyelids. A sickening wave of rose-scent surrounds her, invading her throat.

She wants to spring to her feet and sprint up the stairs, but her strength is gone. She can't even raise her hand to wipe away her stinging tears.

"Caught you," she hears her pursuer say, his voice rich with amusement. "You've been a bad girl, Honoria, running away like that, making me pursue you..."

Her eyes fly open as he grabs her, pushing her back against the steps. The rough edges of the brickwork cut across her waist, her shoulders, the back of her head. The preternatural flames surrounding him banish the darkness, leaving her no refuge.

"Do you know what happens now?" His tone is conversational, in counterpoint to the brutal strength with which he yanks the hem of her boy's tunic up to her waist and forces her knees apart.

"No ... please, no!" She had sworn earlier that she wouldn't humble herself, that she'd die without begging. But now, in the moment of her violation, she can't help herself. "Please let me go!"

He grins down at her, wolfishly, his hands bruising her wrists, his weight pinning her to the cold, unyielding brick. "After I'm through with you, you'll never leave us again. You'll be mine, forever."

* * * *

Michel tried to struggle free of the nightmare. He still felt the edge of the step digging into his hip, and the burning pain between his thighs as Menelaos raped Honoria with brutal glee.

But that never happened! Menelaos found me ... found her ... and brought her back to the House! He said ... he said ... The true memory he sought was clear: "Tsk! You're ill!" Menelaos exclaims, kneeling a step or two below her. "You foolish girl. Why did you run so long?"

Somehow the stairway is bright enough to show that his extraordinary gray eyes are filled with concern. A hesitant smile tugs at one corner of his bearded mouth.

Pain was his reward for finding the memory without Honoria's help. And a roaring vortex of confusion hit him, as all past times became *now*. *He falls, falls, falls, the memories sliding and colliding. He runs through the Hippodrome maze, through the blood-filled streets of al-Mansurah, through the fear-choked streets of Beziers, through the burning woods of Ludgunum...*

The Furies that pursued his dreams dragged him back down into the darkness.

* * * *

He became aware he was in a bed, and that someone—Tirgit—was holding him. He tried to open his eyes, but he had given too much of his strength to his sister that afternoon.

The horrible dream was still resonating. *The absolute darkness around her pulses gently with waves of heated color. Menelaos tugs the hem of her tunic past bruised, torn*

flesh and asks, "In all of our lifetimes together, is there any part of my bargain with you that I have not fulfilled?"

She shakes her head.

"Give me your Kiss of Peace," Dominic commands. His hand moves to the back of her head, forcing her forward as he pushes aside his rich dalmatica, revealing a fully erect cock still streaked with her maiden blood. As Dominic invades her mouth, forcing himself past teeth and tongue into her throat, he chokes off her air, holding her immobile as he moves. He strokes her hair as he thrusts, his touch disturbingly soothing. When he cries out and convulses, his fingers dig into her scalp as she drowns in the hot salty liquid flooding her throat, tasting of smoke. Deep waters close over her head. She is weightless, blind, drifting on the slowing pulse of Dominic's lust as he whispers, "You are mine. You've always been mine. I'll never let you escape me."

—and came abruptly awake, coughing and gagging, to find himself pressed against Tirgit's breast, lapping at the bleeding, shallow cut there as she murmured frantic reassurances to him.

Michel lunged away from her, wiping at his mouth. "Why did you do that to yourself? To me?"

Before Tirgit could stammer more than, "I—It's what I do for Lady Cecilia—" he was casting frantic glances around the solar, his heart pounding. Mathilde's lavender perfume lingered, but he couldn't see her.

"Where's my sister?"

"Lord Dominic escorted her home," Tirgit replied firmly. "It grew late, and you were so tired."

"I've got to save her—" He tried to leap out of the bed, but his strength failed. His arms and legs felt like pudding rather than muscle and bone.

"Shhhh," Tirgit soothed, easily restraining him. She pulled him back against her and rocked gently. "It was just a dream, Lord Michel. Lord Dominic will protect Lady Mathilde."

"From himself?" asked Michel, bitterly.

Tirgit blinked in surprise. "Why do you accuse him of ill intentions? She was smiling when she left with him."

Michel rubbed his hip, trying to rub away a phantom bruise. *It never happened*, he told himself. *It never happened*.

But Honoria's memory, hesitantly offered, did not assuage his conviction of violation. *Menelaos sits next to her, as naked as she, bent over the lute in his lap. She reaches to trace a slender henna-tipped finger down his nape, where his dark hair curls a little. He sets aside his lute and she bends now, skillfully playing his instrument, laughing with her lover as he groans and shakes with the sensation. He shouts as she drinks his fulfillment, and they lie down entwined together, careful of the silent lute, sharing joy...*

No! It was almost less painful to recall the shattering dream, Honoria sprawled on the narrow, dark steps of the Hippodrome, screaming as Menelaos forced himself inside her.

Mathilde, smiling ... God protect her.

* * * *

The next day Michel bent, somewhat resentfully, over the slanted surface of Cecilia's writing desk. *Like a damned clerk, occupied with quill and parchment.*

He had shaken off most of his lethargy but not his unease from the accompanying nightmares. Like the crippled Templar he'd been just weeks ago, he was putting his long training in business affairs to the use of the House. It had been Dominic's idea—*damn him!*—when Michel complained once too often of being cooped up in the Chateau.

He sighed, dipped his quill in the plain metal inkpot, and continued to enter the accounts of the past month's trade.

Item: To the customs officer at the Port of Southampton, duty on a bale of pepper, ginger, valerian, cinnamon, galingale, mace, cloves, saffron, and grain-brazil 1, 0s, 0d.

Item: To the customs officer at the Port of Bruges, duty on a ton of woad 0, 0s, 1d.

Item: To the customs officer at the Port of Bruges, duty on a hundred of sable, marten, polecat, fox, and cat skins 0, 0s, 1d.

He stopped writing as the last item brought his sister to mind. The distant clatter of the trestle tables being set up in the great hall below, and the smell of roasting poultry, reminded him that it was nearly mid-afternoon. Dominic had yet to return from escorting her home the previous evening.

Michel stared at the clouds dotting the blue sky outside the window, trying hard not to imagine what they might have done together. He fought to calm the twisting in his gut. He wasn't jealous! How could he be? He was just worried about Mathilde! Virgin only knew what would happen if his sister

happened to fall in love with—the man who had been Honoria's beloved for centuries. Honoria laughed nastily. *Not jealous? Has being reborn a man cooked your brains? Or did you receive one too many blows to the head as a squire?*

Michel dropped all pretense of concentrating on the huge ledger before him, and massaged his temple with ink-stained fingertips.

Not jealous, he answered Honoria, silently, all the time wondering if he were going mad. *Just worried. For Mathilde. And for himself.*

* * * *

Dominic returned near sunset, radiating a smug satisfaction that validated every one of Michel's forebodings. His raised eyebrow and sardonic glance as he strolled into the great hall did not allay Michel's murderous instincts in the least. Abruptly abandoning a game of *Marelles* he'd been playing with Tirgit, Michel rose from the table and fled upstairs.

To his distress, Dominic followed him. "She's a grown woman," he said once they reached the solar, directly addressing Michel's ill-temper. "It's not as though I were despoiling a virgin."

"She's a respectable widow! You shouldn't—"

Dominic interrupted. "I am her very respectable betrothed husband."

Michel jerked, as at a blow.

Pretending not to notice, Dominic continued. "They've cried the banns twice already. One more Sunday, and we can wed, which is what I meant to talk to you about."

I don't want you to marry my sister! Michel bit his lip. He wouldn't say that out loud, confessing the depth of his feelings. He went to stand by the window, staring out into the twilight shadows.

Dominic came behind him and placed his hand, lightly, on Michel's shoulder. He wanted to shrug it off, like a horse with flies, but he stayed still. Eventually the other djinn would get the message.

"She doesn't love me," Dominic said. His hand trembled and he took it away. "She's infatuated, but it's just proximity, and her health improving. Gods know, I don't love her, not like I loved—"

Michel bit his lip so hard it bled. The metallic taste of his own blood anchored him to the present moment but brought a warning from Honoria. *If you face him now, he'll take it as an invitation. I wish you would accept it. I miss his arms and his aura around me.*

The little wound healed quickly. The larger wound in his heart remained a ragged mess. "I don't like any of this, Dominic," he said to the window. "But Mathilde has chosen you, for her own reasons. Very well. Carry it through."

Dominic sighed. "The marriage contract has been drawn up. This union may be just a convenient device for explaining her departure for London in my company, but she drove a hard bargain anyway. We're planning to wed in a week and a

day. How much display will we need to be acceptable to the community here?"

Michel huffed. Dominic wanted his help in planning? "It won't be a scandal if you restrict yourselves to a moderate wedding feast for the kin and neighbors after you exchange vows." He sat down at the table, picked up his quill, and began scribbling out a list. "You'll need to order wine, and meat and pastries. Apricots and cherries may still be available ... If you're inviting the neighbors, you ought to include three or four barrels of beer, and a roasted peacock—the flesh is usually tough, but everyone will talk about the novelty."

Dominic chuckled. "It's a dish served only by nobility, isn't it? We can ensure that none of Mathilde's neighbors forget her breeding."

After Michel stopped writing Dominic asked, "What about family? Will it cause problems if your sister weds before your father can journey here?"

Michel folded his hands together. "My father has been in poor health these past years. He will like this marriage less than I do, since he ordered Mathilde to keep herself in a state of chaste widowhood, never to remarry."

Dominic blinked. "Barbarians, the lot of you."

Honorina nodded her immaterial head vigorously. But Michel only said, mildly: "I expect Father has grown to depend on the money Mathilde sends him, and worries that a new husband might not permit her to send any more."

"I'll write and reassure him he need not fear. What about the rest of your kinfolk?"

"I'm sure my aunts Alys and Blanche would like to attend, but my uncles wouldn't let them travel to a mere merchant's wedding. So," Michel finished, sadly, "none of them will come. Especially since Mathilde is marrying a foreigner."

"If they only knew." Dominic chuckled, and plucked the list from Michel's fingers with easy familiarity. His mood shifted. "I'm sorry you can't be there, too."

Michel recoiled.

Stiff and cautious again, Dominic clarified: "Because Mathilde is your family, and she should have those who love her present. I—I don't want to impose my feelings on you—"

"Then just go away." Michel dropped his head onto his hands. "I've had as much as I can take today."

Dominic stood silently. Then he bowed with a rustle of silk, and departed.

She's good for him, Honoria murmured. He didn't want to care, but he was glad, too. Until he woke into the middle of the night from yet another vile dream, panting harshly, with Tirgit attempting to soothe him by offering her blood and her body.

The balm she provided was only temporary.

He knew these dreams weren't real, when he could compare them to his actual memories without pain. All too frequently, he dreamed of trying to defend himself against the charge of oath-breaking. Brutal rape inevitably followed the accusation. Sometimes he even wondered if perhaps he *deserved* to be so punished for betraying the Templars.

This night, Lady Tahat had found herself betrayed and brutalized by her consort, Lord Khonsu, in a gilded chamber

that reeked of cassia and cedar oil. Now, when he would have liked to forget, the images were too clear.

Khonsu's gray eyes are closed and he snores heavily, a trickle of blood outlining the smug, satisfied curve of his full lips. Tahat stumbles away, fleeing with painful steps down a tunnel paved with smooth stone. She finds her way blocked by her sister Nebthet, goddess of the dead and of dreams. Nebthet's face is as pale as the polished limestone beneath her feet, her expression as remote as her painted images. "Sister," says Nebthet, "You have transgressed upon the forbidden ways. For this you must pay the price." Nebthet raises her hand, brandishing a sword made of moonlight...

Michel shook, unable to remember, unable to forget.

* * * *

By Saturday morning, Tirgit looked as strained as Michel felt, marks like black thumbprints pressed under her green eyes. As well as his nightmares, her pregnancy had been taking a toll, despite the soothing teas Yvonne had recommended before she had departed, not quite in disgrace, back to Aragon. Tirgit denied any discomfort, but she moved slowly, and had to sit down too often. Her normally high spirits were downcast.

Michel missed the mischievous girl who had boldly flirted with him upon their first meeting. He worried for the young woman who was carrying his child. He felt sick about his sister's marriage to Dominic. Not being able to attend was as intolerable as attending would have been. It was the waiting

that was most wearing upon his spirit. Waiting, and imagining.

He watched Tirgit during a pause in his endless paperwork. She was sitting nearby, stitching steadily on the neckline of a chemise, embroidering it with a pattern of intertwining flowers. Feeling the weight of his gaze, she looked up. "Lord?" Her voice was soft, uncertain.

"I—Nothing."

She smiled tiredly at him. "I know you fear for your sister's Transformation, lord," she said with kind condescension. "So do I. But you are powerful. Lord Dominic, also. You will prevail."

She sounded so sure! Michel wished he could be as confident. Honoria had said, *Each djinn has a different vision of Transformation*. She had pictured the intricate structure of life upon a loom of light behind his eyelids. Her preferred tools had been a needle with a golden thread of power, and a pair of scissors with handles fashioned like the blooming twigs of a thornless rose.

But that was merely a metaphor for the minute, multiple changes he would have to make. Honoria could not show him the underlying reality, and he dared not alter the warp and weft threads of his sister's very being without a perfect pattern to follow. He had forgotten so much, but he knew that without a doubt.

Damn the fate that left both of them crippled! Because he had no easy access to his memories, and Dominic's fine control of his aura was not predictable, they needed each other to perform Mathilde's Transformation.

I'll be his hands, and he'll be my eyes. How it used to be,
Honoriam mourned.

Dominic had been insane to attempt a Transformation at night, on the road, in the rain. That he had been successful was insanely lucky. They would need all that luck and more, for Mathilde.

Yet Michel dreaded most the hour when he would be forced to join his mind, his blood, with Dominic. What might he reveal to Honoriam's beloved in that unholy communion?

Chapter Eight

...and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. —*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* 2:10

Feast of St. Alexis, Saturday, July 17, AD 1260

Ypres

The day of his wedding passed in a blur. Though his heart ached, Dominic moved mechanically through the exchange of vows at the door of St. Martin's. He gave Mathilde the traditional purse of gold to dispense as alms to the poor in her new role as his wife, and hoped her innate generosity would tolerate his inadequacies as well as she met the expectations of her neighbors.

Steady as a pillar of cedar at his side, Mathilde played the part of happy bride to perfection. After the Mass, they walked to the Rosenhuis. Just as he had directed, the street had been laid with a thick carpet of fresh straw, and long tables covered with Fausta's much-abused linen sheets hosted course after course of roasted meats, baked eels and fish, salads decorated with candied violets and preserved orange peel, bread made from the finest white flour, and pastries both sweet and savory. Already, the wedding vultures were descending upon the feast.

He could not help but be reminded of that summer's day in Beziers, before disaster had fallen upon them all. It was not so suffocatingly hot in Ypres, and fashions had changed somewhat, but the basic form of a Catholic wedding, and the

absence of any forethought of calamity amongst the guests, remained the same.

His dry memories contained the almost static images of his wedding to Honoria in the year after the devastating Cretan earthquake. *In the Basilica of Holy Peace, built by Emperor Constantine, they exchange rings, share a common cup, and wear the crowns of marriage for the blessing by the Arian priest.* Honoria's eyes had been as bright as sunlight on water even through her gossamer veil.

He could not recall what he had felt then. But he felt keenly now that all the centuries of happiness could not balance the pain of separation from her. What was he doing, marrying Mathilde? Why had he agreed to such a travesty?

"Congratulations, you lucky dog," exclaimed the portly husband of her neighbor Katrin, as Mathilde accepted the jealous compliments of her friends and neighbors.

Nearby, Josef and Fausta, with the remaining visitors from other Houses of the Rose, performed their duties as hosts with professional friendliness and watchful eyes.

The stone and plaster walls of the surrounding houses echoed with talk and laughter, competing with joyful noises from the hired musicians. The guests became louder and rowdier as the hours passed. They toasted the health and happiness of the newlyweds with endless cups of wine and mugs of beer as the long summer afternoon faded to a scarlet sunset.

He responded like an automaton to every coarse jest and every sincere wish, each equally unreal, equally infuriating. At intervals, he opened his Seer's eyes to check, as was his

duty, for any sign of Lost ones in the crowd. The only result was that he developed a headache to go with his malaise.

When twilight descended, the gray stone of the House blazed with hundreds of candles, staving off darkness. The front garden bloomed with the full fragrance of summer, settling like a fragrant cloak over everyone.

The servants passed around pitchers of wine and platters of rose-shaped subtleties of marzipan, cleverly tinted pink and scented with rosewater. Father Johannes, Mathilde's parish priest, waited at the foot of the staircase, ready to accompany them upstairs to bestow the nuptial blessing. Then, Dominic realized with a chill, he and Mathilde would be left alone to consummate their marriage.

* * * *

Mathilde was distracted from socializing when Dominic scooped her up in his arms. She gave a faint shriek of glee, heightened by the numerous cups of wine she'd downed, and threw her arms around his neck as he carried her across the threshold. A mighty cheer rose behind them as he placed her carefully back on her feet just inside the doorway and kissed her on the lips.

Then a group of women, led by Katrin van Merglehynck, descended on Mathilde and pulled her away from Dominic with many loud promises that the next time he saw his bride, she would be wearing *much* less.

Her last sight of Dominic, as the women pushed her upstairs, was of the male guests hoisting the now scowling djinn up onto unsteady shoulders and proceeding to parade

him around the tables with a drunken rendition of "In My Lady's Chamber."

In Dominic's suite on the second floor, there followed a frenzied period of being tugged one way by Katrin, who was attempting to unbraid Mathilde's hair and brush it out, by Fausta and her cousin from Cologne, who were trying to pull the heavy brocade gown the other way over Mathilde's head.

Once she was stripped, dressed in a fine silk chemise so sheer it concealed nothing, anointed with oil of roses, and tucked into the huge bed, the first of the boisterous men pushed open the doors to the bedchamber and staggered through, flinging handfuls of grain and rose petals with woozy exuberance.

Dominic grimly endured being stripped to the skin and thrown into bed with much rude commentary on his generous physical attributes.

Trying to stifle her own giggles, Mathilde hastily lifted the coverlet and allowed her nude husband to regain the modesty he had lost as he took his place at her side. He drew her close with one arm as she sat up, attempting to look appropriately solemn.

Father Johannes began droning the blessing and sprinkling them both with holy water as he expressed a futile wish for many healthy children to be born of their union. *May this blessing pass to Tirgit*, she prayed. *I hope to enjoy being an aunt.*

His rites completed, the priest withdrew with a final benevolent wave, and it was time for the others to break the temporary respectful silence with even bawdier jokes.

Mathilde heartily desired to draw the coverlet over her head and hide from the increasingly lewd advice and suggestions.

She recalled her first bedding ceremony: it had been considerably more restrained, perhaps in deference to her high-born and virginal state. This time around, she was a widow, and thus fair game. It was a relief when Fausta and Josef begin to herd the wedding guests out of the chamber.

But with the sound of the chamber door closing and the sudden silence, her anticipation returned full force.

It was time.

* * * *

Once the bed curtains had been drawn and the guests ushered downstairs to enjoy wafers and wine, Dominic turned to face his bride. He let his hand cup her cheek, then trail lightly down the smooth, pulsing length of her throat, to her collarbone.

She gulped, and her heartbeat speeded. A wine-induced flush blossomed from her cheeks, rising where he caressed her. She giggled, then inhaled sharply as his fingers dipped lower, brushing against her sensitive nipple through the thin material of her chemise. She relaxed against him, the softness of her breast pressing into his bare chest.

He bent his head to give her a lingering kiss, relishing the softness of her lips, the frantic thunder of her heartbeat under his hand. Unwanted, the memory overwhelmed him: *Soon he will know. He savors the moment of balance between past and future, fully alive to the possibilities of pleasure—or pain. Nebogu begins to cry from the tension ... when Dominic sits*

down next to him on the wide bed, his whole body twangs like a bowstring. Dominic clasps the back of the boy's head, holding the fragile skull with his fingers while his thumb finds a frantic pulse point in the thin neck...

He tried not to react to the juxtaposition of past and present, to the avalanche of painful uncertainty that nearly smashed him flat. He had told himself he was willing to face the outcome of his actions, whether or not he found what he desired.

But he had lied. He had been so *sure* that he would find Michel. That when he found Michel, he could restore Honoria's love simply by Raising and Naming him. That somehow he could convince Michel to forgive his transgression of the House's strictest prohibition. He had been so *sure*. That certainty, like treacherous mountain ice, had slipped, burying him in cold and frightening doubt.

Mathilde, wriggling sensuously with her hands buried in his hair, stopped before their lips met again. "Dominic? What is it? You're trembling."

He couldn't lie anymore. He couldn't bear the pain. Why was he in bed with—*married to*—this woman who was not his beloved? Were those *tears* trickling from his eyes? His chest compressed. He would soon sob and weep like the woman he had once been, who had wept when Ea died in the burning maelstrom of Inanna's curse, severing at one stroke the bonds of love and friendship. Who had died in service to Sharibet's reorganized House, with only the frailest hope that reunion would ever occur. He knew that woman had felt hope. Sharibet had said so, on a muggy fall afternoon in 1226 when

he re-lived that disaster under her tutelage, and lost, as he always did, what it had meant to him.

The full force of that grief hit him now, multiplied by the decades and centuries of its denial. He could not breathe. He dared not move. He would give way.

He would *not* move, though Mathilde's hand stroked his hair, and she crooned a mother's lullaby. He could not stop the betraying flood. Eventually the tears stopped by themselves. He felt dry, old, tired, and embarrassed.

Mathilde passed him a soft rag, and he wiped his face. "Better now?"

Could he speak yet? He was afraid to try. He wadded the cloth in his hand. It was her chemise. A sad laugh escaped. He tossed the damp material off the edge of the bed, and reached for his bride.

She welcomed him into her arms, asking no questions, demanding nothing, offering boundless sympathy. He accepted everything she willingly gave, making love to her in gratitude, in darkness, in submission to his fate.

When their bodies had taken full joy of one another, uncaring whether their souls joined or not, he lay beside her glowing, slumbering form, wide awake himself. He had wasted his only chance to steal some happiness tonight, instead dwelling on the dead sorrows of the past, neglecting the danger in Mathilde's future. He had taken all her comfort, and given nothing back.

Tomorrow would be worse. There were so many possible outcomes, all of them bad.

Tomorrow, he would bond in blood with Michel, who would see—unprepared—every evil thing Dominic had done since Honoria's death. If Michel let him live, together they would either Transform Mathilde, or kill her. If she died, it would be all Dominic's fault for crippling Michel's powers in his hubris, and his damned certainty. If she lived, she would find how flawed he was as a man, and a djinn.

No matter what happened, Michel would hate him more tomorrow than he did today.

And he would have to endure it.

* * * *

The last, badly hung-over guests departed the House of the Rose late in the morning, cheering soddenly as Mathilde and Dominic emerged from the bridal chamber.

Mathilde was not too sore to ride, but it was a close thing. Dominic's desperate lovemaking had seemed like the final effort of a drowning man to live. She had not wanted to refuse him anything, for fear she would lose him altogether.

She had admired his charm from their first meeting, and stood in awe of his age when he revealed it, but the depth of his grief, his utter devastation, had created a bond of sympathy she had not expected. He, too, knew loss severe enough to prostrate him.

In the morning light he showed his charm and his politeness as if nothing had happened. But she knew him better now. She had guessed the depth of his love for her brother. Now she knew without a doubt.

It's not that he's sorry about marrying me, she told herself. *He'd be sad with anyone else but Michel.* It was a twisted jest of fate had brought the two of them together when they could not truly be together.

She would do her very best to make him happy, for as long as she was able to. Today was the day of her Transformation. Would she survive it? Of course she would! Either as herself, or in some new future life. They had promised her that, and her half-seen dreams were pale corroboration.

At any rate, it was time to go.

Fausta and Josef and their two darling daughters were downstairs gifting the departing guests with handfuls of leftover marzipan sweets from baskets held by the rosy-cheeked little girls. She stopped to admire them, and was rewarded with shy smiles and clumsy curtses. She thanked Josef and Fausta for their admirable hospitality, and was rewarded by a curious bow performed with hands clasped tightly at the waist. One day she'd find out what it meant.

In the courtyard, the stable boy held the reins of Mathilde's palfrey and Dominic's gelding. Dominic cupped his hands and helped her mount, which she did, gingerly, the witnesses calling out bawdy commentary close enough to the truth to make her face heat.

As Dominic had predicted, the remaining wedding guests rode or walked alongside them as far as the city gates. Once out into the open fields that surrounded the city, Mathilde rode in silence at Dominic's side, a ball of icy fear in her stomach growing larger and more prickly, despite her

common-sense talking to it. Her Transformation would commence at sunset, in the cellar of the chateau.

