

# BROKEN GODS

HOUSE OF THE ROSE  
BOOK THREE



BY MICHAELA AUGUST

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*by Michaela August*

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-Dedication-

And cast down what is in your right hand; it shall devour what they have wrought; they have wrought only the plan of a magician, and the magician shall not be successful wheresoever he may come from.—Surah 20, "Ta Ha," verse 69, *The Holy Qur'an*

This book is dedicated to David Lee Keller, who first suggested there was more to Mongols than history records.

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listed in the bibliography on our Web site.

Previously, in *Glass Souls* and *House of Memory*:

The vampires who call themselves djinni protect the mortals of the House of the Rose from Crusader and Saracen alike. When anti-heretic Crusaders massacre the city of Béziers in 1209, most of the Protectors perish trying to protect their charges. Cecilia, the Eldest Protector, survives but saves only the badly wounded Protector Menelaos.

His memories and powers crippled by a devastating head injury, Menelaos, now called Dominic, spends the next forty years healing. When King Louis of France leads a Crusade to Egypt in 1259, Dominic discovers that young cousins Sir Michel and Sir Roland are the reincarnations of Menelaos's beloved wife Honoria and her twin brother, Marcus, who were killed in Béziers.

Roland, who was Marcus, is quickly persuaded to transfer his allegiance to the House of the Rose, agreeing to become a Protector. In this role, with his new name, Arjumand, and in the arms of Sharibet, he finds some measure of success and contentment. But Michel flees in fear for his soul and vanishes into the protective anonymity of the order of the Knights Templar.

When Dominic receives false news of Michel's death, he begins an obsessive quest for Michel's new 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.

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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 her oldest enemy, the banished soul of the goddess Inanna, has been reincarnated as Blanche, the daughter of Michel's sister Mathilde, also a reborn Protector. Cecilia becomes Mathilde's best friend, and arranges a marriage for young Blanche to remove her from the influence of the others.

Dominic receives word of Michel's location and journeys in haste to Ypres. He 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.

Cecilia manages to cover up her misdeeds, but only by further crippling Dominic's powers, and injuring Michel's memories, as well. Pursued by the Templars, Dominic, Cecilia, Michel, and Mathilde settle in London, where Dominic and Michel forge an uneasy truce and Mathilde, who has been transformed, learns the duties of a Protector during her probationary period.

*Broken Gods* begins approximately nine months before the start of the events in *House of Memory*.

## Chapter One

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering ...—*Colossians* 3:12-13

Friday, September 19, AD 1259

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

Arjumand abd al Warda, Protector of the House of the Rose, stood unhappily before his consort Sharibet in the room called the Red Solar. Wide windows, high up on the wall above the red tapestry that provided the chamber's dominant color, overlooked an inner courtyard shadowed by twilight gloom.

"I know I promised..." He heard his own whining, and wished he had more control over his voice, or over his fate.

Sharibet frowned and put down her pen. "Yes, you did promise to Transform my daughter Nadira, and so you shall."

"I promised 'if God wills it!'" he countered, drawing from his flawless memory the regrettable words he had said on that rainy Christmas evening in Acre, two years ago.

"You forget, *mon coeur*, that we djinni are as very gods to the House, who are my children. And I do will that you make my daughter Nadira one of us."

"I don't will it." Arjumand insisted. "She's not ... she's ... I can't explain it, but it would be wrong to Transform her."

"If you can't explain, then you cannot change my mind." Sharibet picked up a parchment from her desk and pointedly began reading it.

Clearly dismissed, he huffed and turned to go.

"Arjumand," she said sweetly, just as he opened the door.

He paused, hating his weakness for doing so. "Yes, lady?" Impotent rage swirled through him, until he could feel it surrounding his body, charged and prickly as the air before a lightning storm.

"Be sure to check the pigeons this evening. I'm waiting for word of Lady Cecilia's safe arrival in Ypres."

"I'll remember." He never forgot anything, these days—except his courage. Not that he'd had much to begin with.

"Until later, then."

He stalked out, wishing he could hit something. Or someone. Perhaps one of the men of the House might spar with him later, to let him work off some of his frustration.

*Damn tradition.*

\* \* \* \*

Saturday, September 20, AD 1259

As squalling winds rattled tree branches in the courtyard outside the children's wing, Nadira bint Abdulaziz handed her son off to the waiting nanny. The child was heavy now, his first teeth well in. *Finally weaned!*

She rubbed her sore breasts and washed them as the nursemaid burped the baby. Smoothing her camisia back over her arms, Nadira enjoyed the cool richness of silk upon her skin, and thought of the gold she would soon be entitled to wear. Soon she would be a djinniah, one of the lords of the House of the Rose.



The nursemaid disappeared through the tall doorway, and Nadira began to comb her hair, anticipation singing through her. Though she had been as exalted a servant as the House had known in a thousand years—a Seer, able to identify the auras of the reborn—she had not been the equal of the djinni, who could see the memories of the past, and return them to the kin.

Soon she would become one of those gods of the people of the House—at long, painful last, after so many babies. Babies were fine as long as they didn't talk. Before then, they were simple bundles of need. After, they became too complex, too full of questions and desires that weren't simple at all, like her eldest, Khalil. He wanted so much from her: loving attention to his school recitations, tender caresses, and more; some sense that she truly cared for him, she guessed. Well, soon he would be disappointed, poor thing.

She would have her Crown of Service, and Sharibet could keep the sons she had demanded for her House.

Soon, she would have the honor and the immortality she had craved since first she was Raised and Named, and promised a gambler's bargain: after this life, if you are reborn into the House, you can live again, with your memories restored. But if you are not born into the House, only if you are Found by a djinn or a Seer will you remember your lives before.

Too many ifs for her.

She sauntered to the barred window of the nursery and stood listening to the music of the city: brawling voices, merchants singing the praises of their wares, and the

constant ringing of the Christian bells. She missed the calls to prayer that she had heard all her mortal life, growing up in Alexandria and Baghdad.

Soon, soon she would be liberated from this prison, no longer a feeble woman in need of a guard, but herself a Protector, more powerful than ten men, and a wielder of magic besides. *Soon ...* She only had to endure Arjumand's touch, his paralyzing kindness, and his burning indifference. She only had to survive her Transformation, eluding a terrifying death brought far too near for comfort. She only need shed her mortality and don the garment of immortality.

Her hand gripped one section of the lattice, tightly enough that the rich color of her skin fled her knuckles, leaving them dun as desert sand. Soon, she would breathe the air of freedom. Or she would cease to breathe at all.

She stood at the window for a long time, treasuring breath.

\* \* \* \*

Saturday, September 27, AD 1260

*One more chance.* Arjumand slipped, naked, into Sharibet's bed. One more try to convince her in the darkness they shared.

"Mmm?" Sharibet said sleepily.

By now, Arjumand knew very well how to please his consort. She required no distracting variations. Her responses were simple, but never safely so.

They shared blood, with its ecstasy and the guardedness that characterized all his interactions with his lover. He saw

the stair-girdled temples in her memories, and the lyre, broken on the floor from Menelaos's grief-stricken rage. Repetition had dulled any heat or flavor from those memories. *Oh, yes, yes, the same old scenes replaying...*

"Ahhh," he whispered into her ear. He kissed her, and stroked her where he knew she liked, until she shivered, murmuring her satisfaction with him.

When she was relaxed and pliant against his body, he whispered, "I don't think Transforming Nadira will be good for the House."

Sharibet shoved him off the bed. "Get out!"

He landed with a thump on the thick carpet. "Sharibet..."

She hissed, but he persisted, spilling out the words. "I know it's Tradition! I know she earned it! I know all these things! But I know Nadira, too, and she won't be a good djinniah for the House."

Sharibet groaned. "I appreciate your diligence in this matter, Arjumand," she said with weary formality, absurd in the aftermath of their lovemaking. "But you must let it rest. She will be Transformed. You promised to do so. She has earned her right to it. Whether she deserves it or not is not at issue. Whatever she does later, we must bear." She smoothed the silk sheet with her hand. "I wish you would agree to be Raised and Named. Dealing with your continual ignorance is wearying."

Darkness thundered in his ears. "Why must we set ourselves up for tragedy?"

"For gods' sake!" She pulled a pillow over her face. He didn't move. Didn't speak. Didn't leave.

"Gah!" She threw the pillow at him.

He caught it just before it hit him squarely in the chest. It gave up a burst of rose perfume that smothered all other scents.

"Arjumand, Arjumand. We can't know what she will do. She may surprise us. If you haven't learned the value of surprise by now, then you need, as I have said before, to be Raised and Named. Now go away, and let me sleep."

He tried to understand. He tried to curb his disappointment. But he could only storm into his adjoining chamber. Once he slammed the door, he lit a dozen oil lamps all at once, driving the air with his aura hands into sparks of heat that ignited the wicks and sent light gleaming from the silk that upholstered every surface. He wanted to smash something, to release the anger that surged through him, but instead he carefully extinguished all but one of the lamps he had just lit, sealing the air from each wick in turn until it died, smoking.

He couldn't even think the words he wanted to. Words like *fool, stupid ...* Dangerous. No matter to whom he addressed them.

He let the emotion dissipate. No help for it. He'd tried. He'd done his best. As Sharibet had said, whatever happened, they must bear it.

He stood, contemplating his own, lonely bed, until he went for a bath, instead.

\* \* \* \*

Eve of the feast of the Archangel Michael, Sunday,  
September 28, AD 1259

Nadira found it most unfair that, with food smells permeating the House in honor of her coming Transformation, she was not allowed to eat anything. She hadn't been allowed to eat any of her favorite foods in weeks. Today there would be no eating at all, no touching anything, no shopping in the market, no exercise since her bath, nothing but water and herbs to purge her body.

She almost missed feeding her baby. Her breasts had hurt for days. She had been preparing for endless weeks. Endless dullness. Endless effort.

Where was the honor, the excitement of her Transformation?

Sitting on a low cushion in the women's quarters, surrounded by chattering, excited kinswomen, having her finger and toenails trimmed, her palms painted with henna designs, her eyebrows plucked, her hair everywhere below her eyebrows torn out ten painful strands at a time, she didn't want to admit she was afraid.

"More water," she said, just to watch her sisters and her cousins scurry to find a cup of the special herbal tisane, and carefully pass it from hand to hand with many smiles. And then to have Philomena, Grandmother of the House in Constantinople, present it to her with a bow: now *that* was more like what she had hoped for, from her Transformation.

She opened her Seer's eyes and fought to control her grimace at what she saw: the ugly mustard color of jealousy, flaring from the elder's aura. Worse: the old woman's Raising

and Naming mark rose like a plume of fire high above her forehead. Philomena wasn't only an elder in body, then. She was perhaps as old as Sharibet herself.

But she was doomed, Nadira told herself, doomed, as all mortals were, to repeat the endless cycle of birth and death that she herself was escaping tonight.

No need to wonder where jealousy sprang from.

She viewed the auras of all the women present. *Ugly mustard. Ugly mustard. Blue and indigo*—how nice, they were detached from the pettiness of life and happy for her. *Red anger*. That was one cousin quarreling with another. *Black sickness*.

Should she warn the woman? Diagnose the disease?

She drank the greenish tisane proffered by Philomena and deliberated. No one else had the Sight. Despite Sharibet's breeding program, very few of the kin developed the ability. No one here would know that she had looked at them with her Seer's vision, unless she mentioned that she had done so. And if she did, they'd never forget that she knew exactly what they were feeling. Then she would be even more alone, on this evening before her Transformation. Afterward, she promised herself, she would tell the woman. In private. As a djinniah, a Protector of the House, protecting the family from small ills, as well as large ones.

If she did not waken from her Transformation? Another of the djinni would see the woman's aura. They would tell her. There was really no need to tell her now. Nadira shivered.

"Are you cold, *habibah*?" her sister Amina asked solicitously, leaning close, calling her 'beloved' as she had

when they were still little girls together. "Would you like us to light a brazier for you?"