Eternal life, eternal youth, health, strength, magical powers. Immortal loss. Immortal service. Was it a good trade?

The sun was a warm weight on her cheeks and eyelids, and the breeze brought the faint scents of baking bread, freshly-mown hay, and the sweet perfume of the hedge-roses blooming pink and white alongside the road. She inhaled it deeply, feeling a shadow of the deep tickle that remained in her lung.

Dominic had told her honestly that her disease, though diminished, had not vanished, and might prevent her from awakening as a djinniah.

She stole a glance at her new husband, and saw that his head was bent, his gaze turned inwards still. *I must go through with this*, she reminded herself. *Or I'll be dead before next Midsummer's Eve.*

Finally, they arrived at the chateau, where Tirgit greeted them with unabashed fondness and Michel embraced her with fervent strength and a careful avoidance of Dominic's gaze.

What did her brother feel, Mathilde wondered, seeing his former spouse now married to another? She blinked, and studied Michel thoughtfully, trying to picture him as a woman. A flash of alien memory came to her, of another wedding feast in a great hall made of pale yellow stone, where a tall, red-headed woman in an old-fashioned gown laughed merrily at Dominic's jests. Mathilde shivered.

Michel noticed. "'Tilde, are you all right?" His hand, as large and warm and masculine as always, rested on her shoulder.

"Yes," she said.

He squeezed, then let go. "Tirgit's prepared a bath. For the ritual cleansing."

Mathilde blinked. "But how did you know when we would arrive? Or," she added suspiciously, "Is it a *cold* bath?"

Michel laughed. "Fausta sent a pigeon when you left the House."

"Oh." It seemed extravagant to risk one of the House's trained birds on a matter as trivial as a bath, but it *was* a special occasion.

Tirgit tugged at her hand. "Come, Lady Mathilde. The tub is waiting in the solar."

"Don't worry," Dominic assured Mathilde, as she cast a nervous glance at him. "We won't start the Transformation without you."

The return of his dry humor made her smile, despite the nauseating flutter of nerves.

* * * *

Michel watched his sister walk away, up the stairs from the great hall, her back straight, neither looking to the right nor to the left. He refused to admit that he felt a pang go through him when the door closed behind her. He had to say something to Dominic, so he asked, gruffly, "How is Mathilde? Is she strong enough yet?"

"She is much stronger, although not completely well. I'm not the expert you were—" Dominic cleared his throat.

Chilled, Michel asked, "Should we wait?" The two of them would have Mathilde's life in their hands. Was his sister placing her faith in them falsely? "We can wait! We don't have to do this today."

Dominic reached out and briefly rested his hand on Michel's shoulder, then slid his fingers down Michel's arm, cupping his elbow. "Cecilia said she would return soon. And I, for one, won't have the courage to try it later. Promise me—today." His voice caught.

"Yes. Yes, of course." A noose settled around Michel's throat. Had Dominic fallen in love with Mathilde already? Why else would he fear so for her?

Dominic swallowed hard. "Before we transform Mathilde, we need to establish our blood bond."

Remembering that joining, Honoria shouted *Menelaos!* She wanted to put her arms around him. Michel froze. Could he really open his heart to feel everything the older djinn felt, to share his memories? Did he want to know what Dominic and his sister had done together in their marriage bed? Could he bear to have Dominic know exactly how close Honoria dwelt to the surface of Michel's mind? Panic robbed him temporarily of speech.

"I—I know." He forced the words past the dryness in his throat, and fought down a cowardly urge to escape. Honoria wanted this badly, and that worried him. "Come to my chamber."

As they passed the solar, he heard girlish giggles and splashing, and rejoiced that his sister was enjoying her bath.

Once in the chamber he shared with Tirgit, cluttered now with parchment and stacks of paper from his clerking, he submitted to Dominic's touch as the other took his hand and pushed up his sleeve.

"I don't know if you remember," Dominic said diffidently. "The elder djinn has the choice whether to drink first, or offer first. I choose—"

Michel's heart pounded, and he reminded himself that he was doing this for Mathilde's sake. *Only for her ...* but his body knew it for a lie as Dominic's warm mouth pressed against the inside of his forearm, followed by a brief sting.

The rush of sensation was familiar and terrifying, and overwhelmingly erotic. How many times had Honoria stood or lain within the circle of these arms as she opened her mind, her soul, and her heart to her husband? Michel's left arm slipped around Dominic's waist, holding him close. His cheek rested against the soft wool of Dominic's shoulder. He was weeping ... no, Honoria was weeping with the joy of reunion after long separation, though the tears rolled down Michel's cheeks.

He was home, safe at last. Why had he fought this for so long? Why had he pushed Menelaos away when his soul longed only to be reunited?

He became aware that Dominic had ceased to drink. It would have only been a mouthful at most, to unlock the gates separating his mind and his heart from the other djinn. Yet Michel did not move away. He did not want to lose the slow

caress that moved over his hair, and down the side of his face.

"Beloved," Dominic said in the archaic Greek of his mortal life.

Michel felt that warm mouth move against his with exquisite tenderness, and tasted the metal and salt of his own blood on Dominic's lips. All too soon, the kiss ended.

"Your turn," Dominic said, and Michel heard how disordered his breathing had become.

He fumbled one-handed at the cloth covering Dominic's arm, then Dominic's heartbeat pulsed against Michel's mouth as he bent to sip his blood, smoky-sweet as Honoria's memories promised.

But the blood was bitter, like burnt flesh. He saw the images:

He lays Michel's body on Tirgit's pallet, rising to see Cecilia's expression of rage. He moves, quickly, to stand in front of her. Deliberately, physically, he strikes her. "You tried to kill me, you lying serpent. Don't do that again, or I won't stop with one blow." She crumples to her knees. His hand closes around her throat...

Earlier: ... at the Ca' dalle Rose, Maryam and Simon Minor, Cosima and the other Raised and Named members of the House stand waiting for Dominic in the entrance hall, their hands clasped at their waists in the attitude of supplication, their faces stony. Dominic stops, surprised. Maryam steps forward. Her mouth a hard line, she speaks in the House's ancient language. "Lord." Her gaze flickers to the boy,

terrified and motionless in Dominic's arms. "It is not fitting, what you do."

Earlier: Dominic bends over Nebogu. His body sings with pain, his blood throbs with it. Knives tear out his heart, great beasts tread his bones, the emptiness at his core aches. Pure need, it doesn't care what feeds it. It wants—The flow of blood falters, the bond to life breaks, and white radiant light wipes Dominic's consciousness away...

Earlier: In a tent as the wind groans, the dead slave watches sightlessly as Dominic, engorged with blood and death energy, plunges hectically into Cecilia's white body. Their auras entwine, interpenetrating, and passion builds as it flows from one to the other. Finally Cecilia cries out, and he follows not long after, spent and sickened. "You improve," Cecilia purrs...

Earlier: "I apologize for the fact that I cannot unbind you," Sir Michel says, wetting his rag with water from the skin. "My lord de Sens has forbidden it." The young knight bends close and washes Dominic's face and neck with a gentle touch, then raises his shirt. It is a relief to be rid of dried blood and sweat and dust. Dominic closes his eyes and gives himself up to the coolness and the firm hands moving across his torso, around the bandages. The rag moves lower, and long-dormant erotic interest wakes from its sleep...

And earlier: ... A hot afternoon spent, naked, making love and music in shadowy rooms while the sun beats on thick shutters outside. The walls echo with the sound of splashing from the inner courtyard's fountains, cooling the breezes that dare invade the thick walls of the Granada House. Menelaos

rolls over, and lets his fingers trail over the curve of her hip, across her belly, and down to the soft skin of her inner thigh. "My flame," he murmurs. She giggles, and parts her legs for him again...

"No!" Michel and Honoria cried out together.

He stumbled backwards, choking on the taste of smoky blood gone rancid with the lives of innocent slave children, with the blood of many others sacrificed to Cecilia's lust, and with every violent act Dominic had committed in the years since Beziers.

Honoria curled up in Michel's head, howling. Michel made it as far as the doorway before he broke down in great ragged sobs of his own. *By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves: I sought him, but I found him not.*

Dominic stood, stony-faced, rolling down his sleeve.

"Murderer! Filth!" Michel, blinded, could not see Dominic through a haze of tears. "How could you kill all those children? All those girls? All those little boys! I don't know you!" Honoria spoke aloud, using Michel's voice. "Where did my Menelaos go? What have you done with my beloved, my heart?"

"I'm sorry." Dominic whispered, not meeting Michel's gaze. "He died in Beziers."

"Dead." Michel spat, trying to clear the taste of Dominic's blood from his mouth. "I wish you *had* died. Or that you had let me die, instead of Transforming me."

"I cannot repent my actions." His voice, already hoarse, cracked on that last syllable. "Yet we must work together to Transform Mathilde."

No! He would be forced to join his mind with Dominic's. He would have to smile and pretend all was well, feeling the whole while like a man standing waist-deep in a river of filth. Michel wrestled with horror, tying it in bonds all labeled *Mathilde's life*.

"Don't try to bespeak me. I want nothing else to do with you." He paused, then added, cruelly. "Neither does Honoria. You disgust her. You disgust *both* of us."

Dominic's face twisted with emotion as Michel turned on his heel and left.

* * * *

By the time Mathilde was bathed, dressed in a long linen gown, and anointed with oil of roses, everyone had arrived for the next step of the ritual.

Her heart pounding, and nervous about the loose garment she'd been given to wear, Mathilde followed Tirgit down two flights of steps. The air grew cool as they descended, and darkness pressed into the bubble of candlelight glowing in Tirgit's hand.

The smooth stone floor felt cold and hard against the tender soles of Mathilde's bare feet as she followed Tirgit through the vaulted spaces of the cellar under the great hall. They wound around neat sacks of grain and salt, and racks of barrels. The dizzying smell of wine-soaked oak enveloped her.

They came to a wooden door, barred with iron. It looked like a vault for valuables, and the fragrance of cloves and roses that issued forth when the door opened to Tirgit's knock only confirmed Mathilde's guess.

The light of a dozen candles shone on walls crowded with rows of sealed jars on wooden shelves. Fresh herbs and rushes had been strewn over the floor, around a low bed. Waiting for her, clad in the same fine garments they had worn to her wedding, were Dominic, Fausta, and Josef. Michel, dressed richly in blue-dyed wool, stood to one side. Tirgit placed her candle in an empty holder, and stood alongside the others.

Mathilde prayed for calmness. She met each of their gazes in turn: Michel's apprehensive and blank, as if he'd received some deep shock, Dominic's concerned and haunted, Josef's eager, Fausta's profoundly uncomfortable, and finally, Tirgit, who was quivering with barely-suppressed excitement.

Josef was the first to speak. "Mathilde le Pelletier, first known to the House as Ninharsag, do you understand what it means to consent to Transformation?"

Mathilde swallowed hard, willing her voice to emerge as something less than a frightened squeak. "I—I think so."

"Listen well," Dominic commanded. "You know you will be eternally young and powerful, and revered as a Protector of the House." He paused. "You will outlive your daughter, parents, kin, and friends. You will become a drinker of blood, forced to conceal your true nature from all except kin. Do you still wish this fearsome Transformation? Do you accept this burden, to protect the House, as you have done before?"

Mathilde met his gaze squarely and spoke as Tirgit had directed her earlier. "I consent to my Transformation." As if she would refuse at this point!

Now it was Michel's turn to speak. "Sister," he said. "Men will name you demon if ever your true nature is revealed. If the House should fall, or if you leave its protection, you will be an eternal outcast." A shadow crossed his features. "Do you still wish Transformation?"

Mathilde answered: "I consent to my Transformation."

Fausta spoke. "Lady Mathilde, do you wish to enter into an eternal covenant with the children of the Rose, to protect us with your god-like powers, and in turn accept the shelter of the House? Do you accept this Transformation?"

For the third time, Mathilde answered: "I consent to my Transformation."

Tirgit smiled widely. "Protectors and kin of the House, let it be witnessed and remembered that Lady Mathilde Le Pelletier, whose True Name is Ninharsag, Lady of the Mountains, has thrice consented to her Transformation by these duly Appointed Apkallu. May she awaken in glorious strength and eternal youth!"

"Remember us," added Fausta and Josef. "May we meet again!"

"We will withdraw now, Lady Mathilde," said Fausta, fingers picking nervously at the seams of her gown. "So that my Lord Dominic can begin his work."

Tirgit led the mortals out of the chamber. Michel stopped, and to Mathilde's surprise, sank to one knee before her.

"What—?" Tirgit hadn't mentioned anything about this when she taught the ritual of consent.

Her brother captured her right hand between his large, callused palms. "Tilde," he said, overcome with emotion. "I'll do my best, but..."

She understood. Reaching down with her free hand, she traced a caress along his face. "I forgive you in advance," she said, forcing stiff lips to curve into a smile. "If the worst happens ... well, what is one miserable, cold winter, more or less?"

His brows drew down, but the tense line of his shoulders relaxed. "I swear to you, by all my powers, you will see London in my company. And I'll teach you to fly."

"You can fly?" From the corner of her eye, she saw the insubstantial sweep of his great wings.

Michel nodded.

A vision of fields, laid out in gold and green like a chessboard, rose before her, and she could almost feel the wind in her hair. "I want to fly."

He pressed warm lips to the back of her hand, then rose and enfolded her in his strong, myrrh-scented embrace. "May we meet again."

"In three days." She kissed his close-shaved cheek. "Thank you for giving me hope of another summer."

Reluctantly, Michel released her and stepped back. He hesitated, his gaze shifting between her and Dominic, looking nearly as sick as she felt.

Dominic sighed, the sound audible in the chamber. "Leave us now, Michel. I'll summon you as soon as Mathilde is sleeping."

"I—" Michel's fists clenched, and his blue gaze fastened on Mathilde. Then he was gone, and she and Dominic were alone.

Her husband looked solemn, his dark hair gilded by the steady candlelight, as he took her by the hand and led her to the low bed. There, they sat, side by side, until Dominic bent, and kissed her, a gentle, slow meeting of lips.

Now that the moment had finally arrived, Mathilde felt her nervousness drain away, leaving behind a calm that spread in ripples outward from the pressure of Dominic's mouth. Unhurriedly, he continued to kiss her, letting his lips travel over her jaw and down her throat, raising a pleasant frisson. His thumb brushed against the sensitive tip of her breast, kindling sweet warmth between her thighs. He made love to her with tantalizing slowness, and she responded, kiss for kiss, caress for caress, until desire drew her taut as a bowstring, and her release sent her soaring.

As she arched against him, and cried out, she felt his teeth against her throat. It was a brief pain as he bit down, followed by a strange, languorous pleasure as he began to draw her life into his mouth.

She clung to him, the bronze light from his great luminous wings growing steadily brighter, nearly blinding as he drank from her. She could *feel* those wings against her skin, softer than down, lighter than feathers.

Her limbs became too heavy to move, though she was acutely aware of all the places that their bodies touched. He was still hard, still inside her, and the steady friction of his

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by Michaela August

thrusts sent waves of pleasure through her belly, pushing her gently away from the shore of consciousness.

Her final thought, before she lost sight of that shore completely, was: *If I have to die, this is a better death than most.*

Chapter Nine

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal [must] put on immortality. —*First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 15:51-53

Sunday, July 18, AD 1260

Chateau du Chancy

Why is Dominic taking so long? Michel paced the length of the chateau's great hall, scuffing aside the rushes covering the floor, and exposing pale gray flagstones. He opened his link to the other djinn, then recoiled at the sensation of Mathilde's soft skin against his mouth, and the sweet coppery taste of her blood.

—Beloved?—

Michel heard Dominic's startled query before he slammed shut the connection between them like a terrified burgher sealing his city's gates against a besieging army. *Don't call me that!* He stumbled, nearly falling over a hillock of rushes he had created earlier, and scrubbed at his mouth, trying to erase the phantom taste of his sister's blood. He hadn't wanted to feel his sister's flesh, slick and heated, against his own. Against *Dominic*. Nausea roiled though him, revulsion mixed with regret for the nights that Honoria had lain in

Menelaos's arms ... *I am not jealous*, Michel told himself. *He disgusts me.*

He did what he did in search of you, Honoria said.

He kicked aside another clump of rushes with savage strength, sending a wave of greenery through the shadowed hall like the single beat of a great wing. He had barely regained his composure by the time Dominic spoke once more.—It is done. She awaits.—

Finally! Freed to take action, Michel ran down the stairs to the cool darkness of the cellar.

* * * *

Mathilde was stretched out like a corpse on a bier: still and white and cold, wearing only a thin shift, surrounded by the scent of the costly spices used to preserve the dead—cinnamon, myrrh, frankincense, and the pungent, woody odor of cedar oil.

She *was* still alive, wasn't she? In panic, Michel opened his Seer's eyes, and found comfort in the steady glow of her aura-wings, whose color reminded him, aching, of the blue-white Egyptian sky.

"Are you ready to begin?" Dominic pitched his voice low, as if he feared to rouse the sleeper.

Michel, feeling unclean, assented. *I must do this for Mathilde.*

Dominic's bronze aura surrounded him, like a pair of large, warm hands encompassing his own, guiding in their delicate work rather than invading, offering an embrace rather than the savage penetration that had haunted Michel's nightmares

this past week. Michel released a breath, re-gathering his concentration, and stilled the ripples of disturbance that had spread to the ends of his aura.

—Here is the sacred ladder.—The picture Dominic sent was a shining, delicate structure, only two joined strands curling about one another like the staff of a Roman medicus.

Panic struck. How could Honoria's tools, shears and needle, re-weave Mathilde's life from Dominic's different pattern?

No! I'll kill her!

You won't, insisted Honoria. We did this before. She shared a tantalizing memory: ... a cold snowy night. Hard stars gleam as a blonde woman says, "I, Anna von Waiblingen, consent to be Transformed." "So witnessed," says the House's representative. "May we meet again." "I regret this haste," says Dominic as he helps her climb down a crude ladder to the cellar of a Viking-looted manor. "But we need your strength. Honoria will guard us." A fire warms the chill of the rough-hewn cellar. Honoria feels what Dominic feels as he disrobes, and huddles under borrowed cloaks with a shivering Anna. Honoria rides behind his eyes, within his skin, sharing his shared pleasure as he melts Anna's resistance until she is bonelessly relaxed. He tastes her blood, and brings the image of the sacred ladder forward to remake her body. Honoria monitors the steps of Transformation, silently comparing his technique to her own as the stars wheel overhead...

You did that with him. I did that ... Michel's honor toppled, legless, strengthless, chopped down by self-betrayal.

Listen to me! Honoria shouted between his ears. *Ninharsag was Ea's consort. We called her Damgalnunna, Great Noble Spouse. She was our sister then, as Mathilde is our sister now, in body as well as spirit. We have always loved her, and she will die if you don't stop dithering about your this-life 'honor.'*

Shock upon shock wore down Michel's resistance just as Dominic's lovemaking had worn down Mathilde's. Or Anna's. He gave himself up to Dominic's hands of air and spirit, viewing the pattern of a djinn within his mind, raising Honoria's shears. He concentrated on loosening and removing the first thread of the tapestry, beginning the alteration of Mathilde's pattern.

A few more snips, holding the fragile fabric tenderly to keep it from unraveling too far, and it was time for the needle, the gold thread now mingled with bronze. Michel stitched the new design, the complex, interlaced pattern of a djinn's powers, spinning out a steady skein of his power and Dominic's. He poured his love and life-energy into his sister's unconscious body, stabilizing the faint rhythm of her heartbeat, all the while supported by steady bronze strength.

Finally, it was done. Mathilde's aura had ripened to a rich bluish-green, the outer sign that the cloth of her life had been rewoven. Michel had done all that he could to ensure that this new fabric would provide her with the robe of immortality.

He swayed on his feet, and noticed that the candles had burned down to guttering stubs in their holders. How many hours had he been immersed in his task?

"I'll hold vigil," Dominic said softly. His hands closed on Michel's shoulders, easing him down to a pallet next to Mathilde's bed.

It went well! crowed Honoria as Dominic slowly circled Mathilde's body three times, anointing her forehead, lips, and heart with salt, water, and oil in turn. He completed the ritual of Transformation with a brief kiss upon her lips and the traditional invocation: "Return to us, O wandering spirit, and dwell in the immortal temple of thy body!"

Return to us, my sister! Michel made only a token protest as Dominic murmured, "Sleep," and left the faintest pressure of a kiss against his temple.

Darkness claimed him. This time, there were no nightmares.

* * * *

"Michel."

The call echoed in his ears and mind, and he found himself on his feet, breathing harshly, hand fumbling for a sword he no longer wore. "What—?" his heartbeat thundered in his ears.

"Your turn to hold vigil," said Dominic, calmly. "Let me rest."

Tirgit came, bearing a jar for him, then took the empty away. He sat next to his sister's body in the night-dark cellar, as morning turned into afternoon.

In between the ritual invocations, Michel repeated Paternosters, using the words to focus his power. He infused

each word, each touch of his wings upon hers, with all the love he had ever felt for her.

He tried not to let his attention wander to the djinn sleeping at his feet. It was hard for him to understand how Dominic, tender and attentive to Mathilde, could be the same man who slaughtered children.

But you've done that yourself. Not Honoria's whisper, his time, but his own voice, pitiless and compelling: *Remember Mansurah!*

He does: *Outside tall wooden gates, the knights overtake the fleeing soldiers and camp followers almost under the rounded crenellations of the city walls ... a jumble of images like a Book of Hours ... red stains on golden stone...*

His voice continues. *Those Saracens who died under your sword included children, and women, too.*

He can see their anguished faces, the wounds he dealt ... *red stains on golden stone...*

No! I served God's cause!

And Dominic served his own. Do the dead care why they were killed?

He could not retch. He had to work with Dominic to see his sister through her Transformation. He crouched protectively over her like the carved sarcophagus guardians of Egypt, extending gilded wings in protection, whispering, "Return to the temple of thy body..."

When Dominic woke at sunset, he took a turn sleeping. When next he woke, it was the depth of the night, and he opened his eyes easily, finally rested.

Dominic stood guard over his sister, whispering the invocation at intervals, totally absorbed in his task. Michel watched him, seeing the painful hope beneath the calm expression, examining the scars branded into his aura.

Our deaths did that to him, Honoria said. We did that to him. Anna and I. Marcus and Horst. We didn't mean to.

He remembered ... *standing on the steps of St. Nazaire cathedral, the sun a hot dazzle on pale golden stone, the air stinking of blood and smoke...*

We did our best. We failed both the kin, and Menelaos. Time to make a new start.

Michel sat up, and said to Dominic, "You rest now. I'll hold vigil."

"My thanks," said Dominic, and they exchanged places.

* * * *

When three days had passed, Mathilde's aura shifted and settled into the furred, brilliant wings of a true djinniah. Scarcely daring to hope, Michel examined her critically with his Seer's eyes. Her aura was stronger and brighter than it had been, yet it was still somehow insubstantial.

"Her powers will be weak when she awakens," Dominic said, completing his own examination.

"Will they become stronger in time?" Michel reached out, and smoothed her shining, ice-blue wing with his own, watching her aura brighten momentarily, then fade.

Dominic's reply was not reassuring. "I hope so."

The weight of hope in that brief contact was too heavy to bear. "I thank you for your vigilance, and for your help."

"I could do no less," Dominic said. "She is my sister too. My bride. My friend. I regret what you and I have lost, but time alters everything save the bonds we share together."

I regret it, too. More than you will ever know. Michel made no reply aloud, but Honoria wept, silently, for all that she had lost.

* * * *

Wednesday, July 21, AD 1260, Feast of St. Praxedis
Mathilde woke wondering, *Is this Heaven?* Wherever she was it was soft, warm, and filled with shimmering light.

The priests would be scandalized if they knew. Because being dead involved male flesh pressed against her bare skin in the most carnally arousing way. She shifted, wriggling her hips, nestling more firmly into that firm warmth. *Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Naked without sin or shame.*

A hand brushed her bare shoulder, then descended to cup her breast. "Mathilde?"

The voice sounded familiar. It sounded like ... "Dominic?" Why was he here? Had he died, too? She felt sleepy and alert at the same time, her body relaxed yet humming with vitality.

"How do you feel?"

"Feel?" She squinted past veils of blue and bronze light to see ... Was it the solar?

"I'm not dead?"

"I should hope not. Michel and I fought hard to keep you with us." A low laugh rumbled out of his chest, and vibrated pleasantly against her back as he drew her closer against him.

"I feel—" She gasped as the hand cupping her breast began stroking it lightly, sending a jolt of sensation through her belly. "Alive. Better than I've felt in ages."

"Hungry?" Dominic murmured, his lips brushing the nape of her neck, sending another jolt through her.

"Not for food." She surprised herself with a low, pleading sound, arching against the fingers that were skillfully teasing one nipple.