The room was packed with females, and the combined body heat was raising a glow of perspiration on all of them. Nadira looked at her sister, and fought to close her Seer's eyes. She didn't want to see ugly mustard, the cherry red of hate, and the plume of ancient history in her sister's aura. "No, I—" her fingers twitched as one of the henna painters missed a stroke.

"Sorry!" the girl cried, and bent to her task more carefully. Firmly looking at her sister with everyday sight, Nadira smiled with teeth-gritted graciousness. "No, but I thank you."

Amina nodded, and went back to mixing the next batch of henna paste.

Nadira let her family complete their ministrations, thinking, *Everyone is older than I am, but I am going to be a djinniah before any of them.* She tried to remember why that had seemed such a good thing to her, just yesterday.

The sun moved against the sky. Evening approached, and dinner smells intensified. A dinner she could not eat. She would never eat again. After tonight, blood would be her only food. Her stomach growled.

"More water," she ordered, and tried with all her strength to keep it from leaking from her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

The family members—upwards of fifty people from Constantinople and nearby cities—gathered in the hall that had once been an atrium when the house was new, before

earthquakes and fires and long centuries of occupation altered every feature. They came to feast and celebrate the exaltation of their kinswoman to djinniah.

Arjumand knew he should moderate his surliness and pretend to participate in the occasion, but what was happening was wrong, and somebody should stop it. But nobody did.

The number of people and the volume of their chatter made him nervous. He swiveled to glare at an impromptu dancer, who was leaping in place and clapping his hands, singing some yowling ditty at the top of his lungs. Nobody cared that Arjumand was annoyed. They were too busy enjoying themselves.

He tried to keep from glaring at Nadira, garbed in bridal finery of costly silk, and burdened with a cap of gold coins worth a city's ransom. By the way she played with the coins, he knew she hadn't been informed that they were only a loan.

At the end of his rope, Arjumand contemplated ways that she might not survive her Transformation. It was tempting. Could he actively prevent her from awakening? *No*.

Fine Protector he was! To see a threat, and not be able to act on it. If he could only see the future, and know whether his action, or his inaction, would most harm the House.

Damn! He slammed his glass goblet full of fresh lamb's blood down on the table, drawing a narrow-eyed scowl from Sharibet. A hasty servitor brought him a less-clotted cup. He waved the server away. More blood was not what he needed. He was going to drink far too much of it later tonight.



The evening went on interminably. He knew everyone here, and everyone knew him, but he didn't want to talk to anyone tonight. He wished he could go home, back to the simplicity of his youth in green Artois, but nostalgia was useless. He couldn't even take refuge in getting drunk, for djinni digestion did not allow it. What could he do? How could he get out of this? He could just fly away—so tempting. But he'd be flying away from all his responsibilities, all the oaths he'd sworn, and from the refuge that the House afforded him. Bah! Was he only concerned for his own skin, after all?

Sharibet glanced at him, smiling with one corner of her lip curled.

He drained the cup he held in one gulp, trying to erase her mockery. Unbidden, dark temptation returned. Drink Nadira's life. Fail to complete her Transformation, and blame it on his own incomplete memories.

Self-disgust made him raise the cup to his lips. Unpleasantly cold blood slid past his teeth. A whiff of the servant's perfume was the only clue that he'd missed seeing her refill his cup.

Around him, the party continued unabated.

\* \* \* \*

Too soon, the time arrived when he had to retire from the banquet with Nadira. Surrounded by family and djinni, all wishing her the best and easiest of Transformations, and slyly teasing Arjumand about the hardship of his coming duties, he plodded toward his suite, like a reluctant bridegroom saddled with an ugly bride.

It was disconcerting to see Abdulaziz, his valet of many years, standing at the doorway, flushed with pride at his daughter's success in achieving the ultimate prize awarded to the kin, and apparently not caring that Arjumand was about to have sex with her again, as he'd taken her virginity a decade ago.

Arjumand smiled sickly at him, replied,—Yes, I know,—twenty times to Sharibet's hasty, last-minute mind-to-mind instructions and reminders regarding the procedure, and shut the door firmly, finally alone with Nadira, who had aged gracefully since she had been his concubine. Her skin was still soft, and her figure was only minimally changed since bearing four sons—or was it five? Arjumand had never bothered to keep track. None of them were his. *Thank God.*

She was standing there, rubbing her forehead. He supposed she must have a headache from all that gold hanging around her face. "Are you well?"

"Yes, lord," she whispered.

"Do you need help to, um, disrobe?"

"No, lord."

"Good. Ah, good."

She tugged vainly at the coin-laden cap encircling her skull.

He sighed. "Let me help."

Her hands made an abortive movement, as if to protect the gold as he moved close to her and unpinned the heavy ornament. But she consciously straightened her fingers and let him set the thing down on a shelf. Six or so chains encircled her throat, and he had to peel them off one by one

so they didn't tangle. Bracelets from wrist to elbow, a triple-stranded belt, and anklets also needed removing.

When she was finally free of it all, she looked sixteen, silk billowing around her, almost ready to float up to the gilded ceiling. A small smile appeared and disappeared on her daintily painted lips as he surveyed her.

"Thank you, lord," she said, looking at him from under eyelashes darkened with kohl.

*By God's bones, let me get through this night with my dignity intact!*

She took the initiative now, reaching out to grasp the gorgeously embroidered tablion of his mantle to draw it off his shoulder. He shrugged off the heavy garment, which fell to the floor behind him like a foothill between himself and the door. Another tug or two, and his tunic became a layer of snow on the growing mountain range. There was no escape in that direction, anyway.

Carefully he lifted her loose tunica over her head, together with her camisia, embroidered at upper arm, elbow, and wrist, to match the glittering hem of her tunica. When she was also naked, they moved together toward the huge bed dominating the room. He extinguished the candles with several hands of air. He didn't want to see what he was doing with Nadira.

When she squeaked at the unexpected darkness, and stood, blind, unable to step up to the high bed, he wanted to slap his forehead for his foolishness. He took her by the shoulders and the back of her thighs, lifted her, and placed her on the bed.

At the first touch of his aura she gasped, then her hands spread on the bed's soft surface, testing its limit. She relaxed and changed her posture subtly, raising her knee, and tilting her pelvis invitingly.

He smelled her musk, overpowering the clean fragrance of roses and mint washed into the linens of his bed.

He remembered her body. He had made love to her often when he had first become a djinn, trying to make a baby to entrap—or, as they said, rescue—a Lost soul for the House. He knew her soul from drinking her blood and seeing the persistent ambition beneath her outward compliance. It was almost enough to make his prick shrivel. He wanted to stop here. Just walk away. But no, he had to uphold the House's damned tradition. Maybe if he just concentrated on the sensations and forgot the hateful person inhabiting this delightful body...

He lay down on the bed and began to caress her. The woman beneath him made encouraging noises, squeaks and not-quite-soundless catches of breath. He couldn't tell whether she was making those noises for herself, or for his benefit. He didn't care. His task was to Transform her, step by ritualized magical step, into a djinniah. Sharibet had drummed the steps into his memory. First, the mingling of essences—not too difficult, and supposed to be a pleasure.

The woman squirmed as he moved energetically, holding one breast in his hand, licking an ear with his tongue. It worked until she sighed his old name in mimicry of passion. "Roland!"

Jarred beyond his ability to pretend, he rolled off her and sat on the edge of the bed, trembling with the effort it took to restrain his urge to beat her.

"Lord?" she said in a small voice.

"Nadira," he replied, not trusting himself to say more. He had abandoned the name and the life of Roland d'Agincourt, Crusader, when Shajar ad Durr, the ruling Sultana of Egypt, had given him a new name fit for a djinn of the House of the Rose. Only his late brother, Robert, homeward bound from Acre to Artois, had called him by that name since then. Arjumand had worked so hard to forget that life, those loved ones, hiding the memories from Sharibet's prying mind.

With one word, Nadira brought back everything he had been hiding from himself: Michel, his Templar cousin, even now being recruited by Cecilia in Ypres as another Protector for the House of the Rose. Whether she wanted him solely for the House, or to ease the dangerous obsession of her current consort, Dominic, Arjumand did not know, but he had done everything he could to hide Michel from Dominic's obsessive search.

Michel was a grown man, with all the resources of the Templars behind him, but his sister, Mathilde, lived in Ypres too. Roland had loved Mathilde without reservation before he'd joined King Louis's Crusade. He had tried so hard to keep her safely isolated from this House of sorcerers, even if it meant he would never see her again—or her daughter. He couldn't stand the thought of linking his old life to the strangeness of this House and their djinni. Why did Nadira

have to remind him? Why couldn't he keep a single piece of himself unsullied by all the damned magic?

"Lord?" she asked again.

"Be silent." He didn't want to hit her. She hadn't done anything on purpose. She was just Nadira. He felt her cowering in the darkness beside him. He reined in his anger. That she feared him ... hurt. Yet he wanted her to fear. He wanted her to di—*Breathe*, he commanded himself. *Breathe. Don't think. Don't feel.*

Somewhere in the House a girl laughed. A young man's voice rose in song, and happy clapping accompanied him. Arjumand clutched the linen sheet and willed himself to be calm, to be reasonable.

In the silence between his own breaths, he heard Nadira's panting. The irregular, terrified rhythm of it incensed him.

"Nadira," he said softly.

"Y-yes, lord?"

"You are not to call me by that name. That name is dead, forgotten."

Her gasp reminded him that Forgetting was the House's greatest curse. He sighed.

"Let's get back to step three, shall we?" he said, as gently as he could. Sharibet had led him through each step and corrected his practice on pathetic little monkeys, purchased at great expense for his training. Afterwards, he had killed them, and burned their changed bodies into ash. He knew what to do. He knew how to do it correctly. All he had to do was complete this Transformation, as he had been commanded to do. As he had promised.

## Chapter Two

Have you a scripture that promises you whatever you choose? Or have We sworn a covenant with you—a covenant binding until the Day of Resurrection—that you shall have what you yourselves ordain?—Surah 68:37-39 "The Pen," *The Holy Qur'an*

His unresolvable problem resolved, Arjumand reached to touch her. The woman had gone dry, waiting for him. He didn't push, although he could have. He caressed, and stroked, and murmured kind words (he had cultivated a talent for lying) until she was ready for him. He applied all the skills he'd learned from Sharibet until the woman shattered with ecstasy.

Step four of Transformation stated: "when the applicant is relaxed and drowsy, begin to drink his or her blood. At this point the applicant should not show any resistance. Unconsciousness may result after the loss of one part in ten of the total volume of blood. Death may result after loss of two parts in ten, therefore time this step carefully."

At the first taste he convulsed, coming hard, seeing the pictures through the bond formed by blood: *the triumph of Seeing Robert's aura, and knowing she had gained the House's greatest prize ... her nights with Roland: hot slick lovemaking, impersonal kindness, and failure to capture his heart, or his child ... discovering in her own Raising and Naming that she was a lowly newcomer to the House ... waiting impatiently for her older sister's Raising and Naming—*

*and then the shock of meeting the different person Amina had become...*

*Beyond the first, rapturous taste, the deeper memories: fumbling in darkness for the last cup of water, and spilling it ... fighting a desperate battle, scythes and knives running red with blood ... she sits, hour by impatient hour, crosslegged, scooping the brain matter out, bit by bit, through the nostril of the Osiris cat, soon to be interred in a funeral rite more splendid than she, a slave to the temple, will ever be granted...*

True to Sharibet's instructions, after about two pints, the woman's eyes rolled up into her head. He was sorely tempted to continue drinking, but he stopped, as directed, closing the wounds he'd made. Now for step five, the hardest of all. He had expected to quail at this most complicated task, but instead he felt strong, poised, and ready.

He wrapped the wings of his aura around the woman's body and through it, filling all the interstices of flesh and bone, fluid and air. He concentrated, opening his Seer's eyes to view the energy of her spirit. With multiple hands of air, he grasped her aura from the tip of the small plume that showed she had been Raised and Named, to the soles of her feet. With one mighty jerk, he tore it asunder.

The body under him writhed with pain. He held it securely in his physical arms, while his hands of air kept her amorphous aura from joining together. Biting his tongue, he raised a drop of blood; then he thrust it into her mouth, ensuring his blood touched the soft tissues at the back of her throat.