She needed more from him than this maddeningly feather-light touch. She wanted to feel him against every inch of her suddenly-sensitive skin. The shimmering light that clouded her vision intensified. She was alive. Right now, she wanted to feel her husband inside her, stretching her, thrusting into her.

"More," she pleaded, parting her legs, reaching back to try and capture his erection.

He moved, skillfully avoiding her questing hand, and rolled her over onto her back, a wicked gleam in his eye. He proceeded to drive her nearly insane before finally giving her what she wanted. She screamed with pleasure when he entered her.

Then he stopped, poised above her, balanced on strong arms.

"Why do you wait?" she demanded.

"Shall I teach you the way of djinni?" He smiled as he asked, but his expression held some reservation. Did he fear her rejection, now?

"Yes, of course!"

"Blood establishes the bond," he said, moving slightly.

She turned her head to one side, ready to howl with frustration. "You tasted my blood before."

"I did. It's your turn now."

She felt the smooth skin of his wrist press against her lips.

"Bite." His voice was hoarse.

She was pleased that his self-control was not quite perfect, after all. She could *hear* the rapid sound of his pulse rushing through his veins, and smell something smoky, delicious, under his skin. She bit and gasped at the taste on her tongue, salty and sweet and altogether sensual. With the taste came a barrage of images, too fast for her to sort out. Coherent thought failed her. She drew him closer, offering herself, all of herself, to him.

This is a perfect union. He moved against her, igniting a storm of sensation in both of them, intensified by the sharing. Mathilde convulsed against him, clinging to him, surrounded by him, embraced by him, body and mind. Her release shook the world, dissolved her body, and left her flying, made of light itself.

Her great wings moved at her will, reaching out to caress her lover, to return to him, all of him, both substantial and insubstantial, the same transcendent pleasure. But instead, abruptly, she was drowning in pain. His pain...

Dominic flung himself away from her, stifling whimpers and curses in some language she did not know.

All she could do was lay where he had left her, limbs asprawl, the room spinning queasily with echoes of her pleasure and his agony. When she gained the strength to sit up she saw him curled on the other side of the huge bed,

clutching his head, his face contorted like a sinner consumed by hellfire.

She still felt the pain splitting his skull and his aura, but it was distant now. "What—" she croaked, then swallowed, dryly. "What happened?" She touched his white-streaked hair and he flinched.

"Did I—did I do this to you?" Her queasiness returned, bringing with it a burning pain in her stomach. She frantically reviewed the events of the immediate past. Had she drunk too deeply? Used her aura wrongly? Hadn't he told her once that a djinn could kill by using the Hand of Air?

"No ... not you. Injury. Beziers."

Beziers? But that was fifty years ago! I thought djinni healed quickly! She looked him over critically. His physical form appeared unflawed except for a few white scars marking the tribulations of his mortal life.

Then the bronze expanse of his wings caught her attention. She could see them quite clearly now, she realized, instead of as a half-realized shimmer in the periphery of her vision. They were marred by ragged dark patches, as if the smooth fabric of light had been repeatedly scorched or torn away, leaving them tattered by far more grievous scars than his body bore.

Instinctively, she reached out a hand to touch the scarred areas, her own blue wing echoing the motion, then froze.

What if I hurt him again?

She forced herself to fold her hands in her lap, and to simply wait, kneeling patiently in the soft featherbed until the

lines on Dominic's face smoothed out, and he uncurled with a deep sigh.

"What happened?"

He turned his face to her, regret vying with humiliation and a certain wariness as he tried to gauge her reaction. He stretched out, and put the back of his hand against his forehead, as if it pained him still. "When you opened your mind to me, the merging of our auras hurts my old injuries." His aura-wings rippled violently.

"Does this happen every time you are touched?"

"No. Only in moments of intimacy."

She mulled over his statement. *It had happened before!*

"Why didn't you tell me, Dominic? Before we married? Before we started?" She didn't know whether to be furious or to pity him. But she needed to know: had he condemned them both to a marriage in name only?

"I hoped—" He bit his lip. "I anticipated that your aura would not be very strong, on awakening."

"Because I was sick? That's what you meant, before, when you said you and Michel fought hard for me."

"Yes."

"Am I weak?" She moved her aura, feeling the slide and pull of a substance with no muscles, and no bones but will and force. "I feel stronger than before I became ill!"

"You are," he said, not meeting her eyes. "I was wrong. I can only offer you my deepest apologies, and an annulment of our marriage and our consortship, if you wish."

"I don't wish that!" she retorted, although every instinct in her rebelled against this perversion of such a perfect union of souls, minds, and bodies. "Can you be healed?"

"Sharibet and Cecilia tried," he said, his mouth tightening. "The only thing they found that can repair the damage to my aura is death-energy."

She waited, knowing she had finally reached the truth. This was the ultimate price of becoming a djinn.

He added, with obvious reluctance: "We drink blood for its life, but death, another's death, increases us if we drink it at the moment of unbinding."

"Oh," she said faintly. What good was it to repair the damage to his wings if he became a murderer and destroyed his soul in the process?

A cold shudder passed through her as she recalled some of the scenes she had seen in the single mouthful of his blood: confronting Cecilia in this very chamber. *I'm finished killing for your sport!* And earlier: *In a tent as the wind sings, the dead slave watches sightlessly as Dominic, engorged with blood and death energy, plunges hectically into Cecilia's white body.*

What did it mean? How many people had Dominic killed so? How could it be that Cecilia—the warm, compassionate woman who had attended Mathilde upon her sickbed—could enjoy making him kill for her amusement? And yet—and yet—his wings were still injured. Whatever he had done, he had not killed enough people to heal himself. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

The burning ache in Mathilde's stomach returned, and her mouth watered. She swayed.

"You're hungry," said Dominic. "I'm sorry. I should have remembered." He left the bed and returned with two sealed jars of the type that Mathilde had seen Tirgit carry occasionally. With a flick of his fingers, the seal shattered. He drew out one stopper, and Mathilde smelled oranges and something else.

We drink blood for its life, she heard Dominic's voice say in her memory. She sniffed cautiously, and a rush of juices filled her mouth. She drank, the blood flowing down her throat, rich and delicious, pausing only when she had drained the jar.

She drained the second jar Dominic handed her, too, and the pain dwindled. *This is the true price*, she told herself sternly. *You knew that when you said yes.*

What price has he paid? She reached for his hand. "I'll find somehow to heal you, without damaging your soul through the slaughter of innocents. I swear it."

"You saw? In my blood?"

"A little. Enough," she said, solemnly.

He tried to pull away. "You don't find me a monster?"

She didn't let his hand escape. "I know you are sore wounded, husband, and I wish you well."

Dominic squeezed her fingers but he didn't look at her.

"What is it?" she asked, a bit suspiciously.

He said, looking down at their joined hands, "It's House tradition for a newly-Transformed djinn to awaken in a soft bed, being held by a lover. But I was supposed to comfort

you, to carry you through the initial shock. Instead, you carried me."

"We shall carry each other, husband," she said softly. "I promise." *Blessed Virgin, let me keep this pledge.*

* * * *

It took a few days for Mathilde to adjust to a world where all living things were clothed in robes of colored light, a glory that emanated even from the humble herbs of the chateau's kitchen garden. She walked through these days feeling very new and very simple, taking nothing for granted, finding life and delight everywhere she looked.

On the third day, Dominic approached her as she sat in the great hall with Tirgit, fabric piled in their laps, sewing in the wan light coming through the high windows as rain poured down outside.

In actuality, only Tirgit was stitching a new chemise. Mathilde's hands had stilled, and she was staring, enraptured, at Tirgit's bright aura. Her Naming Mark rose above her head like the flames of the Holy Spirit depicted in the stained-glass windows of the cathedral, and darkened to a green glow over her belly, where Michel's child grew.

"I really must teach you to how to shut your Seer's eyes, or the world will think you've gone mad."

Mathilde started when Dominic's voice rose behind her. Blushing, she fumbled with the cloth and thread tangled in her lap. He chuckled, and bent to kiss her cheek, just as Michel entered the hall from outside. Her brother's face darkened as he caught sight of them, and Dominic froze.

Without a word, Michel spun on his heel and disappeared through the archway on the far side of the hall.

"Michel, wait!" Mathilde rose, letting the half-sewn chemise slide to the rushes. "Dominic, excuse me, please. I need to talk to him." Mind-to-mind, so Tirgit would not hear, she sent,—He's been avoiding me ever since I awoke. Don't follow.—

He returned agreement, tinged with resignation, and a swift impression of gratitude.

She scurried across the hall and down the spiral stair to the cellar that mirrored the stairs below the solar. "Michel!"

He had opened the vault where she had been transformed. The usual stores had been returned to it, so a large barrel reeking of yeast stood against one wall. The low bed had been replaced with a table holding clean jugs and tankards, into which the ale from another barrel was decanted at mealtimes. Normally a rather dark place, it blazed now with the golden light of Michel's aura. He was in the act of opening one of the djinni's jars when she entered.

"What on earth is the matter with you? You haven't said two words to me since I awoke." Mathilde let him see her hurt. "Have I done aught to offend you, little brother? Do you hate me now?"

"It's not you," Michel replied. His hair and clothes were damp with rain.

At her incredulous look, he crossed his arms. Reluctantly he added, "It's *him*. You're always together these days. I haven't been able to spend time in your company without him hovering over you like—like an anxious weanling!"

"Don't be jealous," Mathilde pleaded.

Michel's expression turned even darker. "What did you say?"

"I've seen it in his blood. How you loved each other." She laid a comforting hand on his sleeve.

"Dominic shows you too damn much!" Michel snarled, jerking his arm out of her reach. "What *e*/se did he show you, sister mine? Did he show you all the children he murdered? Has he offered to do the same for you?"

Her palm itched, and she slapped his cheek, startling them both. She rubbed her fingers together. "Did you know that death-energy is the only remedy to heal his aura? Or that he refuses to kill in that way any longer?"

"Do you condone it?"

"Of course not! But I don't know anything else to do to help him. Do you?"

He looked away, and his Naming mark flickered in a way that hurt to watch. He staggered, and she had to hold him up.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't remember. I used to know so much," he groaned. "I can't help either of us."

His arms encircled her, tight, painful, desperate. She held him as he shook. She feared for him, and grieved at his sorrow. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Michou," she said, as she patted his back.

Finally, he relaxed and his arms loosened around her shoulders. "We'll just have to live with it."

"Well you can start by being civil," she said in her best older sister manner. "Bring some of those jars with you and

we'll sup together." As they left the vault, she didn't speak what was on her mind. *When I am Raised and Named, I will find a way to help you. Both of you.*

* * * *

Sunday, August 8, AD 1260

Chateau du Chancy

"Please, take some of this chilled wine. The recipe is from my husband's family. Adding the sweetened juice of oranges or lemons is very refreshing in summer weather," Mathilde said to the guests seated in the solar.

Tirgit, bearing a large silver-gilt pitcher, moved gracefully from one woman to the next, pouring wine into Venetian glass goblets. Even from several feet away, Mathilde's heightened senses could smell the tang of citrus mixed with tannin.

Katrin van Mergelhynek, as pink-cheeked as ever, took a cautious sip and sighed in exaggerated ecstasy. "This is divine! Your new husband must be very wealthy to afford such luxury, Mathilde!"

"Of course he's rich, Katrin, you silly goose," chided Jossine Faerber. She was a vigorous, thick-wristed woman in her fifties, the wife of a prosperous dyer, a fact which showed in the blue stains that not even the most vigorous scrubbing could eradicate from the skin of her palms and fingers. "You've never heard of anyone associated with the House of the Rose being *poor*, have you?"

Over a fortnight had passed since Mathilde's Transformation, and Katrin and Jossine had ridden out to the

chateau to pay a call and to mine the rich vein of gossip to be had from the newest addition to the most interesting merchant family in Ypres.

Mathilde smiled demurely, and raised her own goblet. Both Michel and Dominic had told her that the djinni could eat and drink in small quantities. She swallowed a mouthful of the wine, and suppressed a grimace, her mouth and tongue burning with the harsh, acidic taste.

This visit was a test, of a sort. Could she still pass for a normal woman among her friends and acquaintances?

"Speaking of *poor*," Katrin said. "Did you hear that Master Ewert 's chief apprentice got Hilde van Leeuvanhoek's maid pregnant? He's going to marry the girl, of course, but he'll be lucky if he makes journeyman now!" She shook her head. "His father will be so disappointed. He'd set his hopes on that young man making master before the age of twenty-five..."

As Jossine and Katrin continued to gossip, Mathilde let the chatter flow over her as she opened her Seer's eyes, and examined the differences between the plain diffuse auras of her two neighbors, and the flare that marked Tirgit as a member of the House.

"Well, enough about *that*," Jossine said, finally, her attention coming back to Mathilde. "What of you, my dear? Any news of your brother?"

Mathilde shook her head, trying to look appropriately sorrowful and concerned. "Brother Philippe is still searching, but they've found no trace of Michel." Who was currently sequestered in his chamber, one floor above. As if he heard his name, the wooden ceiling creaked from his fretful pacing.

"I pray every night for his safe return," Katrin said, piously. "Now you must tell us, Mathilde. How goes it with your new husband?"

"We've all been speculating whether you made a love-match or if you were simply unable to resist uniting your business with the House of the Rose," added Jossine, draining her goblet, and holding it out for Tirgit to refill.

Blunt as ever. Mathilde had been expecting these questions. Now she must answer them. "It was both. My husband—" it still felt strange to call Dominic that, "—has much to recommend him, being a man of great intelligence. And I'm no fool to overlook the opportunity to sell furs to Italian and Byzantine nobles."

"*Intelligent?*" Katrin giggled. Her face was flushed now. "Don't tell me that you didn't find him handsome and vigorous as well? We did see him at the bedding!"

"Indeed," added Jossine, slyly. "You must tell us whether Master Dominic is as capable in his marital duties as he is in his business affairs."

Struck by the memory of Dominic huddled in the bed, while his agony echoed through them both, Mathilde raised her goblet to her lips again, trying to hide the hot shame that rose up her face.

Her guests began laughing. "I'd say that our Mathilde is very well-pleased by the match she made," wheezed Jossine.

Mathilde thought furiously. She should not deny it, no matter that they had misread her blush. "I find my husband extraordinary in every respect," she said, forcing a sly smile. Let them infer what they would from her remark!

This sent her two friends off into another gale of laughter, helped no doubt by Tirgit's efficient refilling of their goblets.

"So, you'll be living here from now on?" Katrin asked, gesturing at the walls that surrounded them. "You must be relieved to be back in noble surroundings."

Mathilde shrugged. "It's not as comfortable as my own parlor," she said honestly, which earned her a dark look from Tirgit, who was currently offering a dish of sugared almonds to her guests. "But, in any case, we're only staying a few weeks."

"Really? Why is that?" Katrin leaned forward, full of curiosity.

"We're moving to London, where my husband and my sister-in-law have urgent business matters that require their attention. That was the main reason I wed so quickly," she continued. "I wanted to travel with them. I've never been to London."

"Oho, so it *was* a love-match, after all!" Katrin teased. "You couldn't bear to lose him when he left Ypres!"

Mathilde's face felt stiff. Why had she wanted to see Katrin again, with her vulgar chatter and impertinent questions? "I feared I would die once he and Cecilia departed," she said, truthfully.

Katrin leaned over and patted Mathilde's arm, giving her a surprisingly intent look. "Are you fit to travel? You've been so ill..."

"I'm fully recovered, I believe," Mathilde answered, uncomfortably. Now the subject of her miraculous cure had arisen. After all, Katrin had spent hours by her sickbed. At

Jossine's skeptical look, Mathilde added: "I had a particularly bad spell right after the wedding, but Dom—my husband gave me some Saracen medicine, and since then, my lungs no longer trouble me."

Well, it was *partly* true...

"The folk of the House look like Saracens themselves," Jossine declared, allowing Tirgit to refill her goblet yet again. Tirgit's brows drew down, but she said nothing. Jossine, lost in the fumes of the wine, continued: "Won't you be homesick for our good beer and honest Flemish speech when you're far away in foreign lands?"

"I—I don't think so." At the amazed looks that both her friends gave her, Mathilde realized it had not even crossed her mind that she might miss Flanders. After all, she had been sent away to foster with her aunt Blanche at the age of ten, and had only rarely seen her parents or their estate in the Ardennes after that.

She was looking forward to her new life, and all the experiences that would come with mastery of her powers and her Appointing as a Protector of the House. Dominic had told her that they would travel to Constantinople in the spring, so that she might take her oath to the kin.

After an awkward pause, and the extraction of a promise from Mathilde to write and tell all about English fashions, and whether Queen Eleanor was really as beautiful as the poets said, the conversation turned back to the various misdeeds, real and imagined, within the small circle of their acquaintance in Ypres. Finally, as the sun sank lower in the sky, her friends rose to go. Mathilde rose to kiss them

farewell, wistfully aware that she would never see them again. Too many secrets divided them now.

Tirgit cleared away the used goblets and the crumbs of the sweets, leaving Mathilde to sit alone and somber.

"Tilde?" It was Michel. He had come down the stairs, quiet as a cat, and stood, looking quizzical. "What's wrong?"

"I saw Katrin and Jossine again. They asked too many questions."

The light from the window cast half his face in shadow. "I want to leave this place soon, so I won't have to hide any more. But Cecilia has been delayed again. A pigeon arrived while your guests were here. The English queen requires her presence, so she will be staying another fortnight, if not longer."

"What did she say about my Transformation?"

His arms tightened around her. "We, Dominic and I, thought it best not to tell her yet."

Mathilde frowned. "I thought you said she'd be pleased."

"She will be."

Something in his tone set alarm bells ringing in Mathilde's head. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Before she left," Michel said slowly, avoiding her gaze. "She made me promise not to contact anyone who had known me ... before. That was sensible, but she specifically named you."

"But she *knew* I was Apkallu," Mathilde said, puzzled. "Why else befriend me?" She tilted her head back to look him in the eye. "Why forbid you to see me?"

"Because she *decided* that you were too ill to be Transformed," he said bitterly. "After our departure for London, Josef and Fausta were to care for you until your death."

"Oh." Taken aback by yet another shocking glimpse into her good-sister's nature, Mathilde struggled to push aside the bitter disappointment that Cecilia would have let her die so easily. *This is not so different from a difficult business negotiation. Forget emotion. What's at stake here? What are the facts?* "But now that I'm a djinniah, all should be well?"

"I believe so. I don't know her anymore..."

She could see him struggling to remember, the flame-like Raising and Naming mark above his head flickering madly, like a candle struggling in a draft. Dread struck her. "The House truly wants to appoint me as a Protector?"

Michel's aura quieted, and he seemed less lost, more like the confident knight she expected. "If you pass your probation, and if you're willing to take the oaths." He smiled. "Cecilia will rejoice to see you, as we do, fully and safely Transformed. How could she do anything else?"

Mathilde was slightly comforted. But everyone kept some sort of vital information from her. What secrets was she missing now?

Chapter Ten

Letter to Mathilde le Pelletier of Ypres, dated Sunday
August 15, 1260

Right worshipful mother, I commend me to you and beseech your daily blessing and remembrance; beseeching you to send me word of your health. I have not received any letters from you since the beginning of this summer, and am sore troubled for your sake.

Sieur de Bressoux was not pleased when grandpere refused to lend one of his stud stallions, but seems to have resigned himself. I am considered stubborn by Madame de Bressoux, but only because I insist on writing to you, the one to whom I owe the most filial of duties. Parchment costs a great deal, but I have written you every week, although I have not been able to send my letters more often than every quarter.

Though you have not written to me this news, so it may be only a rumor, we have heard that you have a new suitor. This is good news, if true, because you deserve to have a good husband. The man who courts you is Lady Cecilia's brother? I wonder why she never mentioned him to us in all her stories? But I suppose he is as good, and kind, and knowledgeable as she is.

My kittens are all grown now. They are sleek hunters, and purr mightily in my lap. Heaven has tabby stripes, and Earth has cream and gold spots. They no longer play so much, for

they have much work to do, keeping down the vermin that occupy the house and barn.

My husband departed last month to attend the Cathedral school in Paris, to learn his letters and law, so I am left alone with the Sieur and Madame and my four young brothers-in-law. They continue lively, although the youngest worries us because he has a cough that will not stop. We pray for him every day and have good hope that God will show him mercy.

I commend me to you in God's keeping, and beseech God send you good health and more joy in this year than you had in this past one.

Written by my own hand on the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, your daughter Blanche

Friday, September 3, AD 1260

Bruges, Duchy of Flanders

With a heavy heart, Cecilia stepped off the ship and onto the bustling quay at Bruges. The air was clouded with a fine gray drizzle that barely wet hair or cloak but served to depress her spirits further.

After a brief rest at the Bruges House of the Rose to deliver correspondence and acquire mounts, she rode out of the city, headed impatiently for Ypres. Once out in the flat fields of Flanders, the drizzle turned to a downpour. She pulled up the hood of her cloak, and tried to ignore the chill in her legs, which seeped in from the mud that splashed up onto her skirts and stockings with every heavy-footed step her palfrey took.

Her escorts, five members of the ship's crew, rode in silence as well. Normally, they would have been laughing and

singing, but her presence made them cautious and overly respectful. The silence gave her anger time to simmer as the miles unwound slowly along the brown ribbon of road. Although Michel and Dominic had been very careful to mention nothing of disobeying her explicit orders regarding Mathilde, Fausta had written her all about the wedding and the Transformation.

Trapped into staying in London six weeks longer than she had planned, Cecilia had read Fausta's letters with mounting horror. As much as she desired it, she could not simply yield to her first impulse and commandeer one of the House's vessels to cross the Channel. She had worked too hard to catch Queen Eleanor's interest. But the drama unfolding in Flanders gnawed at her with every day she spent making witty conversation at the court in Westminster.

True, she had hoped her absence would give Michel and Dominic the opportunity to work out their differences. One way or the other. But she hadn't expected *this*. Hadn't she explained the risks? The danger to the House and to Michel should the Transformation of a very sick woman fail and the authorities begin to investigate?

They did not need *more* official attention. It was bad enough that the Templars were convinced that Michel's disappearance was somehow connected to the House of the Rose. She was partly to blame for that, she knew. She should have been more cautious when striking up a friendship with Mathilde last autumn.

It wasn't as if she didn't want to welcome another Apkallu back into the fold, she told herself, as she wiped an icy trickle

of rainwater from her face. Quite the opposite. Each reunion with one of her lost siblings was an occasion of joy. But Dominic's outright defiance of her orders—orders meant to ensure the continued safety and stability of the House—marked a worrisome trend. His behavior had proved erratic in the wake of his injuries in Beziers, and this latest escapade was no different. How she missed the old Menelaos, who never acted without carefully considering the consequences!

Finally, she arrived at the House after hours of listening to her palfrey squelch through hock-deep mud, the spires of Ypres's churches appearing and disappearing behind the veil of the steady downpour.

Her five escorts let out a ragged cheer, no doubt looking forward to hot food and hot baths. Two of them would stay in Ypres to help Josef and Fausta, and, later on, marry their little girls.

The other three youths had volunteered to help Cecilia move her household from the Chateau du Chancy, which had served its purpose admirably, and whose lease could now be terminated and the property returned to the Templars.

The move to London would come not a moment too soon. There had been Templars watching the docks in Bruges. They had not given up their search for their Preceptor, and Michel would either need to disguise himself well, or go farther away than she preferred, to escape their net.

* * * *

It finally stopped raining when Cecilia rode through the gates of the chateau several hours later. With grim

satisfaction, she noted that all of the chateau's inhabitants were gathered in the courtyard to greet her. Fausta must have sent a bird to warn them. Not that it mattered, as long as they showed her honor.

Her gaze swept over the assembled group. Dominic looked particularly ill-at-ease, as well he should. Mathilde also looked nervous, and was clutching Dominic's hand, though of all the djinni here, she had the least to worry about. It was enough that she was well and truly Transformed. "Mathilde, my sister—"

Michel stepped forward, interrupting her greeting. He said, "Welcome back, Lady Cecilia," brushing aside the servants and coming to her stirrup to assist her in dismounting. "I trust you had an uneventful journey from London?" His lips brushed her cheek as he set her on her feet, and she felt one of his wings brush the edge of hers in a gentle caress.

She smiled at him tightly, refusing to be mollified by so transparent a gesture. Perhaps she would allow him to try to appease her later. "I thank you for your concern, Michel. I wish to speak to you—*all* of you—in the solar as soon as possible. Regarding our relocation to London, of course," she added, giving Mathilde a reassuring smile.

She saw Tirgit's anxious expression, and beckoned her forward. "Child, it is good to meet again!" She stooped and gave her maid a swift kiss to her forehead. "Will you help me change my clothing?" Without another word, she turned and strode into the chateau.

* * * *

An hour later, clad in a fresh, dry gown, her hair brushed out and re-braided, Cecilia awaited the other djinni in the solar.

Tirgit had withdrawn, only too happy to escape the coming confrontation between her patron goddess, her foster-father, and her lover.

Fingers drumming on the stone windowsill, Cecilia studied the solar's clumsily-executed fresco of lords and ladies riding out on a hawking party. The proportions were all wrong, and the colors garish, without attention to shading or shadow. She reminisced longingly of a delicate wall-painting of deer grazing in an apple orchard that had decorated the walls of the djinni's suite in Ephesus eight hundred years ago, and sighed.

Why couldn't things remain the same?

The world was changing so quickly. Not like the old days, when the Apkallu had ruled the first cities, and had controlled the progress of their subjects by judicious distributions of gifts: fire, useful plants, the arts of making medicine and perfumes; the rule of law; the cultivation of grain; the brewing of beer and making of bread.

Since then, she had tended the souls of the Apkallu as carefully as Ninharsag had once tended her precious plants, pruning them, shaping them bit by bit so that they could live, content, in this new era. It was for the best. The days of the gods had long since passed, and she could not risk destruction of her world for the third time.

Found and lost, again and again, she had always safeguarded their memories, and Raised them up as

Protectors of the House, less than what they had once been, but more than they could have ever achieved on their own.

Yet they showed her little gratitude and less affection. In fact, they scorned her now: first Arjumand, who had refused either to consort with her or to allow her to Raise and Name him; then Dominic, who had broken the law of the djinni to take Michel against his will; and, finally, Michel, to whom she had shown every consideration, even removing the memory of his soul's violation by Dominic.

A knock on the solar door roused her from her simmering thoughts.

"Enter," she said, folding her hands and assuming a serene expression. Time to put the rebels in their places.

Michel entered first, his golden aura-wings tight against his body. His Raising and Naming mark still flickered, and she drew comfort from the fact that he was not as strong as he appeared.

Dominic and Mathilde followed close on his heels, and the skin on the back of Cecilia's neck tightened as she saw how Mathilde clutched his hand, and how all of their auras extended in unison, forming a cloak of tri-colored light that sheltered them. Were they so determined to conspire against her?

Arjumand, Robert, Michel, Mathilde, and Blanche. Why had so many of the Apkallu been reborn into this one family? Why had *she* been reborn here, the Forgotten One, tangling the fates of those who rightfully belonged to Cecilia?

But, first things first.

"Mathilde! It is good to meet again." Cecilia stepped forward and enveloped the newest Apkallu in an embrace. "I'm so very happy—and deeply relieved—that your Transformation succeeded."

Mathilde released a pent-up breath, and returned the embrace. "I was afraid you didn't want me here."

"Never!" said Cecilia. "You've been lost to us for so long. It was only the risk that concerned me. You were so ill!"

"Then I wonder why you did not try the healing method sooner," Michel interjected, coldly.

How dare he speak to me like that! Cecilia released Mathilde, and stared at her consort, temporarily speechless with rage. "Healing was never one of my *mes*," she managed to say, finally, referring to the sacred powers of their ancient godhood. With a single sentence, he had put her on the defensive. "But wisdom was one of yours, Brother Ea, and yet I find it sadly lacking in this incarnation!"

"What do you mean?" He refused to rise to her bait, which only fueled her anger.

"Not only did you break your word to me about not contacting your sister," Cecilia said, keeping her voice low with an effort, but unable to keep herself from pacing. "But what of you? You could have been exposed as well!" She turned to Dominic. "As for *you*—Menelaos would have *never—*"

She saw his expression darken as his old name left her lips, and hastily changed the course of her words. She wanted to cow him, not prod him into yet another act of defiance. "Common sense alone should have told you that Mathilde was

too visible a figure in this community to take such a risk! What if something had gone wrong? How would you have explained the death of your bride without drawing the wrong kind of attention to the House?"

"Sister Ereshkigal," Michel answered for both of them. "Your concerns were indeed valid ones, and we took them under due consideration before embarking on this course of action."

Under consideration! Cecilia's flare of rage must have reflected in her aura, because Michel, despite himself, took a half-step back.

"However," he continued, courtesy faltering. "You are mistaken if you believe that you have the right to issue orders to us, your brothers and sisters."

"What?" Cecilia all but choked at his insolence.

"You forget that I am Raised and Named, an Apkallu of the first rank." Michel's aura-wings flexed. They were not quite as large as hers, but big enough to pose a threat. "And as such, I am entitled to use my best judgment concerning the Lost. I did not make my decision lightly where Mathilde was concerned."

Cecilia gritted her teeth. "You know as well as I that a consumption of the lungs was an unacceptable risk."

He stared down at her, looking every inch the arrogant Preceptor of Templars. "Unacceptable to *you*, perhaps. I felt that the addition of another Apkallu to the ranks of the Protectors would benefit the House. Since my sister was very ill, her death would not have raised as many uncomfortable questions as you feared."

Mathilde's watchful expression reminded Cecilia of a magistrate arbitrating a dispute between two merchants.

It would not do to cede her authority, but neither could she afford to alienate her newest Apkallu. Cecilia debated possibilities fiercely, then adopted a conciliatory tone. "Please believe that I gave my instructions because I had everyone's best interests at heart."

"Understood," Michel said curtly. He added more gently, "We did not deliberately set out to endanger the House."

Cecilia kept her expression demure, accepting his words as an apology of sorts. Ea had once been the eldest and most powerful of their family. *Once, but no longer.* She wondered how long it would take him to realize this. She missed Honoria's much more reasonable female sensibility.

"You see, I was the one who discovered Michel's secret," Mathilde said, shyly. "Something had been troubling me about his disappearance, so I rode out to the chateau in your absence, and discovered the truth."

"But you were so ill when I left." Cecilia did not try to conceal her surprise. Truth be told, she had not expected Mathilde to recover, much less mount her horse and leave the city!

"I am whole again," Mathilde said, her hand slipping into Dominic's. "Able to see things more clearly than before, though I do not understand everything."

What did she mean by that? Why was her gaze still assessing, rather than the loving, trusting expression Cecilia was accustomed to seeing? The answer came clear as her gaze fell on their intertwined fingers. Mathilde must have

seen more than she expected in Dominic's blood. Yet she did not seem to fear him, nor did she seem disgusted.

Cecilia cast her mind back to her recent journey down the Silk Road, and wondered how much Mathilde knew. She would need to speak to her privately, later.

"We received a letter from Sharibet yesterday." Dominic said. "She writes that Dumuzi has been Found and Transformed, though not without difficulties."

"Dumuzi! He has been Lost to us for generations! This is wonderful news, indeed!" And perhaps it was. Dumuzi had always been one of the weaker Apkallu, and he had been estranged from Inanna even before she committed her crimes. He might make a valuable ally, if he survived his probation period.

Then something Dominic had said registered. "What sort of difficulties?" she asked, warily.

"He's a Mongol warrior," Michel answered. "He was part of the army that attacked Sidon in August."

A Mongol? Interesting. Cecilia folded her hands primly in her lap. "It will be good to meet again at the next Appointing," she said. "And good for the assembled members of the House to see the Apkallu regain their numbers."

Seeing the slow nods of agreement, she decided to switch topics. "Now, for immediate matters—it is imperative that we relocate to London as soon as possible. The Templars are closing in, I fear. I saw them in Bruges, clustered around the docks like flies at a fishmonger's stall."

Dominic pursed his lips. "Michel will need a disguise. If he darkens his hair, and adds twenty or thirty years to his face

with cosmetics, that should fool anyone looking for a golden-haired man of middle years with a bad limp."

"Why not a minor Transformation?" Michel asked. "I think I remember how to do that. A new face would serve me well in London, with so many Templars there."

Cecilia concealed a smirk. Sharibet still knew how to regenerate teeth, but the only art of the flesh that remained was that of Transformation. She wondered how soon it would be before she remained the only djinniah who could perform that ritual as well as the Raising and Naming of Apkallu. *Perhaps it would be for the best if I removed that power from the next generation of djinni ...* For now, she would leave it to Michel to discover his own limitations. Perhaps it might humble him, and make him more amenable to her advice.

"The sooner we depart, the better," Cecilia said.

"I suspect that Josef and Fausta will be relieved, as well," Dominic interjected. "They are a bit overawed at having so many djinni in the newest and smallest House of the Rose."

"You mean the London House is larger than the one here?" Mathilde asked, looking interested.

"Quite a bit larger," answered Cecilia. "You'll find the djinni's apartments large and well-appointed, and the family better-integrated into the fabric of the city."

"They've been there for over four hundred years," Dominic added.

"When do we leave?" Mathilde asked, eagerly.

Cecilia saw the lure of a new beginning take hold of them. Despite their defiance, they still needed her. "The *Rose of Harwich* is docked and awaiting us in Bruges. Did you receive

the documents containing the details of your new identity as Michel de Murat, a knight of Auvergne?" The thick packet should have contained details of his supposed noble lineage, a table of his purported relations, the lords to whom he now owed fealty, and a host of other necessary pieces of information.

"Aurelio de la Rose sent them last month."

She opened the blood-bond between them, and felt his conflicted emotions. Relief that he would be making a fresh start in London, regret for the name and family he would be leaving behind, and acceptance of the necessity to begin anew after the series of near-disasters here in Ypres. Most reassuring of all: he wanted to be a Protector, and yearned for the chance to walk the streets freely to use his skills to benefit the House.

He was also simmering in anger against her, as if he had a right to defiance. She would have to teach him proper respect for her wisdom. And if he would not learn ... the Underworld awaited.

* * * *

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed in discourse about the move to London, and the situation at the English Court. Behind his tightly-closed mental shields, Michel fumed at Cecilia's high-handedness.

He sensed that his consort was also displeased at how their conversation had gone. Honoria's memories showed him similar incidents in the past that had ended with other djinni humbly acknowledging their faults and apologizing for not

obeying her directives. Well, he was not a woman in this lifetime, to be guided by his betters. He was a man of nearly thirty years, who had held great responsibility over other men. Even if his former life was lost to him forever, he refused to humble himself unnecessarily.

By mutual consent, shortly after sunset, Dominic and Mathilde departed to the guestrooms on the far end of the great hall, above the buttery and pantry. Michel suspected that Tirgit had fled to the refuge of the room they shared when he was not with Cecilia.

He followed Cecilia to her solar and waited until she closed the door. "Do not," he said, as calmly as he could under the circumstances, "ever again presume to chastise me like a servant or a child."

She was as ready for battle as he was. "Then do not play the part of a feckless youth, Michel. I will continue to decide what is best for the House and the djinni."

"What is best for us?" he asked, in disbelief. "How, by God, was forcing Dominic to kill for your pleasure best for him?"

The images in Dominic's blood had haunted him since Mathilde's Transformation. He himself had fallen far from his life of Templar virtue. Even now he had two women waiting for him in separate chambers. How much further would he permit himself to be degraded? He had failed the greatest test of inner rectitude once already. And seeing Cecilia in the candlelight, her sandalwood perfume filling his senses, he wanted to rut with her, even though he knew what ruthlessness and selfishness her sweet face concealed.

Rather than exploding in rage, as he expected, she seemed to shrink a little, the tightness in her face slipping into sadness. "Did you know that Sharibet and I tried everything short of using death-energy to cure him? And that nothing worked?"

"I saw it in his blood," Michel admitted. And hadn't Mathilde told him the same thing?

"It was our last resort," Cecilia continued. "Sharibet was too squeamish and too worried about the consequences to try it. That's why I took him on our journey through Mongol-held lands, so that he might find the cure he needed without bringing the wrath of the authorities down upon the House." She sighed. "I admit to joining with him after he killed, but it is the only time he can experience the way of djinni without intolerable pain. Why shouldn't we both experience surcease? But I swear it was done primarily to heal him. We did nothing to harm the House, and I marked the souls of the slaves we killed so that, if we find them again, we can offer them some recompense."

Michel wanted to hold on to his righteous indignation. He didn't want to believe her claim, but his fragmented memories recognized the truth in her words.

The room filled with soft silver glow, as if the moon had come indoors, as she stepped close and embraced him with her arms and aura. "Ah, Michel, I understand how difficult this must be for you," she said, putting a hand to his cheek, her voice soft. "You were Transformed late in life, and cruelly Raised and Named." She shook her head before gazing up at him earnestly. "But if you want to survive your probation, and

prosper as a Protector, you must reconcile yourself. You cannot continue pretending that you are still Brother Michel, an ordinary monk."

Did he still want to be discontented Brother Michel? "I feel like I've lost my honor," he said, haltingly. "That everything I once believed about myself has been proven false."

"Do you believe that the djinni have no honor?" She tilted her head, studying him. "What of the oaths we swear at our Appointments? Or the promises we make when we dwell in the houses of the kin? Can you accept a new kind of honor to replace these barbarian codes you were raised with?"

He wanted to protest that she slighted him. He had not been raised a barbarian. *Yes, you were,* Honoria whispered to him. His protests withered, unspoken.

"It seems I must," he replied. With a few cutting truths, Cecilia had overturned him.

"I'm glad," she said, and pressed her body close.

It seemed their conversation was at an end. He swept her up, and deposited her on the bed, pinning her wrists as he kissed her roughly, the way she liked.

As he yanked her gown up over her hips, he felt a brief pang of regret for the gentleness he shared with Tirgit. This joining was more like two leopards mating than a tender act of love. But Cecilia was urging him on, her strength equal to his, and the passion of blood and hot flesh between them flared like oil cast on a bonfire, immolating his senses.

It was only afterwards, after the rush of sensation had faded and he lay by Cecilia's side in the great bed, that he

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by Michaela August

realized he felt more lost than ever. There was nothing to stop him going to Tirgit now, to revel in her loving embrace. Nothing but his own shame.

Chapter Eleven

Thou shalt not see the brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt in any case bring them again unto thy brother. And if thy brother [be] not nigh unto thee, or if thou know him not, then thou shalt bring it unto thine own house, and it shall be with thee until thy brother seek after it, and thou shalt restore it to him again. In like manner shalt thou do with his ass; and so shalt thou do with his raiment; and with all lost things of thy brother's, which he hath lost, and thou hast found, shalt thou do likewise: thou mayest not hide thyself. —*Deuteronomy* 22:1-3

Thursday, September 9, AD 1260

Chateau du Chancy

With the ease and efficiency born of centuries of experience, they were packed and ready to bid Ypres farewell before the week ended. The Flemish servants had been dismissed, any memories of Michel neatly suppressed by a geas, and only Raised and Named members of the House remained to perform the last few tasks.

Tirgit would be accompanying the four Apkallu djinni to London, as would three of the young men Cecilia had brought with her from London.

On the day before their departure, Michel sat down at one of the trestle tables in the deserted Great Hall to complete his final task. To this end, he had borrowed Cecilia's mirror, and propped it up on its stand on the table.

He tried to fix an image in his mind of the changes he wanted to make. Darken his hair, yes. Perhaps change his long, straight nose to an aquiline curve. Thin out his lips, and make his eyes hazel rather than blue. That should suffice...

Michel did his best to summon the wayward knowledge garnered in his past lives, elbows propped on the smooth boards of the tabletop. First, Honoria, since her memories were the strongest and most accessible to him. How had she ... ?

No, she had never done it. *Odd.*

Perhaps Lady Tahat could help? It was harder to summon those memories. They were a jumble of images and impressions that made his head ache. Faces, without names to put to them. *The smell of blood and the rise and fall of a ship's deck beneath her feet. Shouting, and a burning pain in her side...*

No. He needed to look back further. ... *a cool, dark room that stinks of infection; laying his hands upon a man's muscled leg, pushing together the weeping, angry-red edges of a deep gash, fevered skin scorching his palms ... a woman's burned face held lightly between his fingertips, his aura covering her blackened, blistered skin like a mask woven of sunbeams ...* But the jumble grew worse the more he concentrated, a pulsing pain behind his forehead stronger with every throb, his memories scattering like a school of shining fish eluding a grasping hand.

Michel rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingertips, and gave up. By almost imperceptible degrees, the headache began to subside.

Well, he had remembered how to perform Mathilde's Transformation, hadn't he? Yes. Of course! Even if he couldn't remember exactly how Lady Tahat or Lord Ea had worked their healing, he could improvise with what he knew.

Angling the mirror, he opened his Seer's eyes, and superimposed the patterned fabric of a djinn's being that had guided his actions in the Transformation. He knew exactly what adjustments to make to change human flesh into that of djinn. But what would he have to add or subtract to the existing pattern to change hair and eye color, and the shape of his face?

Tentatively, he reached out with his powers, visualizing his aura as a set of shears, and poised to snip free a particular section.

Just before the scissors touched, he hesitated. *Something feels wrong.* He studied the pattern he wanted to change. *Is this really the right one?* What if he ended up permanently altering some part of himself that he wished to keep?

Michel crossed his legs reflexively as lurid possibilities raced through his mind, and the throbbing pain in his head started up again.

He pushed the mirror away in exasperation, and let his head come to rest on his forearms. *I wish I could remember. Damn Dominic and his clumsiness, anyway!*

He sensed the cool presence of Cecilia's immense aura before he smelled her sandalwood perfume. She put something heavy on the table with a small thump, and sank down next to him on the bench.

He gave a muffled groan, and she responded by massaging the back of his neck with her strong, slender fingers. The headache receded.

"Here. Tirgit brewed some hair-dye for you. Sponge it on your head, then comb it through." Cecilia's massage stilled, then resumed again as a caress. "I can help you with the glamour, if Dominic hasn't already refreshed your memories of how to do it."

"Walnut dye and a glamour?" Michel raised his head from the table. He caught a glimpse of his unchanged visage and turned away from the mirror. "Is that the best that the Apkallu can do now? I remember creating demons from the rats in the granaries. Griffins. Centaurs. Sphinxes. I remember—" But he didn't remember, not really. Just flashes: an image, a snatch of dialogue, and the feeling that the powers that once came naturally to him had been locked away.

"With each passage through the Underworld, our powers grow weaker, even as our auras continue to grow," Cecilia said, sympathetically. "I know not why, but as The Undying, I have been spared."

"Then Transform me," Michel suggested. "Just a few changes." Through their blood bond, he sent her an image of the dark-haired, hazel-eyed man he had envisaged.

She shook her head, regretfully. "That was never one of my *mes*," she said. "Remember? I guide the dead to the Underworld and back. Raising and Naming was my *me*, as was the song of shaping the earth, until Inanna, may she be Forgotten, stole it from me."

"I remember," said Michel, regret filling his mouth like salt and ashes. "A little. Not enough."

"Perhaps, in time." Cecilia removed the lid from the dye-pot and handed him a sponge.

He accepted it, the tannic reek from the dark liquid sloshing inside the container as bitter as his disappointment. *What else have I lost?*

* * * *

The disguise worked, and the four Apkallu boarded the *Rose of Harwich* without incident the following day.

Michel stood with Mathilde at the ship's rail as it glided out of Bruges harbor. Michel guessed the flavor of his sister's thoughts as she pensively watched the red brick buildings and church spires shrink steadily in the distance. They probably echoed his own at the prospect of leaving his homeland yet again. He had been so pleased when the Templars sent him to Ypres after long years spent abroad. He had nearly wept with joy when he swallowed his first draught of good Flemish ale again. But when his sister spoke, she surprised him.

"Did you know that this will be the farthest I've ever traveled from home?"

He blinked as she smiled. "I used to envy you whenever we received one of your letters, you know. Egypt, the Holy Land, Italy. It sounded so exciting. I never told anyone, but I felt trapped sometimes."

"Is it all right with you?" he asked awkwardly. "Becoming a djinniah, and being Dominic's consort..." He let his voice trail off, afraid of offending her. And yet, he had noticed the

strained atmosphere between Mathilde and her husband since she awoke from her Transformation. It would serve Dominic right if he was disappointed with his marriage, but Michel couldn't bear to see his sister unhappy.

She sighed, and leaned into his side, though her gaze didn't leave the rapidly-receding shore. "I wish I could *do* something for him. You've seen his aura ... I tried to heal him by giving him my strength, just as you did for me before my Transformation." She stopped, biting her lower lip.

Michel could guess what had happened next, based on some of the things he had seen in Dominic's blood. "And?"

"I couldn't stand his agony long enough to tell whether my efforts made a difference or not. Now I can't bear to sleep in the same bed. I'm afraid I'll hurt him again."

"So, only killing seems to help him?" Michel asked. He did not really want to talk about Dominic, but he could deny neither Honoria's curiosity nor Mathilde's distress.

"I'm afraid, Michou," Mathilde said. "There *has* to be another answer, but if I fail him, he may be forced to become a murderer again, or remain wounded forever."

"Maybe he enjoys being a murderer!" Michel hadn't meant to say that, but it was too late to recall his words.

His sister rounded on him. "How can you say that? How can you *think* that? You know him better than I!"

Honoria answered for Michel. "I don't know him any more. Look what he did to *me*."

"I wonder," Mathilde said, the fury leaching from her tone. She slapped the railing. "I wish I were Raised and Named *now*, so I could remember how to cure him. And you."

"I'm sure you'll succeed," Michel assured her, though his doubts ran deep. What would she do when she remembered everything, and realized that there were so many powers she could no longer call on?

How would she react when she discovered that that Ea and Ninharsag had once been lovers? Michel knew that it hadn't *technically* been incest—the bodies they wore at that time had not been kin—but his fragmentary memories made him profoundly uncomfortable, and he tried his best to avoid them.

"I didn't mean to make you worry, Michou," Mathilde said, her tone falsely cheerful now. It was clear that she no longer wished to discuss Dominic, and Michel was more than happy to oblige her. "I feel better than I have in years, and you cannot imagine how I look forward to doing something *important*, instead of frittering away my life with worries over cargo manifests and petty quarrels between my apprentices."

Michel shook his head. "Just because Dominic and I have promised to teach you swordplay doesn't mean you'll be free of manifests and apprentices, 'Tilde! This *is* a merchant family, after all."

* * * *

Friday, September 17th, AD 1260

London, England

Long before the curves of the Thames brought their ship within sight of city, Michel saw the morning skies bruised with the smoke from thousands of forges, baker's ovens, and kitchen hearths. As they approached London, the open fields

became scattered inns and cottages, which soon thickened into close-packed buildings that crowded the river on both sides. Dozens of ships lay at anchor along the wooden docks, and smaller vessels manned by foul-mouthed watermen paddled in-between the larger traffic like loudly-cursing ducks.

It was Tirgit's first visit to London, and she leaned over the rail, fascinated. "There are so many churches!"

"More than I remember," Michel replied, putting his arm around her. Menelaos and Honoria had served as Protectors here three hundred years ago, when the Saxon kings still ruled. He relaxed into her soft warmth, regretting the lack of privacy in the past three days. Worse yet, he had been forced into close proximity with Dominic. Just seeing him touch Mathilde was enough to set Michel's teeth on edge, despite what Mathilde had told him.

He wasn't jealous, was he? He couldn't be! *Liar*, whispered Honoria.

He felt an overwhelming sadness whenever he allowed her memories to surface and show what Menelaos had been like, before. But no matter how often he told himself that Dominic was not Menelaos, that the djinn Honoria had loved was dead, some part of him refused to believe it.

Michel hugged Tirgit closer, and saw the flash of her mischievous white grin as she leaned against him, pressing the curve of her breast into his side. Perhaps tonight, if the House of the Rose in London granted them a private chamber...

She wiggled to get some breathing room and said, "It's not quite as grand as Alexandria, though, is it? Or Constantinople, before the Crusaders sacked it."

Perhaps because Tirgit's question was so artless, the past-life memories came effortlessly. Michel saw the former town underlying the present city.

London, though grown impressively large, was still built mostly of wood and thatch. It pressed up against the riverbank in a disorganized mass of peaked roofs and chimneys, barely contained by the Roman defensive walls. The giant cruciform of St. Paul's cathedral loomed over the city's center like a fortress.

Speaking of fortresses, two large new keeps rose along the riverside. Gerald de la Rose, the ship's captain, helpfully identified them as the Tower of London and, farther up the river, the crenellated walls of Baynard's Castle, both built by the Normans after their conquest two hundred years ago. "The current king likes to build towers, too." Gerald chuckled. "Might have something to do with the unpopularity of his taxes."

Michel raised his brows. "Did the war in Wales go that badly, then?"

"It was certainly short on plunder," Dominic commented, dryly, coming up next to them. "Master Geoffrey told Cecilia he wants us to petition to the King for tax relief."

At the sight of the other djinn, Tirgit's smile broke out like the sun emerging from behind clouds, and she pulled away from Michel to give Dominic an enthusiastic greeting. The wind flattened her gown against the front of her body,

revealing the slight curve of her pregnancy, and Michel's flare of resentment faded. Dominic might be like a father to Tirgit, but Michel was the father of her child.