His blood would provide a template for the physical Transformation. If he'd been Raised and Named, Sharibet had told him, he would already have the memory of the changes he would induce in her body, the sum of which would make a djinn. Without memory, he must follow a map. The changes were clear and simple, like moving colored beads on a string. He just had to make so many of them, over and over.

How long did it take? Minutes? Hours? When the woman's aura stayed separated of its own accord, he allowed himself to collapse. He made one more check with his Seer's eyes to confirm that the nascent wings of a djinn wavered and flared from Nadira's body. They were tiny, hardly larger than her natural aura had been. But they would grow a few fingerwidths per century, so long as she lived Transformed.

—Well done, *mon coeur*,—Sharibet's mental voice whispered to him. She was playing her lute in her chambers, waiting for him to finish.

—I don't agree,—he snarled.

—I know.—Her voice was fainter than the ringing of fatigue in his ears.—But it is the Law. She earned it.—

*Stupid damned law.*

\* \* \* \*

Thursday, October 1, AD 1259

Nadira didn't so much waken as slowly come to realize she existed. She felt a repetitive vibration somewhere nearby.  
*Slap. Slap. Slap.*

There was sensation, as well: some kind of pressure. Why was there motion? Sound? She felt heavy with a sleep so

profound that she could not remember herself, her name, her place. She had a body. That was what felt heavy.

The tapping continued. As awareness increased she realized that it was coming from herself. Oh—that was her hand. That was a wall. She was calling for help. She was pounding on the wall behind her in order to summon assistance. She had been left here, alone, for some reason. Who was she calling? Why did she need help? There was a sense that something had happened. Something painful. She recognized pain now, in the bones of her hand, hitting against the unforgiving solidity of the wall.

She stopped. Her fingers throbbed. She felt different, although she couldn't remember what she should feel like. What had happened to her?

She tried to blink, but her eyelids were gummed shut. She tore them apart, letting in too-bright light. She squinted, seeing a pink halo. She brought a distant hand close, closer, until it bumped into her forehead, her nose. She took a breath, and felt a momentous vibration—a heartbeat in her chest. She opened her Seer's eyes, and gasped. In front of her a glory of light shone with silver-green and red radiance, shaped like wings.

"Leila!" Nadira gasped, her memories crowding into consciousness, her normal sight taking in the details of the room. Her own room, her own bed. Windows dark with night. No lamp lit, but she could see everything, including the Crown of Service djinniah sitting beside her bed.

"It is good to meet again, little sister," Leila said. "I'm glad you have awakened." She lifted up a jug, marked with the seal of the djinni.

Nadira knew what was in it and what the wedge-shaped mark upon the seal meant. The only thing she didn't know was how the blood would taste. She covered her mouth with her hands. Not yet! She didn't want to know just yet.

Leila waited patiently. Her silence drove Nadira to speech. "It is good to meet again, sister."

"Elder sister, you must say," Leila corrected.

"Elder sister," Nadira repeated, puzzled. "Why are you here? Where is Ro—Lord Arjumand?"

The sadness in Leila's face intensified. "He is not here."

"But isn't he supposed to—? Doesn't he want to know how my Transformation—?" Nadira stumbled to a halt and covered her face with her hands. He had been so angry, so cold. "He hates me, doesn't he? For failing to give him a son."

Leila gave an exasperated sigh. "He doesn't hate you. You're of the House. You did your best to please him, and he knows that. He kept very strict watch over your Transformation."

"They why isn't he here for my awakening?"

"He has other duties."

Nadira groaned. The sense of injury, of rejection, burned, a familiar, hated pain. But when the burning persisted, she identified it, at last, as hunger.

She put out her hand. "Give me—"

Leila pulled the jar out of reach.

"What are you doing? I'm hungry!" She tried to lunge forward, to grab the jar, but invisible hands held her down.

"Nadira, newly-created djinniah of the House of the Rose," Leila said formally. "Your life has been, and shall be, a life of service to the House. The House provides you shelter, and the requirements of your life: food, clothing, and tools. In return, you must swear to accept only what the House willingly gives to you, and to seek this food nowhere else, without permission. You must swear, Nadira, and your oath must be binding."

Her hunger was growing hotter, stronger. She feared she might blacken in its burning. "What? No! I want—"

"You must pass many tests, younger sister, before the end of your ordeal." Leila warned. "If you fail any of these tests, you will be killed. So swear to me now."

"Live or die at your whim?"

"Have you ever wondered why there are so few djinni? The life of a djinn is hard. The House cannot afford to have you fail. The family must be protected. This is the first Rule: while in the House, you must never drink any blood not willingly offered to you."

The fire in Nadira's belly raged. How could she quench it? *A promise is easily given.* "I swear to it!"

"So heard. So witnessed." Leila broke the seal, and handed her the jug.

The liquid was laced with herbs whose names and properties she had been taught. She recognized the sweet taste of oranges. But the blood—All the children of the House who guessed the secret of their djinni Protectors licked their

blood from little cuts, but she had never imagined it would taste like this. It was salt and iron, with an imprint of pain from a swiftly-slashed throat. The echo of death was in it.

She swallowed, and tried to make sense of it. Was it a popping? *No, an eggshell cracking. No, a ...* she couldn't encompass it, or describe it. But she knew that breaking the seal of death gave her power, even from the drained and stored blood of a lamb.

Blood. She been afraid of this. Blood was supposed to be life, but she was only drinking death. And she could not stop until the jar was empty.

"How do you feel?" Leila asked, as she took the jar away.

Nadira felt energized and sick. She wanted to hide, and at the same time accept the accolades of her kin. "Fine," she said, inadequately.

"Then let's go to the bath."

*They will bow to me. I am mistress of them all!*

But to Nadira's dismay, the house, or this wing of it at least, appeared deserted. It was disappointing, but she started to relax a bit in the steam room of the bath house. The cleansing oil slathered on her skin was fresh, and Leila's hands were practiced at scraping it off. The water in the pool was cool and made her feel lovely and light, but Leila, who usually chattered nonstop, was being unusually, almost rudely, silent.