Dominic's lip lifted in a mocking smile. "You'll finally have a chance to put your Templar diplomacy to use at Court."

"I look forward to serving the House however I can," Michel said in a neutral tone. He turned away to shut out Dominic's troublesome presence by studying the city unfolding itself along the bank of the Thames. But what caught his eye was a large stone bridge across the river. Below the houses that crowded its span, a dozen or more narrow arches divided the frothing torrent of the Thames. "That's new," he said, pointing it out to Tirgit. "I heard it was built during King John's reign."

Tirgit studied the structure. "Will our ship fit under that?"

Michel shrugged, wondering the same thing.

Dominic winced, and said, "We won't go that far. The House is just ahead, before the bridge." Unspoken was his apologetic statement, *As Honoria would have known*.

Gerald de la Rose was a skilled captain, and soon the *Rose of Harwich* pulled alongside a stone quay with green-slimed steps descending into the water. A crowd of people, dark-haired and amber-eyed like most of Sharibet's descendants, but generally taller, with much paler skin, streamed out of the large building directly behind the quay, smiling and waving and exchanging shouted greetings with the ship's crew.

A respectful silence fell as the djinni disembarked. Cecilia went first, Michel at her side, closely followed by Dominic and Mathilde.

Geoffrey de la Rose, in the lead, bowed deeply and said, "Lords and ladies, it is good to meet again!" He had dressed in his finest clothing to greet the djinni, his rank signified by a weighty gold chain wrought in the shape of a climbing rose-vine that lay draped over his collar.

Michel, followed by Dominic and Mathilde a half-beat later, returned the bow. Cecilia merely inclined her head, but favored the Master of House with one of her smiles.

"It has been many years since I was in London," Dominic said, looking approvingly at the three-story brick building that abutted the quay.

Cecilia brought forward a relatively tall, olive-skinned woman whose wimple was pinned with a large gold-and-emerald brooch. "Joan de la Rose, may I present to you Sir Michael de Murat, whose True Name is Ea." As Joan dipped down into a curtsy, Cecilia said, "Joan is wife to Geoffrey, and the Mistress of the House."

Michel cleared his throat. "It is good to meet again. I served as Protector here in the reign of the first King Edward. This House was much smaller, and had a thatched roof?" He hated his uncertainty, the sense of being flawed where he had once been capable.

Joan smiled broadly, ignoring his hesitation. "You'll find many other changes as well. All for the better, I hope!"

Mathilde was introduced, and was warmly welcomed by the kin. But when Cecilia introduced Dominic, the family's smiles disappeared. They were respectful, but no longer bursting with excitement at having such distinguished guests.

Geoffrey recovered some of his spirit. He beckoned. "Come, come, let me show you the House of the Rose in London."

As the djinni followed him into their new home, Michel checked to ensure the crew was beginning to unload the ship, and carrying the sackcloth-wrapped Damascus rose bushes in their arms. These bushes, painstakingly shipped from the lands across the Mediterranean, would form the basis of a new rose farm in Kent.

The long, arched façade facing the river was frontage for a large warehouse. Heavy doors made of thick oak planks bound with iron stood open in welcome, and from inside issued the clean fragrance of distilled lavender essence, cutting through the cloying scent of roses like a sword through silk draperies. On the other side of the warehouse crowded with boxes, bales, and hundreds of small clay jars, they emerged into a large courtyard surrounded by a three-storied house. The old timber-and-plaster dwelling with its single great chamber, where Honoria and Menelaos had lived during their sojourn as Protectors here, now formed the right side of the courtyard. Directly ahead of them, a deep, arched gateway led to the street.

"...the entire bottom story of the street frontage is leased out as shops," Geoffrey was saying, proudly. "Brings in eight pounds a year, it does."

He was speaking an odd dialect with such a thick accent that Michel was hard-pressed to understand him. Honoria had lived here for many years, but the patois these days was an almost-unintelligible mixture of Norman French and English.

Geoffrey continued the tour. The ground floor of the House was given over to stillrooms, counting rooms, and, of course, the warehouse. Michel noticed water-marks on the walls, and concluded that the Thames had flooded once or twice in recent memory. New, luxuriously private bedchambers and parlors had been added to other wings, along with fireplaces to replace the old open hearths. The third story, under the roof, served the apprenticed maids and stable lads.

As the shadows began to lengthen, Michel and the other Apkallu joined the kin for supper in the familiar space of the old great hall. They were served goblets of spiced blood in the great hall as they listened while Geoffrey and his wife briefed them on the current situation at Court.

"The most troublesome occurrence," said Geoffrey, "is that we've received no word from my son and his ship. Lady Cecilia has been trying to persuade the King to pressure the Hansa merchants on our behalf, but she has had little success."

"Such matters take time," Cecilia said, quickly. "And I have not been able to obtain a private audience with Henry, only the queen." She sneered. "He is steadfastly faithful to Eleanor."

"Understood." Geoffrey's brow furrowed. "But each day that passes ... we don't know where our kin are being held. Are they captive in a foul prison? Having to pay outrageous lodging fees at some flea-ridden inn? Have the Hansa sold them to the Turks as slaves? Where's our cargo?"

"Why not petition the King directly?" Michel asked, to calm both Cecilia and Geoffrey.

"We could, but King Henry will charge us dearly," Geoffrey replied, wiping his face as if that would cool his angry flush. "We hoped that Lady Cecilia's friendship with Queen Eleanor would turn the matter to our favor, but all of her efforts—*diligent* efforts!" he added hastily, "seem to have gained us little."

Cecilia's lips thinned, but she said nothing.

So Geoffrey has to ask you for help, Honoria whispered. *I wouldn't like it either, if I were Cecilia.*

Dominic, smiling unpleasantly, seemed to have come to the same conclusion. He said, "Shall I go, and *convince* the king to come to better terms with the House? Or do you wish me to go impress upon the Hansa that our ships and our people are not to be meddled with?"

"I'd like to go to the Hansa," said Michel eagerly, itching to return to combat.

"In my opinion, the House would be better-served if Sir Michael went to court with me, and Lord Dominic went abroad to avenge the insult against the House," announced Cecilia. To Michel's displeasure, she added,—The Templars are still looking for you among the Hansa, Michel. I would rather not expose you unnecessarily.—

Disappointed but acknowledging Cecilia's reason, Michel subsided with all the grace he could muster in the face of Geoffrey and Joan's keen glances.

"Er, I've heard that the king is inclined to favor foreign knights these days, Lady Cecilia," ventured Joan.

Cecilia bent a fond glance upon Michel. "I will obtain an audience, where our clever Ea can employ his silver tongue to

the House's advantage."—I'll come with you, and introduce you to the important officials and nobles.—

She's keeping me on a tight leash. It had not escaped Michel's notice that they had been assigned to the same suite of rooms, and that Tirgit had been firmly escorted elsewhere upon disembarking.

As the mother of a djinn's child, Tirgit was second in status only to Joan, but she was a mortal. And Cecilia was officially Michel's consort.

"Can you provide me with clothing suitable for Court?" Michel asked, temporarily resigned to trotting at Cecilia's heels like an obedient hound.

Chapter Twelve

To my right worshipful and heartily well-beloved mother Mathilde le Pelletier, dwelling in Ypres.

Right worshipful Maman:

I recommend me to you, beseeching you of your daily blessing. Please it you to know that I have not heard from you for a long time, which causes me to be right heavy at heart; not since the last time that I sent to you in writing have I heard from you, neither in writing nor by messenger.

I send you my best wishes on the occasion of receiving notice of your marriage to the honorable Dominic of Venice and I beseech God's blessing upon you both for a long and prosperous union.

Though I want to hold your happiness in my heart, I have the most doleful news to relate. My dear husband's youngest brother, Pierrot, has this week forsaken this mortal existence, God have and keep his soul. I tried so hard to help him and yet he departed from this earthly life. He coughed and coughed in my arms, and could not take breath.

I weep even now. In the short time I knew him, I came to love him as if he were my own brother. Madame says I must not weep, nor love too strongly, for it is God's will and we must submit ourselves, trusting and beseeching in His great mercy. She has now lost four children besides the four who yet live! Is this truly the fate that God intends for us, to teach us humility and to pray for his mercy? I fear that I shall not be able to face such heavy prospects for mine own marriage,

and I beseech you to pray for me and to implore the tender mercies of the Holy Virgin Mother.

My husband does well, and is pleased that I have begun my monthly courses. We will consummate our marriage soon and hope for a babe of our own next year.

I send you my heartiest affections and filial respect, and pray heartily for your happiness and for your well-being and that of your husband.

Send me word, I beseech you most humbly! God have you in his keeping.

Written by my own hand at Bressoux on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, your dutiful daughter Blanche post scriptum Maman, why does no one know what sickness is? If I knew, we would not be left to God's mercy. Why did Pierrot have to die? If I were God, I would have arranged this life very much differently. I desire to know how our bodies work, and how to reverse sickness. But I am told it is not fitting to teach a woman the arts of physic, so I suppose I must discover it for myself.

post post scriptum: Madame is mostly prostrate this day, and so I am sending you this letter via a traveling merchant of the House of the Rose who has kindly offered to carry my letter to you, and also bears some items of trade which you might like. Please entertain him for my sake, and for the sake of the love I bear you.

post post post scriptum: Have you received any word at all about my right worshipful Uncle Michel? I have heard the most dreadful rumors and keep him in my prayers.

Feast of St. Michael, Wednesday, September 29, AD 1260

London

I can't afford to fail in this assignment. But without all of my memories, how can I succeed?

Fretting, Michel sat next to Cecilia on one of the padded benches in the House's ornately-decorated barge as it rowed smoothly upriver to the king's palace at Westminster. Two of the young people of the House accompanied them, acting as attendants to bear the gifts and formal petitions for presentation to King Henry.

He found himself glad they had taken to the water rather than fighting through the city, having spent many hours blindly following Geoffrey de la Rose as they navigated a maze of narrow streets overhung with half-timbered houses. Except for the pigs and dogs that roamed everywhere, the close confines had reminded Michel of al-Mansurah, making him uneasy, half expecting another ambush, as he and Geoffrey jostled through the crowded lanes toward the Perfumer's Hall, dodging traffic and pickpockets.

From the comparative refuge of the river, crowded with other watercraft, Michel could hear the sing-song din of competing vendors hawking their wares from every street corner. Compared to this hustle-bustle, Ypres seemed a small, sleepy town. Leaving the walls of the City behind, the barge glided past the round church and sleek stone buildings of the London Temple. Michel instinctively hunched his shoulders, as if the Templars might spot him and raise a cry for his arrest.

Cecilia gave one of her maddening looks of pity, and slipped her be-ringed hand over his. "Do you want me to present the petition, then?"

He straightened, face heating, as her words found their target. "No. Sir Michel de Murat has nothing to fear from the Templars." *But he has much to prove as Protector.*

"Very well." Her condescending tone raised his hackles.— Even though you are no longer wearing a glamour, there's not much chance you will be recognized.—

"Now, let us speak of how to approach the king," she said aloud, quickly changing the subject. "Queen Eleanor has been busy on her husband's behalf this past summer. While he seeks Pope Alexander's aid to invalidate the oaths that my lord de Montfort compelled him to swear two years ago, she has been busily sending gifts of robes and jewels to those knights in northern France and Flanders who might help them against de Montfort."

"Does she believe you can help her cultivate the loyalty of these knights?"

"Perhaps," Cecilia said, with an enigmatic smile. "But whatever happens, it will certainly mean civil war if Henry reneges on the Provisions of Oxford, and tries to reclaim his sovereign authority from the barons." She paused as they passed another barge, this one laden with slabs of colored marble, no doubt destined for the renovations taking place at Westminster Abbey. "How do you intend to present our petition to the king?"

"I wasn't planning on striding into the audience chamber and immediately bending him to my god-like will," he said,

dryly. "I want to offer him ten percent of the ship's cargo in gratitude for helping us punish the Hanseatic League."

"Too much," Cecilia said, immediately. "Geoffrey will never agree to sacrifice that much profit."

"He's already agreed. Because without the king's aid, he may see no profit at all," Michel pointed out.

Cecilia's lips thinned.—I see you've been busy preparing.—

Michel shrugged. What did she expect? Without his past-life memories to guide him reliably, of course he had tried to learn everything he could! Then again, how would she know what he did? They had scarcely seen each other since arriving in London. She spent her days in the company of Queen Eleanor, while Geoffrey escorted Michel around London, introducing him to the allies and rivals of the House. They only saw each other at bed-time, when they were diverted by sports more interesting than conversation.

He twitched his shoulders under the thin linen of his undershirt. Like a tigress, Cecilia had scored his back with her claws. The subtle itch of his newly-healed skin was a reminder of how eagerly she devoured him.

"I doubt we'll have to use anything but ordinary persuasion," Michel continued. "Geoffrey told me that King Henry has been rebuilding nearly every church in the kingdom in addition to trying to pay for his wars. He's deep in debt and desperate for money."

Cecilia looked as if she wanted to argue with him, then, to his surprise, she shrugged. "Very well. Do your best. I will only intervene if necessary."

"Thank you, lady," Michel said, striving to keep sarcasm from his tone. He closed his fingers around hers, feeling her pleasure at the gesture through his link with her. "I've also spoken Geoffrey about our living arrangements. We can't continue to live in the household of a common merchant if we want to present ourselves as nobles at Court."

Not to mention that being under Geoffrey's roof also meant having to live in close proximity to Dominic. Michel wanted to be well away before the other djinn returned from his mission to the Hansa in Stralsund.

"I suspect that our connection to an extremely wealthy merchant house is the primary reason we were granted this audience. What did you have in mind?" asked Cecilia.

"A house in Westminster. Joan knows of a suitable property on Endive Street, close to the palace, and the House is willing to provide us with a staff of Raised and Named servants in return for a presence at Court."

Tirgit would not be one of those servants, unfortunately. Joan had insisted the girl stay at the House, where the mother of a djinn's child could receive proper honor. Michel had agreed, wanting to shield her as much as possible from the opprobrium that the outside world would heap on a woman pregnant and unwed.

Cecilia looked askance. "A house near the palace, on such short notice?"

"The current tenant, Sir Roger Leybourne, is about to depart to the continent with Prince Edward and the rest of his entourage." Michel said, irritated. Why couldn't she simply

accept that he had arranged matters satisfactorily? "They're planning to participate in a series of tournaments."

"Very well," Cecilia said, having found no reason to object to his plans. This time.

Michel heaved a silent sigh of relief. He suspected that having convinced Cecilia, the king would prove a lesser challenge.

She's much more amenable to your suggestions than she ever was to mine, Honoria said, enviously. *I suppose having a prick again is serving you well.*

Don't you mean "us?" Michel asked, keenly aware of his precarious state of mind. If Honoria were truly part of him, why was he having a conversation with her?

A derisive laugh was all the reply she made to that question, allowing Michel to concentrate on the interview that lay ahead.

* * * *

One of the king's pages met them as they entered Westminster Palace's Great Hall, and bade them follow. The vast space was dim despite enormous arched windows at either end, and clerestory windows along its length.

Michel's attendants, young James and Beatrix de la Rose, were both gawking at all the huge embroidered hangings and the richly-dressed groups of nobles as they walked the seemingly-endless hall. Michel had to restrain himself from imitating their gaping. It was the largest secular building he had ever been in, and this was merely one part of the royal palace.

Only Cecilia seemed unimpressed, probably because she had already visited the palace numerous times.

Michel expected the king to receive them in the hall, seated under his cloth of estate, as was customary for a monarch hearing petitions. Instead, the page led them past the throne and up the wide stone staircase by the window. At the top they were admitted directly into a brightly-painted antechamber to the king's chamber, where garish Old Testament prophets and seraphs cavorted between sections of gilded plaster. Even the ceiling was painted and decorated with multicolored bosses.

The page led them through open double doors into a chamber dominated by a canopied state bed, its thick scarlet curtains pulled back to reveal a lavish fresco of the coronation of St Edward the Confessor looming over the headboard. Here, the page announced their arrival, and left them, shutting the doors.

Michel realized with some alarm that aside from himself, Cecilia, and their two attendants, there were only four other people in the room, three of them seated under cloths of estate.

—What is happening?—Michel asked Cecilia as he bowed deeply to the three seated people.—Why are we being granted a private audience?—

She sent back a mental shrug as she sank gracefully into a curtsey.—Wait and see.—

As he straightened up, he had a chance to look at their hosts.

A young, tonsured man in the white habit and black mantle of a Dominican friar stood near the back of the chamber, holding a wax tablet and stylus.

Seated in the central, and largest, of the three canopied chairs was an otherwise unremarkable middle-aged man of average height, with a balding fringe of curls and a neatly trimmed, graying blond beard. He could have been any Englishman, except for one drooping eyelid and the gold diadem on his head. This was King Henry, then.

On his left, Queen Eleanor was a beautiful woman in her late thirties, wearing a modest wimple covering her hair, and a deep blue gown trimmed with ermine and pearls. Even seated, it was apparent that she was much taller than her husband. Her gaze, as it met Michel's, was keen and intelligent under fair brows.

On the king's right was a muscular young man of perhaps twenty years, with silvery blond hair and his mother's height and regular features, save for one of his eyelids, which drooped like the king's. He was scowling and his aura pulsed a dark, angry red. This must be the heir to the throne, Prince Edward.

Michel's mind worked furiously as they exchanged courteous phrases and presented gifts to Henry and Eleanor. Why would a foreign knight on his first visit to Court merit a private audience? Had Cecilia gained more influence during her previous stay in London than she had related to him?

As smoothly as if they had been meeting with kings for centuries (and perhaps they had, in their previous lives), James stepped forward and presented a robe embroidered

with gold thread and pearls, lined with miniver for the king. For her part, Beatrix gave the Queen a carved box containing a gold ring set with polished rubies in the shape of the House's rosette.

—I wager they'll send these items immediately on to those French knights that the queen is cultivating,—Cecilia broke into Michel's musings.

—No doubt.—

Young James made his final bows and retreated, leaving the robe behind in the possession of the clerk. Courtesies dispensed with, the king leaned forward, chin propped on his knuckles. "You wished to present me with a petition for redress of wrongs?"

"Yes, sire." Michel stretched out his hand, and James placed the roll of parchment containing Geoffrey de la Rose's petition in it.

With another deep bow, Michel began his appeal. "I am the patron and protector of the House of the Rose, good English merchants who have lived here in London for generations. They humbly request your aid to secure the safety of their ship, the *Rose of Yarmouth*, and her crew, Englishmen all, from the arrogant Hansa, who have unlawfully seized the vessel and her cargo in the port of Stralsund."

"What would you have me do?" the king asked, as the clerk stepped forward and accepted the petition document from Michel.

"Sire, we beg you to arrest those merchants of the Hansa currently residing in London and hold their goods forfeit to recompense the House of the Rose for its losses," Michel

answered easily, having practiced the delivery of this appeal with Geoffrey innumerable times. "It is our sincere hope to compel their fellows to release our ship and crew."

The king considered the request. "We have long granted the merchants of the Hansa certain privileges and freedoms in our realm. Does it not seem unjust to seize the goods of these Hansa merchants in London for an offense committed in a faraway port?"

Fortunately, Michel had prepared for this objection. "Sire, the Hansa are a corporation, originating from a joint agreement and alliance of several towns and villages. They are able to form contracts as joint debtors, and therefore they must all accept liability for the offences of single members. The merchants of the Hansa here in London should therefore bear responsibility for what happened in Stralsund. We hope that your gracious help in this matter will lead to a speedy return of our property and our people."

Cecilia dipped into a curtsey, murmuring, "The House of Rose would be very generous in its expression of gratitude, Sire."

"You make a convincing case, Sir Michel, Lady Cecilia," said the king, perking up at the mention of gratitude. "Of course, as a responsible sovereign, we must attend to the welfare of our subjects." He paused. "But there is also a way in which Master Geoffrey might be able to attend to the welfare of his king."

"Sire?" *What, he doesn't want a share of cargo?* Combined with the private audience, Michel felt very uneasy.

"There is a delicate matter with which the House of the Rose may assist us." The king cleared his throat. "Will you swear to keep silent anything discussed in this chamber?"

"On my honor as a knight, and on my soul as a Christian," Michel replied promptly. "I do solemnly swear."

"On my soul, I swear it," said Cecilia, echoed closely by James and Beatrix.

"Very well, then." The king looked better pleased as he sat back. "I understand that the *Rose of Yarmouth* carries shipments bound for Genoa. If the House of the Rose will take my special emissaries as passengers, and ensure their safe arrival in Rome, we will grant your petition. They must travel swiftly in utter secrecy, and return in the same manner."

—I knew it!—Cecilia crowed.—He's appealing directly to Pope Alexander for that bull of absolution.—

"We hope for your discretion and assistance in this matter," Queen Eleanor added, her voice low and pleasant, accented with the *langue d'oc* that Honoria remembered so well. "It would not do for that odious de Montfort to hear of this matter."

"My lady queen, we would like to help you," Michel said. "But it is a fearful thing for mere merchants to entwine themselves in the affairs of kings and princes."

"It will be very profitable to your House," replied the Queen. "In addition to granting his petition, we will concede to Geoffrey de la Rose a monopoly to provide incense for the king's private chapel and perfumes for the King's Wardrobe."

Michel weighed the options. It would have been easier simply to offer the king a share of the recovered cargo.

Despite the queen's inducements, embroiling the House in a political struggle, especially with a weak ruler who had already been forced once by the Lord de Montfort into giving up a measure of his power, might prove very dangerous.

What if the Pope granted the king's appeal? The country might easily be plunged into civil war, the king and his supporters against Simon de Montfort and his group of powerful English barons. Whether de Montfort won or not—what if he discovered the House's role in his fate?

And yet, how could Michel refuse a direct request from the king? The fate of the *Rose of Yarmouth* and her crew hung in the balance, not to mention the future prosperity of the House in London.

"My lord king," Michel said, as the silence in the king's bedchamber threatened to grow oppressive. "I am certain that Geoffrey de la Rose and his kin would be happy to assist you in providing transport for your emissaries."

Both King Henry and Queen Eleanor smiled broadly at his answer. "Very well, then! Brother Boniface, will you note that I hereby grant the petition made to me by Sir Michel and Lady Cecilia on behalf of Geoffrey de la Rose?"

Confident that the audience was nearly at an end, Michel allowed himself to relax as the Dominican secretary scribbled on his tablet. He had succeeded! And quite possibly gained royal patronage for the House's perfumes, into the bargain.

"Sire, you have my sincere thanks, and thanks of those of the House of the Rose awaiting the return of their loved ones from Stralsund," Michel said, bowing.

"The House has an able protector in you, Sir Michel," said the Queen, with a look of admiration.

"You flatter me, my lady," Michel demurred. "I am but a humble knight."

"I could do with the support of such a knight, humble or not." She fluttered her long eyelashes. "If war comes, surely you are aware of our situation? We seek to gather to our side all men of undoubted chivalry and prowess. May I count on you to defend me, Sir Knight?"

Think fast, said Honoria. She sounded amused. *How will you rescue yourself from this sticky situation*, Sir Knight?

"My lady, so beauteous a queen deserves to have many doughty champions, and I am flattered most sincerely that you wish to induct me into that noble company." Michel hastily recalled the papers that Geoffrey had drawn up for his new identity as Michel de Murat. Cringing inside at Queen Eleanor's expectant expression, he continued: "It saddens me beyond measure that my oaths of fealty to Comte Robert of Auvergne and the king of France do not permit me to swear a further oath of fealty. But, in deference to the honor you have paid me, I would be pleased to pay a scutage-fee to be excused."

"That is indeed a generous offer, for a man not my vassal," the king said.

—Exactly how generous?—asked Cecilia.

—Ninety shillings to cover the cost of thirty days' service for a knight and his squire.—That's less than the loss of an entire ship's cargo, especially if the *Rose of Yarmouth* is carrying furs and beeswax,—Cecilia replied.—But Geoffrey

won't be pleased.—Would he rather see me take the field against Simon de Montfort and his men?—

To the king, he responded: "It is my sincere appreciation of your generous welcome to this noble realm of England that leads me to insist on paying you scutage, sire."

It was obvious that the king did not wish to refuse. "Your own generosity does you great credit, Sir Michel. I thank you." Though he was a king, he still rubbed his hands together like a satisfied merchant.

Michel bowed one more time, and from the corner of his eye saw Cecilia making an equally deep curtsey. With that, the audience was at an end.

He had done it! The Hansa would feel the penalty for harming the House. Full of heady triumph, Michel gave his arm to Cecilia, and flanked by James and Beatrix, they retraced their steps from the royal bedchamber back down to the Great Hall.

—You did fairly well,—Cecilia said, her mental voice rich with unspoken criticism as they reached the bottom of the stairs.—But you should have—

Cecilia's advice was preempted by a deep, smooth voice whose Norman-French was heavily flavored by an Italian accent.