Nadira tried to occupy herself with the pleasures of breathing, and moving, and seeing everything in spite of the dark. But Leila's—*was it preoccupation?*—became annoying.

Or was she jealous? Nadira was afraid to look, and see for sure.

She waved ripples in the perfumed water. The kin had spent a week's income to scent this for her. She tried to feel grateful, and satisfied, but it was hard to muster up such enthusiasm in the face of Leila's silence. Was she supposed to start the conversation? Ask questions such as when would she start protecting them? And from what? Well, she wouldn't! During her entire childhood she had been told, "You'll understand when you're older." Now she would grow as old as they were.

Then the room began to spin in dizzy swoops. In the air around her body something congealed. It was not quite pain, but for all that, it was the most awful feeling she had ever experienced. They had told her that Transformation might kill her. Sharibet had carefully explained that it was not a death and resurrection, but a complete alteration of her body and aura. However, right this moment, she felt three days dead and rotting.

"Leila?" she whimpered.

"Time to get you back to bed, I see." Leila helped her up out of the pool, wrapped her in a robe, and carried her back to her room.

"What's happening?" Nadira managed to ask, although her voice cracked like ninety-year-old Philomena's.

"You're a new djinniah. Stay calm. Over-exerting your emotions only makes it worse. And, when you speak to me, you should say, 'elder sister.'"

Nadira lay on her bed, helpless and wracked with an invisible agony that never touched her flesh, but ate down into her bones. How wonderful her life was now! *O, Merciful!*

\* \* \* \*

In the dark, she felt like a horseshoe on an anvil, red hot, and beaten with hammers. She didn't want to sleep any more, not with the frightening dreams that had stalked her into wakefulness.

"Leila?" she croaked.

No one answered. Had they left her alone to die? "Leila!" Was she going to have to crawl out of her bed in search of someone? What if she really were dying? "Leila!"

Now she heard light footsteps approach outside her room. The door opened and gently closed. Amber radiance nearly blinded her. Hurriedly, she closed her Seer's eyes. She hadn't even known she'd opened them! But when she opened her physical eyes, the radiance was still blinding.

"Leila is busy right now, daughter," came a chiming voice.

*O, Annihilator! Sharibet!* Nadira shrank back from the candle's glare. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to—to—"

"To summon me? Of course not. I know you would never commit such discourtesy. You're a well-brought-up daughter of my House."

Dark guilt churned amidst the anvil's heat, then a cool, small hand rested briefly on Nadira's forehead. "Still burning. You must rest." The hand withdrew. A rustling sound, then footsteps, retreating.

"Mother Sharibet? Please, I'm hungry."

A sigh. "Of course, child. Why do you think I came?"

Nadira wanted to sink through the bed, through the floor, and hide forever as there came the unmistakable sound of a clay seal being broken, a waft of citrus, the cool, smooth feel of the jug between her fingers, and blood, sliding past her tongue, bringing life to her body. She shuddered with the intensity of it. "Thank you, Mother Sharibet."

The jar disappeared. "You're welcome, daughter." A gentle hand briefly brushed hair away from Nadira's hot and sweaty face. "You'll come into your strength soon enough."

"Yes, Mother Sharibet."

The footsteps pattered away toward the door. Nadira dared to unseal her eyelids, but dark gold still shone brighter than the sun. Sharibet's voice came once more. "Daughter, you should remember, when you address Leila, to call her 'elder sister.'"

Then she was gone. Nadira wanted to groan and throw the sheets over her head, but she realized: if she could hear Sharibet's footsteps going away down the corridor, then Sharibet could hear her, as well. It was a terrifying thought.

Why had she ever wanted this Transformation?

After the light footsteps vanished into the depths of the house, Nadira let herself groan. But as she shivered there, she knew that deliberately acting on her impulses smacked of the childish.

*Secretive child*, they'd called her. How satisfying it had been when her Seer's eyes were discovered. She'd shown them all that she was not just an insignificant first-lifer. Her



triumph had only become sweeter when she'd spotted the Lost Apkallu Utu in Acre.

She laughed weakly as her body roasted, as the not-pain that surrounded her threatened to crush her into oblivion. All her dreams, all her own jealousies and envies, were come down to this, burning in a darkness that ate her up in tiny bites.

\* \* \* \*

Feast of Saint Hilary, Tuesday, January 13, AD 1260  
Arjumand paced the length of Sharibet's office.

She was checking over his ledger entries, and it was never wise to interrupt, except when she herself wished for dalliance to relieve the tedious work.

He paused at one end of his arc to stare out Sharibet's extravagant glass window. From this fourth-floor vantage on the street-side corner, chilly winter sunshine winked off choppy waves in the Sea of Marmara. A city of ships lay at anchor in two huge harbors, resting from their travels carrying goods and gold from everywhere.

Would the House have anything to carry when the trading season resumed in the spring?

Mongols were already in northern Syria, like the first taint of gangrene in a wound. Their emissaries had even tried to gain an audience with the Latin Emperor of the Romans, heir to the Crusaders who had conquered Constantinople over fifty years ago.

Arjumand had seen representatives of those Mongols at Court, with their long mustaches and their spears bound with

wolves' tails. Swaggering in silk coats and leather trousers, they assessed Emperor Baldwin's bankrupt dominion and found it *ripe*.

Mongols. They were like locusts. Arjumand stifled his disquiet and resumed pacing. He had read the reports from Cecilia detailing her journey along the Silk Road. Scarcely anyone was left alive in cities that had bustled with trade for three thousand years.

Sharibet's household had barely escaped from Baghdad before Hulegu Khan's hordes massacred every Muslim in the city. Caliph Musta'sim had liked his parties, his wine, his pretty boys. He had neglected his army. He had not, beyond resisting the siege for a month, tried to fight. Now Hulegu reigned between the two rivers, and wanted more.

Hard information was scarce, but Arjumand knew that Emperor Baldwin's officers and spies were trying to discover the Mongols' true plans. Were they willing to ally with Crusaders in the Kingdom of Jerusalem against the Saracens? Or would they raze and enslave indiscriminately? Had they set their sights on Constantinople yet?

If they had, it was certain the Emperor wouldn't be able to save it. Baldwin the Second had been scavenging for every penny he could scrape from the city he and his forebears had looted for the last half-century. He'd begged for money in every royal court in Europe, sold his birthright fief of Namur (not a day's journey from La Roche en Ardennes, where Michel had been born) and even mortgaged his son to the Venetians. He had few knights, and fewer allies. Beyond the walls of Constantinople and its suburb Galata, he was

surrounded on three sides by hostile Byzantine states, remnants of the Empire the Venetians had brought down in 1204, which were themselves bounded by Mongol-conquered territories.

Back at the window, Arjumand wondered how long before they'd have to flee. Constantinople was such a strategic location, at the center of vast trading and pigeon-post networks. It would cost the House a great deal to reroute all those interlocking lines of communication.

To lose the city itself ... He would regret it. Having ruled the world for almost a thousand years, its stones bore the forgotten faces of heroes, saints, and emperors. The kin had many stories of the city's life, along with tales about his former self, a self that he could not remember. Had Marcus really called lightning from the sky as a mortal youth? Rescued hundreds after a ruinous earthquake? Protected the House from rioters, and nearly died putting out a fire? Had he made love to all those women of the House? Arjumand cringed. Had he truly done those things?

And yet, when he walked the hilly streets of this ancient city, some places made his skin creep, some warmed him in a strange way. He didn't want to see it razed by Mongols.

Sharibet turned over the final page of the ledger, scanned it, and initialed it. She smiled at him when she was done. "A very good set of pages, *mon coeur*. I see you have learned your lesson about not entering anything you would not want known to current tax authorities, or the ages."

Except for a slight bow of acknowledgment, Arjumand kept his posture the same. She'd told him once about buried clay

tablets dug up and used to levy post-dated fines against the House. He'd returned some breezy comment about parchment not lasting that long, and they'd had a furious row. Their lovemaking when they made up was equally furious, and he'd expected that would be the end of it. But it hadn't. Years later, she was still harping on the tired old subject.

"I have one question," she said. *Of course.*

"Why have you not inquired as to Nadira's progress?" Her voice was sweet and cutting at once.

He leaned on the window frame, under its ogive arch. "I assumed if anything went wrong, that you would tell me. If all went well, you would also tell me. Beyond that, I have no interest in her until she is ready for training. You know I do not wish to train her. And you know my reasons." Should Nadira fail after his training, no matter how hard he tried, it would forever be looked upon as his failure.

Sharibet shook her head, regretfully. "You are more like her than you admit, Arjumand. She has not asked about her children since she awoke, either."

Anger sizzled through him. "Lady, if you wish me to be like her, you have only to compare us further. I could show you her true nature in a way you will assuredly not like."

Sharibet blinked. "Well, the puppy does know how to snarl. What sharp teeth you have, too." She treated him to an extra-dazzling smile, as if to blast away his sullenness. When that didn't work, she said, "Ah, *mon coeur*, don't frown at me so."

When that didn't work, she narrowed her eyes at him.

Arjumand remembered the early years of their consortship, when that expression could send tremors of apprehension through him. He would ask himself in some terror: *Doesn't she love me anymore? How have I displeased her?* Now he only felt a great weariness. There were bigger terrors on the horizon than her frown, and he had no cure for them.

"Will you need me for anything else?" he asked, using his most respectful tone.

Her fingers tapped the thick leather cover of the ledger.  
"No. That will be all."

"I will be at Court."

She gave her regal nod, the one that showed off the length and slimness of her throat.

He nodded, too, an abrupt motion to show how annoyed he was. As he left her presence, he chided himself for taking such bitter pleasure in these foolish games. What did he hope to accomplish?

### Chapter Three

*To our Mother Sharibet, from your children in Venice. Sent via Captain Muzaffar al Warda, Captain of the Saint Barnabas. Written on the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist—Saturday, December 27, 1259 (received January 14, AD 1260)*

*As you have always instructed us to do, we are sending this report to advise that we have refused our willingness to allow Lord Dominic to search the memories in blood of a slave child of eight years called Smerdy, purchased by Lord Dominic in this city with his own coin, which has been repaid to him from the House's petty cash.*

*As we wrote to you in our last report, Lord Dominic has searched a handful of other purchased slave children, releasing them to the Underworld as they were too young to consent to join the House. We do not wish him to kill any more. It is too upsetting to our children in this House, and has become a scandal in Venice. However, you may be assured that Lord Dominic has not harmed any person or ally of the House.*

*Although Lord Dominic claims to be searching for the Lost, we respectfully requested him to cease and he agreed. We do not wish to bring him to the ax at this time. If he does not keep his agreement, dear Mother, please believe us willing to protect our House as necessary.*

*Sent with our deepest love and devotion, and sincerest wish that we may meet again.*

*By the hand of the Mistress of Venice, Maryam dalle Rose,  
True Name Ab-erra. Remember me!*

*Shrove Tuesday, February 24, AD 1260*

Nadira rolled over onto her back. It didn't hurt so much anymore. For months she hadn't been able to think of anything but the pain, relieved only by short trips to the bathhouse. Today, she was just bored. It should be time for her to get up and learn to be a Protector. She wanted to know how to do djinni magic: moving objects at a distance, controlling men's minds, and all the rest. She'd earned it!

The afternoon crept by slowly, not at all relieved by the faint sounds and scents of overindulgent Christian revelry in the streets outside. They would start their lax Lenten fast tomorrow, but that was nothing to her. There was a spark of sunshine coming through the thick curtain they had hung over the doorway to the inner courtyard to protect her sensitive eyes. And she could hear the bare-branched sycamore in the courtyard shiver in the wind.

Nadira sighed. It was no good to lie here, being bored.

Leila—*elder sister*, she corrected herself—had left her some scrolls to read, but they were in the chicken-scratch script of the House. Ugh. It was unfair that the Raised and Named of the House just remembered how to speak and read it, and needed no instruction. She'd spent tedious hours learning it, hating every minute.