"Lady Cecilia? God's blessings upon you, daughter, and what a pleasure it is to see you again at Court! I heard you were abroad in Flanders."

"Indeed, I was," Cecilia answered. "I give you good day, Sir—no, *Brother* Amadeus."—It's Amadeus de Morestello, the

Master of the London Temple.—Cecilia's mental voice sounded tense.

With a start, Michel turned to face the man in the white Templar habit. He was in his fifties, his tonsured hair and long beard iron-gray. Fat as a pastry-cook, nevertheless his skin showed the weathering of years spent under the burning sun of the Holy Land. Cecilia had warned Michel that the Master was frequently at Court because King Henry favored the Templars, but he had not expected to encounter the man so soon.

"Sir Michael de Murat? I am acquainted with your lady wife, but I do not believe we have been introduced."

With the hammerbeat of panic in his chest, Michel frantically rummaged through his memories of the past decade, trying to determine whether he had ever before met this particular Knight-Brother. "I am only recently arrived in England, Brother Amadeus," Michel replied, as blandly as shortness of breath allowed.

"Indeed?" The Master assessed him with shrewd hazel eyes. "Whence do you come, Sir Michael?"

"I hold a fief near Murat, in Auvergne," Michel said. "But I have not been there in some time. I have been traveling in Italy."

"And surely also in Flanders?" Brother Amadeus raised an eyebrow. "Allow me to offer congratulations on your marriage to Lady Cecilia. She has been well-regarded here in London as a chaste and sober widow."

Damn. He's been investigating us. From long experience, Michel knew exactly how thoroughly the Templars kept

records, and how frequently the various preceptories exchanged correspondence.

"We thank you for your good wishes." He fought to maintain the pretense of innocence, restraining his urge to babble apologies and confessions. Brother Amadeus's familiar white habit only served to remind Michel of his own cowardice in the face of ultimate peril. He felt an almost irresistible longing to beg forgiveness for having failed the Order.

"Yes, thank you, Brother." Cecilia coyly slipped her hand into Michel's.—Careful. He's dangerous,—she said, entirely unnecessarily.

Michel forced himself to say: "Is there some particular part of my travels that might interest you, Brother Amadeus? The holy sites of pilgrimage in Rome, perhaps?"

A flash of irritation vanished under the Master's mask of polished amiability.

Really, Honoria commented dryly. Did he expect us to throw ourselves at his feet, confessing our true identity, weeping and pleading for mercy? Though you did worry me for a moment.

"I seek news of another Sir Michael, very similar in appearance to you," said the Templar. "Though he might be older, and not quite as tall. He walks with the aid of a staff due to grievous injuries he suffered while on Crusade. Have you heard of him? His name is Sir Michael de La Roche-en-Ardenne."

Michel pursed his lips thoughtfully before replying. "I believe this Sir Michael you seek is a kinsman of mine." His instinct to flee battled with his fragmented memories. Ea had

played this kind of game countless times, and only rarely lost. But Michel dared not call upon those memories, not if he wished to keep his composure. He added: "A *distant* kinsman. I do not believe we have ever met." Given that nearly all of the noble families in France and the Low Countries were related, not to mention half the families in England and the western Holy Roman Empire, a distant kinship meant nothing, and both Michel and the Master knew it.

"Is that so?" Brother Amadeus's expression remained amiable. "You say you are from Auvergne? It's odd, but I could swear I hear the Low Countries in your speech."

Michel smiled as pleasantly as he could. "I was fostered in the household of my mother's kinsman in Flanders. I have not lived in Auvergne since I was seven years old." Another plausible half-truth.

"I see." The Master inclined his head, clearly unconvinced. "Well, if you hear word of Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, pray send us word. He disappeared under mysterious circumstances this past spring, and we—particularly our brothers in Ypres—are desirous to assure ourselves of his well-being."

Michel permitted himself to show shocked surprise. "He disappeared?" He was curious what the Templars made of the incident, since even his habit had been left behind when Dominic abducted him.

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to disclose the details, but I am sure you understand that it is a matter of importance to our order."

"I shall keep it in mind. Well, it has been an honor to meet you, Brother." Michel bowed. "But my lady wife and I have promised to sup with my lord Gloucester and we fear to make a late arrival at his table."

Brother Amadeus bowed with professional politeness. "The honor was all mine, Sir Michael. But if you will permit me one more question?"

He had no choice, and they both knew it. Acutely aware of all the attention in the Great Hall trained on their conversation, Michel resisted the temptation to reach out his aura-wing and coerce Brother Amadeus into forgetting his questions. *But if he starts to denounce me as an impostor...*

"I recently read an interesting report, concerning events that took place some years ago during the Crusade of King Louis of France to Egypt."

"Oh?" This was not what Michel had expected the Master to say.

"It concerned an apostate Crusader who slew the king's brother, Robert d'Artois, while the good comte fought against the Saracens in a city called Mansurah."

"Killed by one of his own? What treachery!" exclaimed Cecilia, feigning horrified disbelief.—He means Roland,—she said angrily.—But it was Dominic who killed Artois. I knew that would bring us trouble!—

"May God rest and keep the soul of poor Comte Robert!" Brother Amadeus crossed himself. "But that was not the most interesting part of the story, for me."

"Indeed?" Michel did not have to pretend bewilderment.

He had spent months in Acre while recuperating from his wounds, dictating detailed reports of the battle. His squadron had been ordered to escort Artois to safety, but he had never been able to recall exactly how he became separated from the other Templars, or how he alone survived. The physicians had blamed the syrup of poppies administered for the relief of his injuries for disordering his recollection, but had there been a different cause after all?

Roland would have been a new-made Protector defending the House when Michel and the king's knights attacked Al-Mansurah. Had he been in the city while Michel fought for his life? So close that he was linked to the death of Artois?

Hadn't he hallucinated while being evacuated? *The houses rise impossibly high, blocking out the stars. Where are the others? He has to find them. He has to warn them! "Brother Henry? Brother Peter?" he calls as he rides past a dead Saracen. It's Roland, wearing a red turban, his blue eyes staring blankly. But Michel blinks, and it's a different man, with red hair...*

That's the House's turban color, Honoria pointed out. And Marcus had red hair.

We did meet! God's Nails! Roland coerced me into forgetting!

At Michel's reaction, Brother Amadeus glowed with gleeful triumph. "Did you know that this apostate Crusader, accompanied by a reputed sorcerer known as Menelaos of Pergamon, presented the Sultana of Egypt with his compliments and poor Comte Robert's head, and both men

declared before the entire Egyptian court that they were protectors of the House of the Rose?"

"The Sultana sounds bloodthirsty, for a woman," Michel said, his alarm mounting at the connections being drawn with his own role within the House. "But that is only to be expected of Saracens, I suppose."

Brother Amadeus leaned in close, like a hunter closing in on the kill. His voice dropped. "That apostate Crusader would now be a man of about your years, Sir Michael. You are also a known as a protector of the House of the Rose, lately of Byzantium. Tell me, when were you last in Egypt?"

He thinks I'm Roland! Michel realized, with an involuntary spurt of laughter. "Are you accusing *me* of—" he asked, incredulously.

"Do you deny it?"

"Ah, Brother Amadeus," a lisping voice interrupted the Master. It was Prince Edward, who had evidently followed them out of the king's bedchamber. His courteous mien was overlaid with a malicious twinkle in pale blue eyes. "I see that you are making Sir Michael's acquaintance. Did you know that my father, the king, currently holds this knight in his *special* favor?"

"How very fortunate for Sir Michael." Amadeus scowled, stepped back, and gathered his practiced amiability. "It was my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Michael. Lady Cecilia, may God's blessing be upon you both." The Master of the London Temple swept off, his white mantle billowing.

But Michel knew that he would be watching very closely from now on. How much did the Templars know or suspect about the House?

Edward looked resentfully after him. "That damned moneylending monk. Always hanging around Court. He's even managed to talk my father into agreeing to put his tomb in Temple Church."

"It would be an increase in prestige for the Order, my lord Edward. May God grant that day be far from soon," Michel said, thankful for the Prince's timely intervention. He bowed low. "Now, if you will kindly pardon our departure..."

Michel pretended more calm than he felt as he followed Cecilia out of the hall and down the dock to where their barge awaited.

—We should send you away,—Cecilia said as they seated themselves on the barge's cushioned benches.—The Templars are going to make things difficult if you serve the House in Europe.—Yes, but Templars are everywhere from here to the Holy Land. Tirgit will find it difficult to travel any distance while great with child,—Michel protested.—I won't risk the life of the babe.—Perhaps your relocation can wait until after Mathilde's Appointing,—Cecilia said, grudgingly.—Your sister and Dominic can remain Protectors here, and we two can venture into the lands currently held by the Mongols.—I don't want to leave at all, but you may be right. The Templars don't have our memories, but they're keeping records on us. When I first joined the Order, they told me that Dominic had dwelled in the house of Sharibet for forty years, never aging.—I did not know this,—Cecilia said, concerned. With

groaning oars, the barge pulled away from the dock and into the middle of the gray-green river, heading downstream.

—The king's favor protects us now,—Michel said.—But I fear that the House of the Rose will find it difficult to say 'no' to any future royal requests if the king discovers the Templars' interest in me.—

Cecilia's smile was sweetly solicitous. "Oh, but Brother Amadeus looks to be in such poor health. Did you notice the blue tint of his lips and the purplish color of the veins in his face? I fear he suffers from an affliction of the heart, poor man. Why, he might not live past Christmastide."

"God save him," Michel replied, a chill running down his spine as he realized what Cecilia intended. It would be easy enough to use a hand of air to stop a heart or inflict an apoplexy. *There's no help for it*, he told himself. There were so few knight-brothers in England that the Master's death would probably halt any investigations that the Templars might be making into the private affairs of the House of the Rose.

I will be a good Protector for the House. I must, if all of these sacrifices are to be worth it. But he wished it had not come to this. Had Roland felt the same, carrying Artois' severed head?

Chapter Thirteen

I pray thee, forgive the trespass of thine handmaid: for the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house; because my lord fighteth the battles of the LORD, and evil hath not been found in thee [all] thy days. —*The First Book of Samuel*, 25:28

All Hallows Eve, Sunday, October 31, AD 1260

A month later, Dominic stood on the deck of the *Rose of Yarmouth* as the ship rode the crisp afternoon wind up the Thames to London. From his vantage point on deck, he saw the group of dark-haired men, women, and children gathered on the House's dock to greet their returning Protector and their kin.

As the ship eased up to the pale stone of the dock, and the sailors began tying up the vessel with thick ropes, Dominic found his gaze sweeping helplessly over the dark heads of the kin. *Is he here?*

Then he found what his soul sought, standing in the shadow of the warehouse: the tall, golden-haired form of Michel, and next to him, Mathilde. Dominic's heart leapt as Michel gave him a slight acknowledgment before looking past him to the rest of the crew gathered at the ship's rail.

While still in Stralsund, Dominic had heard from the Hansa that Michel had bent the King of England to his will. His Honoria had triumphed where Cecilia had failed, even with the damage he had sustained during his Raising and Naming!

Dominic firmly suppressed the curl of guilt winding through his gut. He had done what he had to, to avoid killing Michel. And his beloved now lived and prospered, even without all his memories, even as his cousin Arjumand, once known as Roland D'Agincourt, did. The gods knew that Dominic frequently wished that he, too, could live without the burden of memories that chained him to the past like the thick hempen cables now mooring the *Rose of Yarmouth*.

He forced his gaze away from Michel, and looked at the woman standing next to him, forcing himself to smile. Mathilde, who was looking less gaunt than she had been before his departure, raised her hand in a reserved greeting. He bowed in response. *Has she forgiven me yet?* Dominic opened his Seer's eyes, and saw that her aura-wings were folded tightly around her body. *Not a good sign.*

Tirgit was there, visibly pregnant now, her face glowing with delight, waving enthusiastically at him. *At least someone is happy to see me*, he thought, as he followed Thomas de la Rose, the ship's captain, down the gangplank and onto to dry land. It did not escape his notice that Cecilia was conspicuously absent. Dominic wasn't certain whether to be insulted or relieved.

"Thomas!" Breaking etiquette, Geoffrey, his face filled with raw emotion, stepped forward and embraced the lanky young man. "Welcome home, son!"

Tears welled in Joan's light-brown eyes as she waited her turn.

Geoffrey released his son into Joan's arms. He turned to Dominic with a deep bow. "Thank you, Lord Dominic, on

behalf of the House. And from this father, you have our deepest gratitude."

On cue, all those gathered on the dock bowed deeply, hands folded at their waists.

"Now, please, come inside, out of this cold wind, and tell us what happened in Stralsund." Joan's voice was hoarse, and she clutched Thomas's arm as she led them into the House.

Dominic followed, feeling much lighter of heart. He knew the suspicion in which he had been held—*child-killer!*—thanks to that busybody Maryam dalle Rose of the Venice House. But now that he had proven himself as a Protector once more, even in a venture where Michel had accomplished the greatest part, perhaps he would truly be welcome here in London.

* * * *

A half-hour later, Dominic was finishing up his report to Geoffrey and Joan in the main parlor on the second floor, in what had once been the djinni's apartments.

The old part of the house had been extensively renovated since Menelaos and Honoria had lived here, the most dramatic change being the addition of large windows overlooking the busy length of Thames Street, each of the dozens of round, greenish panes admitting a distorted view of brown thatched roofs and half-timbered walls.

The walls and ceilings of the parlor were plastered white, to maximize the amount of light, with the ceiling beams stained a dark red, like fresh blood. A slant-topped desk stood near the windows, and the plank floor was covered with red,

yellow, and blue-patterned rugs, so common in the Houses on the Mediterranean coast, but exotic here.

Extra chairs had been brought in, enough to seat Geoffrey, Joan, Thomas, Dominic, Michel, and Mathilde. A tray bearing goblets and a pitcher of hot, clove-scented wine stood on the long work-table near a tall loom.

A fresco on the wall opposite the fireplace, its colors unfaded by the passage of four centuries, showed two angels, one dark-haired and male, the other red-haired and female, holding back the waters of the Red Sea as Moses and his people fled across the exposed sea-bed, pursued by Pharaoh's army.

As Dominic spoke, he studied the painting in an effort to keep from devouring Michel with his eyes. A month's separation had left him keenly aware of the hollow space in his heart, a space that could only be filled by great golden wings and a thoughtful blue gaze.

The images in the fresco summoned memories from the time that he and Honoria had served as Protectors here. Alfred and Edyth Rose-sele, who had been the Master and Mistress of the London House at that time, had insisted on commemorating their most spectacular deed. Did Michel remember that day? Or was that memory among the many that Dominic had inadvertently torn away?

The Viking raids had been particularly bad that year, and the House in the port of Dunwich had appealed for help. Menelaos and Honoria, working together from the deck of a tiny, leaky fishing vessel in the freezing darkness before dawn, had used their powers to raise a giant wave that

overturned the three warrior-filled longships rowing swiftly for the town. The townspeople, naturally, had given loud thanks to their God and saints, and the kin of the Dunwich House, who knew better, had dutifully joined in the resulting thanksgiving Mass, along with their two visitors from London.

Even if he could not recall the emotion in that scene, intellectually he knew it had been a real victory, not like his puny efforts in Stralsund! Dominic had fulfilled the letter of his duty there, and brought home the ship and crew and valuable cargo, along with a few extra bales of furs and amber, confiscated from the Hansa as a fine. But he was keenly aware that he had not really accomplished anything that a sufficiently determined mortal could not also have done.

"...and you didn't kill anyone?" Joan was asking, nervously.

Dominic shook his head. "It would have raised too many questions. Besides, when I arrived, the Hansa had not physically harmed any of the kin, only imprisoned them. Gregory von dem Rosenhuis would have died, anyway, of an abscess of the tooth, so I could not rightfully take vengeance for his death." *There! Let them judge for themselves that I am no mindless killer, but that my actions are governed by reason.*

"From what I know of the Hansa," Michel said, in his pleasant, deep voice, "I imagine that it was enough simply to remove certain valuable items from the warehouses in Stralsund. They imprisoned and executed one of their own in

Luebeck last year for allowing his ship to be captured by an enemy."

"Indeed," added Mathilde. "I cannot imagine that they would overlook losing a cargo of silver fox and top-quality marten. From experience, I can tell you the bales of furs that Dominic brought home with him are worth a year's income or more, without even taking into account the value of the amber."

"And that chest contains enough for a hundred necklaces!" Thomas declared, his cheeks flushed from the hot spiced wine he had been drinking. A quiet young man by nature, he had said little thus far, allowing Dominic to make his report with the occasional murmur of: "Yes, that's exactly how it was."

"I see," Geoffrey said, approvingly.

"A clever stratagem!" Joan clapped her hands, and smiled broadly. "Forcing the Hansa to punish the evildoers themselves! But didn't they suspect you after all those goods vanished?"

"They didn't," Thomas answered for Dominic, taking another long pull from his goblet. "No one saw anything."

Dominic was pleased that the others had spoken up to defend him, but it chafed that his word alone had not been sufficient to convince Geoffrey and Joan of the soundness of his actions.

"Lord Dominic has not mentioned that all of the Hansa ships moored in the harbor also suffered various damaging misfortunes in addition to losing their cargoes," Thomas said. "Hulls suddenly sprang leaks, ruining sacks of grain and bales of spices. And there was nothing to seal them with," he

chuckled slyly, "because the warehouse with the barrels of caulking and pitch caught fire and burned fiercely for two days."

"It was unfortunate for them," commented Dominic. It had been enjoyable to use his hand of air to kindle more than just the torches at Appointing ceremonies.

"Almost all the Hansa ships were further damaged by sparks from that conflagration," continued Thomas, with a wicked grin. "It spread from mast to mast, until nearly every ship—except ours, of course—had its sails ruined. Those will take months to replace, especially since the stores of canvas and leather in Stralsund were housed next to the pitch and caulking, and that building was also consumed, as were the next three warehouses on that street, which were filled with timber bound for Hamburg. It was a tragedy." He raised his goblet in Dominic's direction. "...for the Hansa, anyway."

"Indeed," Michel said, ironically, his mouth tugging into a reluctant smile.

The young captain crossed himself piously. "Just before we sailed, the townspeople were saying that the Hansa had offended God with their worldliness and arrogance, and that their misfortunes were a sign that they must repent their evil ways and beg forgiveness from God."

"That was indeed a marvelous accomplishment, Lord Dominic," Joan said, too brightly.

"Yes, yes," Geoffrey agreed. "You have done well. Very well indeed!"

Their tone was that of indulgent parents watching a crippled child walk in faltering steps. *Do they hold me in such*

low regard, to be amazed by such a small thing as lighting a fire?

Mathilde smiled at him proudly, and Dominic swallowed, hard. *They do.* So any evidence to the contrary was to be received with this disbelieving delight? Honest failure would have inflicted smaller injury to his pride.

"It was less that I have done before," Dominic said, as neutrally as he could. Behind Geoffrey's chair, the dark-haired angel spread wide his arms and wings, holding back the waters until the last of Moses's people reached safety. "Speaking of forgiveness, this is addressed to you, Master Geoffrey."

Reaching into the oiled leather satchel at his feet, he handed Geoffrey de la Rose the precious folded parchment with its heavy wax seal. "It contains a letter from the head of the Hansa in Stralsund, expressing regret about the misunderstanding that led to the impounding of the ship and promising to punish those responsible. He hopes that you will accept his humble apologies and ask the King to free the Hansa merchants recently arrested in London."

Geoffrey accepted it, and bowed to both Michel and Dominic. "The House is grateful for the aid of its Protectors."

Even the ones they consider damaged beyond repair, thought Dominic, as his gaze met Mathilde's.

* * * *

The meeting in the parlor broke up quickly after that. Thomas was eager to be reunited with his wife, and Michel promptly departed for his rented lodgings in Westminster

before Dominic could find an excuse to have a private word with him.

The message was clear. Michel had not yet forgiven him for the monstrous things he had seen in Dominic's blood. How could he ever hope to redeem himself to his beloved? Thus abandoned, Dominic felt too weary to face his next ordeal: his reunion with Mathilde. And yet, it could not be avoided. He had to salvage what he could of their relationship, or face further years of loneliness.

Since he had disembarked, she had said little, other than speaking formal greetings. She had kept her mental shields firmly in place all through the recitation of his report. She did not seem angry with him, but her expression during the afternoon had been solemn.

Together, and in silence, they went across the courtyard, into the newest wing of the House, and entered the djinni's apartments, which consisted of a parlor with two cushioned chairs, a fireplace, and a desk, and a large bedchamber.

In both rooms, the walls were hung with skillfully embroidered tapestries depicting the tales of angels and men from the Old Testament. On the parlor wall was a tapestry depicting St. Michael the Archangel, sword in hand, leading the hosts of Heaven against Lucifer and his rebels. In reference to Inanna, the fallen Apkallu of the House, Lucifer wore the Morning Star on his brow.

Mathilde went to one of the chairs in the parlor, and seated herself, her face as stern and sorrowful as the victorious angels behind her. They had not shared a bed as lovers since before they left the Chateau, not since her attempt to heal

him had ended so badly. He had not been expecting it to work, and the pain had been no worse than that inflicted by Sharibet's treatments, but she had shied away from touching him after that, both physically and mentally.

Dominic sat down across from her, but pulled his chair close enough that their knees were nearly touching. In response, her wings wrapped even more tightly around her rigid body, as if she feared even the slightest contact with him.

He refused to do the same, letting his own scarred aura curl around hers. He might not love her as he had loved Honoria, but his courtship of Mathilde had not been *entirely* a lie.

"Mathilde," he said, in his warmest tone. He took her hand. Her fingers were cold, so he enclosed them in his own to warm them. "How have you been in my absence?" He opened their link, and sent her an image of his first glimpse of her on the quay, looking healthier than he had ever seen her, strands of blonde hair escaping her wimple and fluttering around the smooth, fair skin of her temples and cheeks.—You look well. London agrees with you.—

The wings of her aura relaxed slightly. "I have been well. Michel ... *Michael*," she corrected herself, "has been instructing me in the sword in your absence. He says you did a good job teaching me the basic stances." Her gaze met his, briefly, then slid back down to the floor. "Joan's eldest daughter, Margaret, is showing me how to make pomanders. The beeswax that the *Yarmouth* brought is sorely needed for those. The King's Wardrobe favors rose and violet scents, and

we've all been rushing to produce as many as we can to fill the royal orders."

"I heard that your brother was responsible for that bit of business," Dominic commented.

"Yes, Geoffrey was very pleased." She tried to withdraw her hand. "I-I wanted to talk to you," she blurted. "I don't think we should be consorts any longer."

"Why?" Dominic did not release her. He did not dare give her the opportunity to flee. "Mathilde, do I repel you?"

She stared at him. Her aura flared, enclosing his almost possessively. He felt the sensation as an uncomfortable prickling, but ignored it. Her reaction was answer enough, but he needed to *hear* it from her. "Do you want me to leave?" he said, when she made no reply.

"No," she said, in a barely audible tone, not meeting his gaze, and fell silent again.

"I still wish to be your consort. But since I cannot fully perform all of the duties, it's understandable that—" He stopped as the sensation of her aura trying to invade his became too acute to ignore.

With a gasp, she withdrew, freeing her hand with a yank, and scrambling out of her chair. She fled to the other side of the chamber, pressing herself against a tapestried wall. "See! If we stay together, I'll just keep hurting you!"

As calmly as he could, he replied, "Is *that* all?"

"What do you mean?" Her blue eyes were wide.

"If you hurt me, I will let you know. And then you will stop, will you not?" He tried to suppress the surge of premature triumph. She didn't despise him!

She still looked distressed. "But what if I don't realize that I'm doing it? I didn't mean to hurt you, those other times."

"Mathilde, I don't fear you. Don't fear yourself."

"But..."

—Don't treat me like a crippled beggar on the street! We are both strong. If we hurt each other from time to time ... He shrugged.

"I'm sorry," she said, pushing herself away from the wall.

"So, you'll continue as my consort until your Appointing?" He kept his tone controlled. He would not beg her. But he did not want to be left alone, either. Or at Cecilia's mercy.

She approached him. "Yes."

He took her hand, and drew her down onto his lap. He put his arms loosely around her waist, and she leaned into his chest with a long exhalation.

"I can't be Honoria for you," she murmured, her breath moving through his hair.

"I don't expect you to be anyone but Mathilde," he replied, daring to kiss her. It was a gentle, almost chaste brush of lips, but he saw the colors of her aura intensify. So, she still wanted him. Good. When he had set out to court her, he knew exactly how he looked to a lonely widow: handsome, wealthy, urbane, powerful. And what a disappointment to her, when he had been forced to reveal what he truly was: a damaged djinn, unable to complete a true union.

She returned the kiss, hesitantly, and he deepened it, pushing off her wimple, his thumb brushing against the nape of her neck, something he had discovered that made her quiver with pleasure.

It made her quiver now, and her aura darkened with desire. He stood, sweeping her into his arms, and carried her into the bedchamber.

There, he made love to her with every ounce of his skill and experience, wanting to break through the maddening caution that governed her every response to him, growing frustrated when she refused to surrender her control, even as she gasped and cried out his name, writhing beneath him. He wanted her to break, to capitulate to the desire that drove her to want to taste his blood. He wanted proof that he had that power over her, even as his own release rocked him, a thin trickle of solitary pleasure when compared to the overwhelming torrent of sensation that accompanied a true djinni union.

Defeated, he sank down beside her, skin to skin, and settled her in his arms, grateful this intimacy would not be denied him.

"I want to heal you," she murmured, snuggling closer, her lips brushing against the sensitive skin of his chest. "I want you to be able to do *everything* again." Unguarded for once, her emotions leaked through their link: tender affection, frustration at her failures, and pity for his crippled state.

That stung worse than her fear or her loathing would have. That he should have lived long enough to be *pitied!* And yet, *what else is there for me, now?*

* * * *

The next day, the Feast of All Saints, Michel reluctantly accompanied Cecilia down the muddy road that linked

Westminster and the City of London. As they rode their palfreys, Michel kept his mind shuttered, but he knew Cecilia was aware of his mood.

He did not want to go to the feast that Geoffrey and Joan had begun to arrange as soon as the *Rose of Yarmouth* arrived. He did not want to spend hours sipping animal blood, exchanging polite banter as platters of the food he no longer found palatable were served, and Dominic lusted after him from a distance. He did not want to see Mathilde's expression of unhappy guilt in the company of her husband.

Most of all, he did not want to arrive at the House, only to be told that Tirgit had been sent on an errand, or was not feeling well, or was otherwise unavailable. Despite his best efforts, he had scarcely seen her in the past three months, and never unaccompanied. The women of the House clustered around her whenever he approached, and their presence, while deferential, was clearly meant to deter him.

Conversely, it simply increased his determination to find time alone with her. By the Virgin's veil, she was carrying his child! If he was not permitted to marry her, he would do what he could to publicly acknowledge her babe as his. But he did not see her as he and Cecilia entered the Great Hall, though all other members of the London House appeared to be crowding the trestle tables that had been set up in two rows down the length of the hall.

—Joan must have used every tablecloth and napkin,— Cecilia commented as they took their places at the head table, which stood on a low dais at the end of the hall

opposite the archways leading to the buttery and pantry.—
And possibly borrowed a few from the neighbors.—

Michel did not reply to this, although he thought of Fausta and her abused linens. He exchanged greetings with Geoffrey and Joan, who were already seated in their places at the center of the table.

Mathilde and Dominic were seated to the right of the Master and Mistress of the House. Michel kissed his sister on the cheek, noticing that she no longer wore the expression of strained guilt that had marked the weeks of her consort's absence, and then, reluctantly, gave Dominic a swift, formal kiss of greeting, aware of everyone watching them. Not to properly greet his brother-in-law and fellow Apkallu would only fuel the fires of rumor within the House, but it was all he could do to keep himself from wiping the touch of Dominic's lips from his own mouth.

Then, courtesies complete, he and Cecilia took their seats to the left of Geoffrey and Joan, and a silver-gilt pitcher of blood appeared just as the first course was being carried into the hall.

As the dishes were presented to the head table, Michel wistfully remembered the taste of eels baked in butter with saffron and garlic. The pig's blood in his goblet seemed unbearably bland against that memory. Likewise, the oyster stew fragrant with peppercorns, the fish with a sauce of ginger and green herbs, carrots braised with honey and cinnamon, and rissoles, those delicate, deep-fried meat pastries redolent of nutmeg and cloves. All these delicacies fired his nostalgia for the enjoyment of eating.

All the while, he felt the weight of Dominic's gaze upon him, drinking in every expression, every move.

Why not yield to him? Honoria whispered to him. *Don't you remember how skilled he is in the art of pleasing both men and women? We would both enjoy it.*

No, he told her, vehemently. *Never. You said you despised him.*

But I'm so lonely. Her voice was heartbroken. *I—we—still love him. We miss him.*

You miss Menelaos. Not the monster he's become, Michel replied with the bone-deep revulsion that had infected him since tasting Dominic's blood.

Against his better judgment, he met Dominic's gaze. Even from eight feet away, Dominic's naked desire was a flame, heating the air and making it too difficult to breathe. Michel abruptly rose from the table, murmuring something about feeling unwell, and fled, pursued by the silence that fell over the hall.

They would all be displeased at his premature departure, especially Cecilia, but Michel did not care. He could not bear to stay an instant longer, feeling Dominic's desire smothering him. It was so hard to deny the dreadful obligation to ease the pain of someone he had once loved.

He took the stairs to the ground floor three at a time, and left the building. The late afternoon air, fresh and wet with cold spatters of rain, was a refreshing draught. He inhaled deeply, as if cleansing his troubled spirit along with his lungs, and set out across the courtyard, heading for the stables. He could saddle his horse himself, no need to pull the stableboys

House of Memory [House of the Rose Book II]
by Michaela August

away from their splendid meal, and be back in his cozy house on Endive Street before the sun set.

If he was lucky, Cecilia wouldn't come home at all before tomorrow.

Chapter Fourteen

If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless. —*Exodus*, 22:23-24

Wednesday, November 3, 1260

Two days later, an amber-eyed boy stood in the parlor of Michel's Westminster house on Endive Street. The lad was panting, his face beaded with sweat and his cheeks hot scarlet despite the chill of the November night.

"Lord Michel, Lady Cecilia," he said, bowing deeply. "A traveling party from the Paris House begs a Protector. They sent a red message." The boy held out the colored ribbon, pre-coded with its emergency information.

Michel knew what that meant. All the ships and caravans of the House carried a basket with two pigeons who would return to the nearest House that had a Protector in residence, a plea for help already bound to their legs.

Michel, who had been summoned from a nearby tavern where he had been dicing with a group of the King's knights, made an effort to clear the wine fumes from his head. He sensed rather than saw Cecilia's presence behind him.

"Trouble in Paris?" she asked, curtly.

The boy was still gasping for breath, as if he'd run all the way from the city. "We don't know. The pigeon arrived at dusk. We haven't heard directly from Paris."

Cecilia moved forward, the candle in her hand gilding her skin. "I cannot leave just at present. Queen Eleanor desires my company, and I do not wish to endanger our rapport. Nor should Dominic leave Mathilde again, so soon. He's supposed to be tutoring her in the lessons of a Protector." Her aura brushed Michel's in a silent caress.

Michel agreed, suppressing his speculation about exactly what kind of tutoring his sister might be receiving. "Then I'll leave immediately. Seven hours of darkness remain. I can reach the House in Dover before dawn, and cross the Channel to Paris tomorrow night."

The boy bowed deeply. "Thank you, lord!"

* * * *

Hôtel de la Rose, Paris

An exhausted Michel touched down in the cobbled interior courtyard of the Paris House of the Rose just before dawn two nights later.

"Our Protector is here! He's arrived!" the boy on watch shouted from the darkness of an arched doorway.

Michel tried to take a step forward, but his strength failed him, and he went down on one knee, landing on the rounded cobblestones with bruising force.

"Lord!" This time, the voice was feminine.

Michel felt anxious hands under his elbows as the courtyard rapidly filled with people, most of them bearing torches or candles. He recognized the new Master of the Paris House. "Master Rogier," he croaked. "It is good to meet again."

"It is good. We are grateful that you came so quickly. Lord Ea, this is my wife, Adeline," he said, indicating the stout woman standing nearby. "Her True Name is Nir-Tur."

"It is good to meet again! Come, come inside, Lord Ea—Sir Michel," Adeline corrected herself. "We'll tell you everything while you refresh yourself."

Michel limped after them into the House, where Adeline took his sodden cloak and offered him a chair padded with wool-stuffed cushions next to the fireplace. Within a few minutes, warmth and a dangerous languor began to seep through his chilled flesh into his weary bones. *So tired ...* With an effort, he resisted the temptation to let his eyes drift shut. Warmed metal was pressed into his hands, and he lifted a gilt-chased goblet to his lips.

As the first delicious mouthful of hot blood flowed over his tongue, Rogier gave him the news: "Lord, my nephew Adhelmar, the chief merchant of this House, and two of his assistants are a week late in returning from the Cold Fair in Troyes. It's one of the biggest fairs in this realm, and we always sell many cases of perfumes and pomanders. We thought that perhaps the roads—it has been raining—but when Mistress Joan sent us a bird telling us Adhelmar had summoned a Protector, well..."

"We feared the worst," Adeline finished, soberly. "We still do, although yesterday we received a ransom demand from Sir Gervaise de Faremoutiers."

Michel raised his brows. "I suppose the lack of Protectors in recent memory has eroded the respect once given to the House. Does Sir Gervaise command many men?"

Rogier shook his head. "He calls himself a lord, but he's not above supplementing his income by banditry. His estates lie near the road that connects Paris and Troyes."

"I shall have to pay Sir Gervaise a call," said Michel, summoning the strength to rise. To his horror, he swayed unsteadily as he reached his feet.

Adeline caught him by the waist with surprising strength. "Lord! Please rest yourself while we prepare a horse and supplies for your journey."

He resented the need for sleep, when there were kin in danger, but he could go no farther for now.

* * * *

Michel came reluctantly awake a few hours later, in response to the maid's tentative hand on his shoulder. "Lord Michel, I am sorry to disturb you, but the bells have rung Sext, and Master Rogier asked me to rouse you."

At least my knees are no longer weak with fatigue. He climbed reluctantly out of the soft nest of bedclothes and allowed the maid to dress him in fresh linen undergarments and woolen hosen before donning a light hauberk and new surcoat brightly embroidered with the de Murat arms. After a goblet of preserved blood and a round of farewells from Rogier and Adeline, Michel mounted the gelding they had readied for him, and rode through the narrow, crooked streets of the city, leading a grim band of kin, armed with staves, bows, and other, hidden weapons.

Away from the shadow of the overhanging houses—so like London's tight maze—and out through the gates, they

followed the road north in watery autumn sunlight. Perhaps it was the light, or the single-minded camaraderie, but Michel felt more himself than he had for years. How long had it been since he had ridden forth as a knight, a good horse between his knees, with his sword and brothers ready for battle? *Too long.*

Pressing their horses as hard as they dared, they passed vineyards and orchards hung with yellowed, withered leaves. Fields of wheat and barley stubble fell behind as they galloped, walked, cantered, and walked again. Often they rode through a greasy perfume of fresh blood, offal, smoke, and crisping skin, as peasants slaughtered pigs, preparing the bacon, ham, sausages, and blood pudding that would feed their families through the long, cold winter.

They rode for the most part in silence until dusk, thoughts occupied with the fate of Adhelmar and his party. Did they still live? When it grew too dark for his troop to see, they made camp in the fresh air, disdaining the flea-infested confines of a public inn. Michel, too, needed to sleep, although not as much as the mortals did. The following morning, as they broke their fast with biscuits and wine, he drank one of the jugs that the kin had packed in his saddlebags. Thus fortified, they continued toward Troyes.

Mid-morning, Master Rogier's newly-adult son, Rodolfe, pointed out a change in the land bordering the road. Peasant cottages had dwindled down to mere huts, and no one was slaughtering pigs. In fact, the few folk out gathering the last of the nuts from the orchards looked hollow-cheeked with hunger already.

Michel stopped to question a group near to the road whether they recalled seeing Adhelmar de la Rose's party last week. The apprehension with which they greeted the sight of the troop's fine clothing and gear, and the sword belted at his side, quickly melted away when Rodolfe dispensed silver half-pennies and courteous words. Even so, no one remembered seeing a train of mules and wagons pass by. Then, as Rodolfe described the rose-colored banners of the House, one of the peasant women offered Sir Gervaise's name before turning to spit eloquently.

The peasants glanced nervously at each other, and by silent mutual accord, began to drift away. "You may find what you seek if you travel another league, Sir Knight," the woman who had spoken earlier said by way of farewell. She offered no good wishes as they rode on.

The sun was sinking low in the west, and the faint sound of Vespers bells drifted over the fields when one of the kin who had been scouting ahead rode back to announce he had found something. In a short while the harsh sound of crows squabbling and a sudden uprush of black wings from a copse of hazel bushes not far from the verge of the road identified a killing ground. As the troop dismounted and approached, a few of the more stubborn birds remained, reluctant to abandon their prize. They hopped and cawed just out of range of Michel's sword.

There were bodies. The four young men had not died easily. Even with the damage wrought by crows and other scavengers over several days, the savage wounds inflicted by sword and mace were obvious. Their bodies had been looted

of weapons and armor, but the rosette badge on their clothes and their dark hair identified them as the guards dispatched to accompany Adhelmar. Cries of dismay, anger, and sorrow from the dead youths' cousins muted to a purposeful murmur of "May we meet again."

From long habit, Michel's hand rose and sketched a cross over their corpses, and he spoke a swift Paternoster. Then, at sidelong looks from the kin, he added a blessing in the ancient language of the House, and the wish that their souls might be swiftly reborn.

But in the near future, none of those responsible for this outrage would escape his vengeance, Michel vowed.

* * * *

The last of the chill autumn twilight was hanging like a swathe of bloody silk on the horizon when they arrived at a track leading through a small forest of cut-down trees to the manor house belonging to Sir Gervaise de Faremoutiers.

This was the last point with any cover, so they dismounted and made camp, as if they weren't going to attack. *Make this lesson in vengeance something memorable. Smite them like the god we used to be,* advised Honoria as they surveyed the approaches to the fortified manor house. Simmering with the memory of the slaughtered young guards, Michel agreed with her wholeheartedly.

They waited until full dark, wondering if Faremoutiers would send out someone to investigate, or a party to rob them. But no one seemed to be watching out of the narrow windows. There was smoke rising from a hearth fire, and the

scent of roasted venison blew their way when the wind changed, but no other movement.

After the new quarter-moon set, they set out for the house, walking quietly. When they reached the wall, Michel made a flying leap to the top and over, landing softly, and checking with his Seer's Eyes for any guardians. There was one sleepy youth, obviously bored and unprepared for trouble. It was the work of a moment to deprive him of breath, and life, wrapping him in hands of air and squeezing. Even as he lowered the body to the ground, Michel was lifting the bar holding the gate closed. The young men of his troop ghosted through the opening. One stayed behind as the rest approached the door.

As they drew near, Michel spotted signs of neglect visible even by starlight: plaster falling away from the wall in layers, revealing the bare stone underneath; missing tiles on the slate roof; The outbuildings that made up the other sides of the courtyard were in no better shape. No wonder this lord was willing to risk the wrath of the House!

They hesitated at the tall, thick-planked doors. No candlelight flickered behind the tattered parchment covering the windows on either side. Michel wished he could see through them. How many men-at-arms slept within? Even with his Apkallu strength and powers, could a lone Protector, with six lightly-armed youths, defeat them all?

Of course you can, Honoria advised him with a disgusted sigh. *Kill them ere they wake.*

Michel recoiled. He was a knight, not a murderer! He would face his enemies and defeat them in battle, not slay them while they slept!

What's more important—avenging the slain and rescuing the kin, or your knightly honor?

Michel knew the answer to her question, knew his duty as Protector. And yet...

Hurry, urged Honoria. *The dogs are rousing!* Indeed, Michel heard the first interrogatory bark from inside. He pushed at the doors, but they were barred.

Working blind, Michel thrust his hands of air through the planks and felt for the locking bar. After a moment he found it, pushed the heavy beam aside, and slammed open the doors. In the great hall, piles of rushes covered the floor, and a thin trail of smoke rose from the dying coals in the central hearth to a louvered opening in the roof. A swift glance with his Seer's Eyes and evidence of his mundane senses showed a score of men and a few women sleeping in snoring, farting heaps under ragged blankets. He nearly gagged at the rank odors.

The sleepers were beginning to stir as the dog barked again, and sprang at the intruders with a growl. Michel grabbed it with a hand of air, muzzling it, and broke its neck. But other dogs began frenzied barking, and a dozen men-at-arms were jumping up, confused but ready to fight.

Michel knew he had to kill them before they strung bows or found crossbows. If he could come within aura's reach of any of them, they would die. He rushed the first man, crushing his head in a hand of air, as if he were lighting a torch. The next

several died as he broke their necks, just like the dog. The slow risers were just beginning to shout and bumble toward him. His great wings buffeted them, smashing them as if they had fallen from a height.

The women and servants were screaming now, then falling silent as the kin went among them, stabbing or strangling them in the red light from the old fire.

Michel did a count of the bodies. The peasant woman had said there were twelve men-at-arms. Twelve bandits responsible for the murder of Adhelmar's guards. There were twenty dead men, and a handful of dead women. The scent of fresh blood had almost overwhelmed the stink of unwashed bodies, rotting food, stale smoke, and shit.

Now, for the last one. He climbed the narrow stone staircase that led up to the lord's apartments.

By the light of a single fluttering tallow candle he saw that the Lord de Faremoutiers was fair-haired and young, scarcely older than twenty. He was also scrawny, naked, and guarding his wife with a sword almost longer than he was tall. Michel spared an instant of pity for Lady de Faremoutiers, who was herself no more than fourteen and shrieking, "Who are you? What are you doing here? Get out! Get out! Get *out!*"

Then de Faremoutiers screamed and lunged, and Michel was torn between two impulses: one, to draw his sword and fight, blow for blow, and two, to disarm him with a hand of air and feed the overlong sword to him by inches. Then there was no time to draw sword, only time to make multiple hands of air. One grabbed de Faremoutier's sword-wielding wrist, and broke it. One made a thin, impassable barrier at neck

height. One clamped over the mouth of the wife. One went behind him, like the haft of a boar-spear, digging into the floorboards for purchase.

De Faremoutiers' body hit Michel's aura and snapped, bones breaking audibly, blood frothing from his severed neck. His eyes rolled up. He fell, and when he hit the floor he did not move again.

The wife stopped trying to shriek, and clawed at the invisible hand of air over her mouth. Her chest heaved, but she could not draw breath. Michel had time to wonder if it would be kinder to kill her now, rather than leave her alone and unprotected in the ruin he had made of her home.

Rodolfe ran in, breathless. "They're alive! We found them, Adhelmar and his assistants, Gilbert and Francois!"

Michel removed his hand of air, and spoke. "There's no one left to hear you scream, Lady. Those who harm the House of the Rose must pay in blood."

The girl gulped and sobbed in terror. But she did not scream again.

"Lord, we found our chest of gold," said Rodolfe. "But Gilbert said the bastards dumped an entire case of perfume in a ditch when they attacked. Master Rogier will be furious..."

Sick at heart now that the action was done, Michel picked up de Faremoutiers's head. A single strand of muscle connected it to his neck, and that was easily cut. The greasy golden hair made a convenient handle, where it wasn't soaked with blood. "Here. Take this to Master Rogier with my compliments. Perhaps he will feel recompensed." As Rodolfe

flinched, he added, "Don't drop it. Or *I* will be furious with you."

Michel knew there was one more thing he had to do. Using the Voice of Coercion, he said to the girl in the bed, "You may not speak of these events tonight, either to identify anyone you have seen, or to describe what occurred, other than to say, as I said, 'The House of the Rose does not permit bandits to profit.' Do you understand?"

She nodded, clutching old and grimy sheets to her small breasts.

Michel left the bloody chamber, feeling dissatisfied and distressed. He had proven himself good for more than paperwork and negotiation, yet his deeds this evening left him with a bad taste in his mouth. He had not stooped to killing foes in their sleep, but his powers had still made the work of slaughter too easy. Where was the honor in that?

Somewhere in the back of his head, Honoria snorted and rolled her eyes. *You killed them, as a Protector must. Why can't you be happy?*

He hoped she could not see his fear. For where would his path lead, if he gave ground step by step to dishonor? Too clearly he saw what awaited: Dominic's hungry eyes, ready to devour him. *That can never be*, he had said. He had sworn.

But just so had he sworn his oaths to the Templars.
Oathbreaker.

Chapter Fifteen

I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, [and] was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. —*Song of Songs*, 5:6

Wednesday, November 17, AD 1260

A fortnight later, on a cold and rainy afternoon, Michel returned to the courtyard of the London House, and slid wearily off his horse. He had traveled from the Hôtel de la Rose in Paris by conventional means, and after a relatively calm passage across the Channel, it had been a long, bone-chilling ride through heavy showers and deep mud from Dover. Trying to stamp some circulation into his numbed feet, Michel waited for a stableboy to appear. When the courtyard remained empty, he led the horse into the warm, dry stable himself.

"Welcome back, Lord Michael!" said the youth, scrambling down the ladder from the hayloft. He looked sleepy, bits of straw caught in his dark, tousled hair. "Forgive me. I didn't hear you arrive."

"It's all right. I'll take care of my horse," Michel said, remembering his own apprenticeship in his father's stables, and the attractions offered by a soft pile of fragrant hay. "I'm stiff from the ride, and moving around a bit will do me good."

It wasn't the boy's fault for not expecting his arrival. Michel had been halfway across the bridge that joined Southwark to the City proper when he'd decided to go to the

House and see Tirgit rather than immediately returning to his house in Westminster. He only prayed that Dominic would be away this afternoon.

"Yes, lord." The boy bowed deeply and led them to the stable, then vanished, no doubt dashing to notify Geoffrey and Joan of Michel's unexpected arrival.

Michel unsaddled the horse, and began to wipe off the mud that coated his mount's legs and belly. The smells of hay and manure soothed him, as did the familiar tasks of caring for a horse. The prickling sensation in his toes and calves spoke of returning circulation.

When he had finished drying off his mount and cleaning the saddle and tack with a soft, oiled cloth, Michel left the stable and entered the House. He strode through many chambers, startling maids and lads into hasty bows and murmurs of "Lord Michael!" as he passed. Finally, he found Tirgit in the second-largest parlor, which had southwest-facing windows to catch the fading afternoon light. Joan was with her, and the two women sat side by side at the slant-topped desk, writing out labels.

"Tirgit, mine own heart," Michel said from the doorway, drinking in the sight of her.

Absorbed in her task, she started violently, and the goose-quill slipped from her fingers. With preternatural speed, Michel reached out an aura-wing and caught it before it spattered ink against the flagstone floor.

She sprang up hastily from her stool and curtsied. "L-lord Michael!" She plucked the feather from the air with shaking hands, and put it down on the desk with exaggerated care.

Then she bowed to him, hands clasped over the curve of her belly.

The sight of her, so painfully formal where previously she had been laughing and impudent, sent an unpleasant pang through Michel's heart. At least she was glowing with good health, her belly round and firm under her gown. He had missed her on his journey to France, and he needed her *now*.

"Welcome back, lord," Joan said, her head bowed respectfully, but not before Michel saw her disapproving look.

Michel returned her stare coolly, letting her know that her attempts to separate him from Tirgit were fruitless. He stretched out his hand, and Tirgit came forward. "Art thou well, beloved?" he asked in Arabic. "I've missed thee."

"I've missed thee, too," she said, quietly, meeting his gaze for the first time. She reached up, her hand enclosing his, her skin warm and smelling of violets. "I am well, and my eyes are refreshed to gaze upon thee once more."

He bent to kiss her thoroughly, ignoring Joan's frown. Tirgit pulled away too soon, and her nose wrinkled. A familiar spark lit. "Lord, thou art sorely in need of a bath!"

"Thine eyes are refreshed but thy nose is offended?" He looked down at her with mock haughtiness and switched back to English. "Then, surely, you know what your lord expects of you, Tirgit."

She giggled, and turned to look at Joan. "Will you excuse me? I must go draw Lord Michael's bath for him."

"And scrub his back," added Michel, just to see Joan's expression curdle.

To his credit, he allowed Tirgit to order the bath drawn, and submitted meekly to her energetic scrubbing and rinsing before he divested her of her clothing and pulled her into the large wooden tub to share in the steaming, herb-scented water. He spent the next space of time making her squirm against him delightfully, chuckling at her gasps and the moans she tried to stifle by hiding her face in his neck.

"Please, lord, please!" He obliged her by turning her around on his lap, spreading her legs over his own, and entering her from behind, so that he could caress the swell of her belly and her swollen, sensitive breasts as he sought his own pleasure.

A memory of Dominic's mouth, taut against his lips, returned to Michel. *No!* he groaned silently, willing himself to concentrate on the slippery flesh pressed against him, surrounding him.

"My lord?" Tirgit, ever-sensitive to his moods, stilled.

"It's nothing," he said, harshly. "Nothing." He gave the breast filling his hand a gentle squeeze, rolling the pebbled nipple between his fingers.

She gasped, arching back against him, and he let his fingers of his other hand slip between her thighs, stroking her as he resumed the pace of his thrusts.

She was his. *His.*

She cried out, spreading her legs wider, and he could feel the tension of her approaching release gathering in the quivering muscles of her calves, her thighs, and her hips. Only then did he permit himself to nip at her neck and take a few drops of her blood, just enough to send him over the

edge in a rush of images from the days they'd spent apart. But what he really sought was the presence of the babe, a steady ribbon of green and gold in his mind's eye.

Tirgit convulsed, a low cry escaping her, her aura pulsing in time with her release.

He held her tightly, moving against her in a broken rhythm until the waves of his own pleasure subsided, leaving him relaxed and calm.

With a happy smile, Tirgit turned in his arms and curled against him, her head under his chin. "My heart sings to see you home again," she said, softly.

"Why have you been avoiding me? I've come to visit you whenever the Court is in Westminster, but you're never here."

Her fingers entwined with his. "I wanted to see you, but Joan said it wouldn't be proper." Her voice trailed off.

Michel hated her new tone of submission. "Not proper?" he repeated, incredulously, drawing her gently but insistently into his arms.

"You're Apkallu, a Protector. I'm only a daughter of the House, a mortal. I should know my place." The pale olive of her cheeks flamed with hot color.

Michel felt his wings sweep out, filling the room with a blazing light that only his Seer's eyes could detect. "So the kin shun you now? For being my concubine?"

"Don't be angry with them, please," Tirgit begged. "It's not that they look down upon me. They honor me as the mother of a djinn's child! But..." She hid her face in his chest.

"Then why?" he asked again.

Tirgit sighed defeatedly. "It's for the best. You belong with Lady Cecilia, not with me."

"What else does Mistress Joan say?" With an effort, Michel kept his tone even, his voice low. *If Cecilia is behind this...*

Tirgit caught her lower lip between her teeth. "They don't want—Mistress Joan says it's not fitting for an Apkallu to lower himself to court me, especially since I've already done my duty to the House."

The familiar taste of ruined dreams seeped into Michel's mouth, musty as spoiled wine. "Is that what *this*—" he stroked the curve of her pregnancy reverently. "Means to you? Just a duty to be performed?"

"I-in the beginning, I thought so. But then, lord, you were the first man to..." Her blush deepened. "To touch me with tender care."

"I want to be with you." Michel let his hand rest on her belly, feeling the flutter of life in her rounded belly, and the steady beat of her pulse against his skin. *This* was real, what he wanted, what he *needed*, he told himself. Not the poisoned apple that Dominic offered him.

"I want to be with you, too, my lord," Tirgit whispered.

"You could be with me for always. If our child is one of the Apkallu, will you accept a Crown of Service?"

"I—I don't know. Perhaps." She released his hand, only to put her arms around his waist.

"If you were Transformed, then you could become my consort," Michel said, resting his cheek against her soft, dark hair. "We could be a family in the eyes of God."

Inside his skull, Honoria snickered. *You know as well as I that there is no God watching and passing judgment.*

Silence, woman! Michel commanded.

"It is a fearful thing for a mere mortal to become a djinniah," Tirgit said, her voice muffled. "If I survived, I would be a weak creature at first, helpless, confined to my bed for months, unable even to feed myself."

"But then you would grow strong again," Michel argued. "Able to protect your kin, and our child."

"Our child?" Tirgit sighed. "What if the babe is not Apkallu? In all my lifetimes with the House, I only heard of three other children of djinni, and none of them were of the Lost."

"Apkallu or not, the child is mine. *Ours*. I will be a father, whether or not the House finds it proper," Michel said fiercely, drawing her closer. "But if ... *if* one of the Lost returns to us, will you consent to Transformation?"

"I would do anything to protect those I love," she said, with more confidence.

"So, you'll consent?" Michel said, eagerly.

Tirgit withdrew, just the tiniest fraction, and he stiffened, afraid that he had pushed too hard. That he wanted this too badly. The memory of Dominic's hungry gaze returned to him, and he pushed it away. His wish to have Tirgit as his consort had nothing to do with Dominic. He was simply trying to make a reasonable plan for the future.

"You sound so certain that our child will be Apkallu, lord," Tirgit said, her voice barely audible. "But the chances are so small. I hope I will not disappoint you."

"Nothing you do could disappoint me," Michel replied, gallantly. "But, if...?"

Tirgit nodded uncertainly. "If the babe is Apkallu. And Lady Cecilia agrees."

"Oh, she's already agreed," Michel assured her, flushed with triumph. He kissed Tirgit with all the passion of his grateful heart, feeling that, finally, all was right with the world.

To his disappointment, Tirgit lingered only a while longer, evading his teasing hands as she climbed nimbly out of the water, her firm determination cloaked with apologies as she dried off, dressed, and hurried off to rejoin Joan in the parlor.

Let her continue to mollify the mistress of the House until the babe is born. Michel was half-dozing in the luxury of the warm water, letting it soak the miles of travel from his weary muscles. *Once she is a djinniah, and my consort, Joan will no longer force Tirgit to dance to her tune. And Cecilia won't force me to dance to hers.*

As if his thought had conjured her, light steps sounded at the entrance to the bathing chamber, followed by the pressure of a familiar aura. "So, you've returned. Rogier sent a bird from Paris a week ago."

Michel did not turn around. Instead, he sank deeper into the now-tepid, herb-scented water. *Of all the days for Cecilia to stay away from court!* "The roads were bad, and it was raining, so I didn't want to fly across the Channel."

"Indeed, the season for sailing is nearly past." Cecilia moved closer, and he felt the brush of her aura against the

back of his neck. "I had hoped to depart for Constantinople weeks ago."

Michel shrugged. "Blame King Henry and his troubles, not poor Adhelmar de la Rose and his cousins. I was able to discover who had abducted them and killed their guards. Vengeance was served."

"Ah. Rogier said they were knights. Did they give you any trouble?"

"No. They were accustomed to preying on those too weak to fight back." And they had no defense against his magic. He did not go into detail. He would be reporting soon enough to Joan and Geoffrey. And to Dominic, damn him.

"Did you enjoy playing the warrior instead of the diplomat, for a change?" she asked.

Playing? He turned and looked at her, trying to read her aura. No luck. She was expert at concealing her thoughts and emotions, even in the midst of sharing blood. "I was trained to be both," he replied, his voice hard. He moved away from her touch, sliding his body around the large wooden tub, drawing in his aura. He had his own secrets.

"I'm glad you didn't stay longer," she said, quickly changing the subject. "I've been preparing for our journey. It's at least three months to Constantinople, four if there are many storms. Winter is always a chancy time, and we will likely need to stay at some of Houses along the way, to wait out bad weather."

The grand Appointing: two Apkallu—Mathilde and the Mongol who had once been Dumuzi—and a Crown of Service

djinniah. He had nearly forgotten about it in the events of the past weeks.

As Cecilia continued to talk about their travel plans, Michel felt his pleasant sleepiness dissipate. Three months, maybe four, and most of that time trapped on a tiny vessel with Mathilde, Cecilia, and ... Dominic.

Dominic. The pang in Michel's chest chased away the last vestiges of his recent serenity. What would he do if he found himself in Dominic's company for weeks at a time, and nowhere to escape? *I can't trust him. Or myself.*

"I'm not going," he said suddenly, interrupting Cecilia mid-sentence.

The astonishment on her face was comical. "What?"

"I said I'm not going." It had not occurred to him that he could simply refuse to undertake the journey; but now that he had, he felt the rightness of his decision.

"You must go! It's tradition." Her wings unfurled, filling the bathing-chamber with blazing silver light. One wingtip snaked toward his forehead, and it was all he could do not to flinch as he intercepted her with his own aura. Silver sparked against gold, and then she withdrew.

"Tirgit's babe will be born in February," Michel said, angry that she had tried to coerce him so blatantly. "I want to be here to make certain nothing goes wrong."

"But you *must* attend the Appointing. Dumuzi is Found again, at last. Everyone will be expecting you," Cecilia said. Her aura remained bright, surrounding him like a massive serpent ready to crush him in her coils. He wondered if she

would try to overpower him, and if he was strong enough to fight her off. As large as his aura was, hers was immense.

Better to convince her by reason, than risk open conflict, though his patience with her had reached an end. "You know what it's been like at Court. The King and Lord de Montfort are still at odds, and if the Pope absolves Henry of having to abide by the Provisions of Oxford, there's no telling how far de Montfort and the other barons will take their conflict. If all the Protectors depart for Byzantium, then who will defend the House if civil strife erupts?"

Cecilia pursed her lips, and Michel could see her considering. "But it's your sister, Michel. How can you stay behind?"

Tradition ran deep in Cecilia's bones, and he knew that she hated to forego the long-standing practice of having every Raised and Named Apkallu present to witness the Appointing of one of their own. He shrugged, sending ripples against the sides of the wooden tub. "Who else? Mathilde has to go, of course, and you, to perform her Raising and Naming. Dominic wants to go. He can't stand to be parted from Mathilde. So, that leaves me, and I wish to stay."

She sighed, and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. He tolerated the touch but kept a wary eye on her aura, lest she try to coerce him again. "Let us talk more of this later."

Underneath her pretense of yielding he sensed deep anger, and a kind of resignation, as if she wearied of pitting her will against his. If that was the case, so much the better. He found her superior manner nigh-unbearable at times. Rather than rising to her bait, he said, "Tell Mistress Joan and Master

Geoffrey that I'm nearly finished with my bath, and will join them shortly to give my report."

Her lips thinned at his dismissal. "Very well. Don't keep us waiting." She stalked out, the door admitting a blast of cold air.

Feeling as if he had been reprieved from an execution, he sat for a while longer in the tub, starting to shiver but not yet ready to face the others.

How had her aura grown so large? Was it from being continuously incarnated in the same body, while he and the other Apkallu diminished with each pass through the gates of the Underworld? Perhaps Ea had known the answers to these questions, but, as always, Michel found his memories floating just out of reach.

No matter. He had won for now. He would have to be content with what the fates had gifted him: Tirgit, a child of his own, and a place as a Protector of the House.

It was enough. It had to be.

* * * *

The summons, delivered by Joan's youngest daughter, Beatrix, came nearly two hours after Michel's unexpected arrival. Dusk was falling, and Dominic had long since given up hope that he would be included when Michel gave his mission report.

When Michel had first arrived, Dominic had fought the urge to rush downstairs, curling his fingers around the cold stone of the windowsill to hold himself in place. The younger djinn had made his aversion to Dominic's company perfectly clear

at the last feast; why invite further scorn? And yet, how could he bear to find himself under the same roof as his beloved, and not even exchange a greeting? Michel's golden aura was like sunshine after months of this damned English rain, and his spirit longed to be warmed by it.

It had taken every ounce of his resolution, but Dominic had closed the shutters, walked back to his seat by the smoldering fire, and picked up the book he had dropped. Waiting, again. Now, as he strode down the stairs and prepared to cross the courtyard to the old wing of the House, he wondered at the reason for the delay. Had Michel been injured, needing wounds tended? Or had he just wanted a bath? Though sorely tempted, Dominic did not dare open his link to Michel discover the truth.

Cecilia, Mathilde, Joan, Geoffrey, and of course, Michel, were already gathered in the panelled parlor. Dominic anxiously scanned for signs of bandages. To his relief, Michel merely looked weary, his aura somewhat dulled by fatigue, but unmarred by injury.

Once Dominic seated himself, Michel gave him the barest nod before he began speaking, his attention focused on Joan and Geoffrey. As the younger djinn related the events of the past two weeks, Dominic had the luxury of simply watching him, and listening to his voice, mellow and deep. But there was an undertone in his voice and his bearing that concerned Dominic. It seemed as if Michel bore some extra burden of sorrow now. He had been violent, resentful, dismissive, and elusive since his Transformation, but not so sad, before his mission. What had happened to him?

"...because of the loss of life, I left a few of the kin at de Faremoutier's manor, and gave them instructions to help Lady de Faremoutier put her husband's fief into better order. Master Rogier is petitioning the French king to appoint a knight in the favor of the Paris House to the demesne, to eliminate bandits from that quarter in the future."

"Is there any risk of a blood feud between de Faremoutier's kindred and the House?" Joan asked, anxiously knotting her fingers.

"He had no one left, according to his wife," said Michel. "I placed a geas of coercion on her so she would never speak of what occurred. There were no other witnesses."

"If you have mastered coercion, then why bribe the peasants?" asked Cecilia sharply.

Michel sighed, clearly irritated. "We can well afford a few silver pennies, and the folk in that district were nearly starving, thanks to the depredations of their lord."

"I am certain your judgment was sound, Lord Michael," Geoffrey interjected hastily.

"I am glad that you are returned safely to us. Our departure must be soon. The *Rose of Yarmouth* stands ready to carry us across the Channel," added Joan.

To Dominic's surprise, Michel's aura shrank at Joan's words. At the same moment, Cecilia's aura flared into a brilliant silver blaze.

"We have decided," she said, her tone calm despite the fluttering of her great wings, "that Michael should stay behind. I am worried about the poor state of relations between the King and Simon de Montfort, and upon

reflection, I believe the House needs a Protector to stay here."

Michel raised a brow at her declaration, but his aura relaxed as she finished speaking.

Feeling as if an invisible blow had forced all the air from his lungs, Dominic sat, mute with pain, as Joan and Geoffrey peppered Michel with questions. Cecilia had said the plan was hers, but Dominic knew that she had never been the one behind it. He knew why Michel was willing to forgo his sister's Appointing: his great loathing for the one he had once loved.

The knowledge burned Dominic's heart, his very soul, like Greek fire. He had hoped that the long voyage might bring them to some sort of reconciliation, or at least some comfort in one another's presence. Those hopes were now dashed, like a broken ship upon an unfriendly shore. His gaze met Michel's, and saw a pain in those blue eyes that matched the agony in his own soul. Then, the other djinn turned to reply to a disappointed comment from Mathilde.

What he said, Dominic didn't know. He could hear nothing over the roaring in his ears.

Michel did not look at him again as the conversation continued, flowing around Dominic as if he were flotsam in the middle of an empty sea.

Finally, everyone rose to go. Michel left the parlor first, and without the light from his great golden wings, the chamber dimmed, even with his Seer's Eyes closed. Dominic slowly levered himself out of his chair, feeling every decade that had passed since the disaster at Beziers. Cecilia made as

if to follow him, but Mathilde took her arm, murmuring something that Dominic couldn't hear.

—Go, talk to him,—Mathilde's compassionate voice sounded in his mind.—We'll wait until you're finished.—A glowing blue-green wing brushed against him in a careful caress.

—Thank you,—he told her, and hurried after Michel, catching up with him in the relative privacy of the stables.

"Cecilia, do you want this one?" Michel asked carelessly, arms filled with the bulky wooden frame of a side-saddle. He fell abruptly silent. "What do *you* want?"

Dominic raised his hands, palms out. "Just to speak with you. I—I won't keep you long."

"Why?" Michel asked, warily, holding the saddle like a shield.

"Because we haven't had a conversation since—" *Mathilde's Transformation*, "—we arrived in London."

He hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation, but Michel frowned. "I thought it for the best." He turned to place the saddle on the back of Cecilia's palfrey, soothing the animal with a gentle hand on its neck. "I can't give you what you want," he said, softly. "I've told you that before." He busied himself fastening the palfrey's breast collar.

"You've made that abundantly clear. But can we reach some sort of accord before you go?" Dominic asked, trying not to beg. He stepped forward and began to help with the buckles and straps. "We are both Protectors. Can we be ... comrades?"

Michel was silent. But he hadn't said 'no.'

Desperately, Dominic continued: "I don't want you to leave like this, not without some hope of reconciliation."

Michel's mental shield wavered, showing an image of himself kneeling in a tent, before a makeshift altar.

"Reconciliation?" He sighed. "Well, here it is: I wish I were strong enough to hate you, but I'm not. Even with what we know about you, *she* says she still loves you. She's always in my mind." He stopped, as if he'd already said too much.

"Honorias," Dominic whispered, elated and appalled at the same time. She lived! She lived *in him*. Gods! What a wretched joke to play on them all. But ... Honorias *spoke* to Michel? "Let me speak with her!"

As Michel started to look stubborn, Dominic threw his pride to the winds. "Please! I beg of you! Let me hear her voice!" He held his breath as Michel visibly carried on an internal debate.

Coming to a shaky decision, Michel said, "You must promise me on your honor as a Protector: You will *not* touch her—me. Nor come closer than arm's-length. Swear it to me now, or I walk away."

"Do you think I only want to *ravish* you?" Dominic asked scornfully.

"I think you corrupt everything you touch," Michel answered, pained and yet clearly tempted. "I think you want too much. Do you swear, or do I walk away?"

"I swear! I will not approach her, by my honor, or however much remains to me of my honor as a Protector of the House." He backed away from the palfrey as it gave a good shake, settling the saddle, and stamped a rear hoof.

"You agree?" Michel's expression was momentarily thunderstruck, Then uncertainty returned. "I don't know if—how—" He stopped talking and closed his eyes.

When they opened again, a different person lived within his skin. "Shuba!" Honoria used the earliest of the cherish names Ea had ever given to Ninshubur, the name that played on her title, and meant both 'precious stone, shining,' and 'bathed one.' She went on in rapid Greek. "He's a good Catholic boy, full of bloodthirst and guilt. Don't mind him too much." Before Dominic could move, she had ducked under the horse's head and barreled into him so hard they hit the stall wall with a thump. She hugged him tightly, with Michel's strength, so that he feared his ribs would crack.

And if they did, I would count it a minor price. He didn't bother responding aloud. He held her almost as tightly as she did. "My flame."

"We haven't much time. He's already shouting at me. I love you! You know that." Honoria had often rested her head in the hollow under Menelaos's collarbone, but Michel's body was taller than hers had been, and she laid her—Michel's—cheek against Dominic's shoulder.

Her breath was warm against Dominic's throat, sending a pleasurable jolt through his belly. He said, "I couldn't wait another six hundred years for you. I would have gone mad. I did go mad. I died without you."

"Shh. I know. Now you must do a harder thing."

He knew what she would ask. He didn't want to hear it.

"You must live without me. We've been shattered, all of us," Honoria murmured. "I don't know what to do. Michel can't remember, and neither can I."

"All my fault," Dominic said, accepting the blame.

"That may be. I don't know if I would have done any different, had I been Raised. Michel thought otherwise, but I know why he did what he did. Poor boy, with my memories leaking through his dreams." She kissed him, sharing and alleviating the hunger he had felt for so long. "We can't do more than this," she warned. "Or we'll break him."

"And you have to live with him," said Dominic, half-laughing. He could not resist giving her another hug. "Gods, I have missed you."

"Of course you did," she said, touching the white blaze in his hair, the track of the crossbow bolt that had begun the disaster for them all. "I'm so sorry that my death—our deaths—did this to you. You must go with Mathilde to Constantinople. Once she's Raised, she should be able to help you."

"She may decide to consort with Arjumand." Dominic did his best to keep his tone matter-of-fact. "Did you know that she and Roland were lovers?"

"I thought as much" said Honoria. "Though Michou did not want to believe it." She turned her attention to the internal Michel. "We're not done yet. Hold your peace." Then she smiled at Dominic, and her eyes were bright. "He's still so young. Go with Mathilde. Fight for her, if you must. You have my blessing, my hopes, and all my love."

Memories streamed through the blood bond between them, intermingling until Dominic no longer knew which memories were his, and which were Honoria's: *Their wedding day, dressed in splendid Roman finery, holding the traditional seedcake to each other's lips, sweet with honey and spices ... Lord Khonsu, brown and muscled in a pleated white kilt, a leopard skin draped over his brown shoulders, drawing a bow and loosing an arrow with deadly accuracy against a bandit in the wastes of Sinai as Lady Tahat drives their chariot, the wind in her hair ... Ninshubur, warrior goddess, golden ornaments shining as the Lord of the Earth carries her, singing, to the sacred bed to work his magic on them both...*

Their kiss ended. "It is good to meet again. Remember me!" they prayed, together. "Always," they breathed as one.

"Be well, my heart," Honoria said. "Oh, and stand well away. I can't vouch for Michel's temper. Flemish barbarian!" But she said it with affection.

It was hard not to laugh. It was harder to let her go. But he did.

Honoria prudently went to the other side of the palfrey. In a reverse of the transformation earlier, her light went out, and Michel's frowning visage took her place. It seemed he was still in the middle of a fight with her, too. "I don't care if you went to him first! He swore he wouldn't touch you! *Me!*"

"I promised not to approach you," Dominic said dryly, interrupting Michel's internal debate. "I didn't. Don't complain to me of your own actions." His blood still sang with the first happiness he'd felt for half a century.

Michel cleared his throat, said nothing else, and gently laid the crupper around the palfrey's tail and attached its straps to the rings on the saddle. Eventually he asked, as if he couldn't stop himself, "If Mathilde consorts with Roland, and Cecilia takes you back as her consort, will you kill for her again?"

Intense pain squeezed Dominic's chest. "I don't want to." *But I may not have a choice.* Each act of murder had taken a piece of his soul, no matter what Cecilia said about death energy healing his aura. He understood that, although Honoria would forgive anything, Michel would never forgive him if he resumed killing. He might never forgive himself. Despair, worse for the contrast of short-lived joy, drowned him.

A light touch startled him from his depths. He opened his eyes to find Michel standing next to him, his expression filled with deep compassion. "We've lost so much."

To Dominic's shock, Michel embraced him. Dominic turned his face into Michel's soft, short hair, and felt the delicate brush of Michel's mind—not Honoria's—against his.—I didn't understand. I didn't want to know what you felt.—

The pain lessened, and with it, Dominic's despair. Reluctantly, he stepped out of Michel's embrace, not sure if he felt relief or disappointment to be released. Michel met his gaze without a trace of his usual disgust. Emboldened, Dominic pressed a swift, chaste kiss against the other djinn's mouth.

Michel did not move.

"Thank you," Dominic said, his voice rough. Then, driven by an impulse he couldn't deny, he kissed Michel again,

mouth open, craving the warmth, the remembered comfort of his beloved's touch.

Michel pushed him away, his mouth straightening into a grim line. "Don't. I'm still staying here with Tirgit, and my child."

Dominic didn't pretend to misunderstand. Michel's kisses burned his mouth like fire. He turned abruptly on his heel and left the stable, leaving the other djinn to stare after him, as the link between them cobwebbed with regret.

Epilogue

November—December: en route to Constantinople

After an easy Channel crossing in *The Rose of Yarmouth*, Dominic, Mathilde, and an unnaturally subdued Cecilia traveled with a large group of kin overland from Calais by mule and riverboat. They boarded *The Rose of Chios* at Marseilles and set sail with a cargo of Gascon wine, Flemish cloth, essences of English lavender and violet, and the fragrant resin of labdanum shrubs from Provence. Forced to wait for seas to calm, the journey to Constantinople proved to be exactly the ordeal that Dominic had feared. Each day took him farther from Michel, but brought him no closer to Mathilde.

They arrived near Christmas at the House of the Rose in Messina on the island of Sicily. Mathilde chattered about learning how to dry the peels of oranges and lemons to keep their fragrance. Yet she refused to discuss her obvious worries after a routine Raising and Naming that he and Cecilia performed for the latest crop of adolescents there.

Did she consider him unwilling or incapable of assistance? She did not confide, and he did not pry. They did not speak of the future, but sometimes, when Mathilde's control slipped, he caught glimpses through their blood-bond of the Roland D'Agincourt she had known and loved: laughing, wickedly charming, passionate. Had that golden youth actually transformed into the rather stolid Arjumand abd al-Warda?

Would he transform back once he saw Mathilde again? How could Dominic compete with such ardency?

And if she did not choose to remain Dominic's consort after her Raising and Naming, would she keep him only as a patient until a successful treatment erased the acrid taste of her failure to vanquish his pain? Or would she fulfill her vow to complete his healing?

On those infrequent occasions when they had enough privacy to make love, their joining was tender but cautious, each taking exquisite care with the other, unable to risk the joyous abandon of true djinni lovers. He missed Honoria every minute, but kept her instructions in mind. He would find a way to be necessary to Mathilde.

In the space of a year, he had gambled everything on his reunion with Michel, and lost it all: the trust of the House, Michel's love, and now Mathilde's confidence. In the space of a quarter hour, he had gained a new lease on life, with the sure knowledge of Honoria's love and blessing. She wanted him healed, so he was done with sacrifice and defeat.

And if Cecilia decided to take him as her consort again? Like Michel, who had refused to accompany her on this voyage to Constantinople, he would just say no. He would taste a true victory, win something worth winning, and be able to keep it. He would be the man Honoria believed in.

No matter how long it took.

~To Be Continued~

The next volume of The House of the Rose series, *Broken Gods*, will be available April, 2007.

House of Memory [House of the Rose Book II]
by Michaela August

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