The light spark winked. Maybe the sun was going down, finally! No, the sounds of the city continued unabated. It had probably only been the breeze. If she didn't have something to do right now, she was going to go mad. She groaned,

reaching for the basket of scrolls. And then someone scratched at her door.

Nadira stood up, running fingers through her hair—unbrushed, but not, she hoped, too unbecoming. Sharibet could be most disappointed if one didn't appear at one's best. To her delighted surprise, her visitor was Basil, Leila's consort. "Lord, it is good to meet again," Nadira said, placing her hands together at her waist and bowing. If she were polite enough, he might stay for a while.

"It is good to meet again," said Basil, in Arabic flavored with an old country-Greek accent. "But you should call me 'elder brother,' you know."

*Not him, too!* "Yes, elder brother," she said. She cast her gaze down, then looked up at him through her lashes. "Why do you honor me with a visit?"

He stepped into her chamber. "I am sent to teach you Greek, so you can easily converse with the people of this region when you are ready to carry out your duties."

*Not more instruction!* But where was he hiding the scrolls to teach her from? She gave Basil a completely bewildered smile.

Matter-of-fact, he began to remove his dalmatica.

A different kind of thrill washed through Nadira. "What—what are you doing, lo—elder brother?"

He winked. He was removing his tunica now. He wore no other garment.

"H-how will you—?" She couldn't finish the question, distracted by his chest, which was wide, with well-defined muscles. A multitude of freckles patched the vibrant



ruddiness of his skin, giving him the look of a splendidly healthy piebald horse. A complicated tattoo twisted around his biceps, inscribed in dark ink.

He was uncircumcised, and ready for sex. Gently, but firmly, he removed her camisia.

"I—I—but—" Nadira stuttered. "Is this wise, lord? What of Leila?"

Basil drew her gently toward him. His eyes, smile-crinkled, were moss-green flecked with gold. "She knows well what I am about, by Mother Sharibet's command. This is the way of djinni. Let it be more than one lesson for you." His kiss demonstrated every century of his reputed expertise. Long before he exhausted his repertoire, she had melted into his arms. He bore her down onto the bed, and with a minimum of preparation, had her neatly impaled on his staff. He was far, far better as a lover than Arjumand. She was certainly not bored now! She climaxed with an intensity that would have shattered her if she'd still been mortal.

*This is a wonderful way to learn lessons,* she thought, when she had leisure to think again. As a djinniah she had strength, perception, and endurance she would never have expected. So did Basil. He was so clever. She was just rousing from deeply relaxed languor when Basil, who had not yet spent his seed, spoke into her ear.

"You liked that, little sister? There's more." He rearranged himself so that he lay on his side. He rolled her body, happily unresisting, to spoon her back to his front. She found new interest as he penetrated her from behind. One muscular arm brushed her breasts. The other, cradling her head, presented

soft inner elbow skin to her lips. "Bite, and drink my blood," he directed.

Nadira considered. She had promised to drink only blood willingly offered. He sounded not just willing, but commanding. Would his blood taste better than a lamb's? She bit down, and the question answered itself. Warm, pure blood flowed smoothly into her mouth, tasting of salt, and iron, and—pomegranates? She exploded in ecstasy and the concussion slammed through her to lift Basil half off the bed.

Then the pictures rolled over her: ... *shock reverberates the length of the immaculate mandarah in Alexandria as Roland, newly Found Apkallu, replies to Cecilia's ritual offer "I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?" "Lady, I will not." ... staring at the shining glory of the empty sea by the mouth of the river Orb as death after death of Apkallu burns through their bonds of blood ... the ground shakes and the houses and temples fall. The water of the Middle Sea leaps from its bed to finish the destruction ... waking with open Seer's eyes to the vast Apkallu auras of Cecilia and Menelaos hovering over him ... Lady Cecilia, lying atop him, nude and perfect, as she drinks from his throat ... bright-eyed Leila, in a red wedding stola embroidered in gold, smiles back as he places his iron ring upon her finger...*

The noises she was making started to diminish, but she was still reverberating to the overwhelming sensations, floating, somewhere, finally reconciled to the changes in her nature, if they could bring her this...

Then Basil bit her throat. His teeth were sharp. They hurt, but before she could cry out, she felt him draw her blood into

himself. His aura wrapped them both in an unbreakable embrace, penetrating her from head to foot, from surface to core. Every bit of her rang with the sensation of being enfolded, fully touched, exalted—and rejected.

She thumped down on one side of the narrow bed, and Basil on the other as he made one small gagging noise. She was too shocked to say anything. *What happened?* She still felt wonderful, except for the growing chill of lying alone in the dark. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking," he said. He didn't sound sincere, at all.

*Well, why is he suddenly so rude?*

He jerked, grunted, and the smell of his barren seed was pungent in the bed between them. He edged further away. "I will give you another lesson, younger sister."

She hoped it would turn out better than this last one, although one more aftershock left her mellow and melting.

—This is how you close your shields.—

So that was how mind-to-mind contact sounded. Or, didn't. She lost track of the specifics of his instruction, trying to tell how she could be hearing his voice through the silence of the room.

—Listen to me!—

Oh! That was so loud. "I'm listening."

The bed wobbled as he surged up from his prone position and towered over her, aura luminous and seething. Was he angry? At her? Belatedly, she began to be afraid.

—This is how you close your shields.—

His many-handed aura pushed at her face. It felt like he built a cap, invisible, yet present, that went all around her head. Then he let go, and all the pressure went away.

—Now you do it.—

She *would*, once she got the knack. How did that go? It was too bad Basil was so haughty, now that he was done with sex. Well, many men were that way ... Basil's aura surrounded her head so tightly she felt nearly crushed.

"Stop! That hurts!"

"You noticed? Good." Basil's smile showed mostly teeth.  
"Build your shield."

"I would if I knew *how*!" They always expected her to know things she couldn't know, and to be able to do things she couldn't do. And they never really taught her anything. If she hadn't had Seer's eyes, they would have completely ignored her.

"Nadira," Basil stared at her, his face no more than a handspan from her own. He looked very determined. "You must begin to control your aura. Every djinn discovers his own power and his own way to control it. Your time of discovery must be now."

"That's not very helpful! You tell me I must but you don't tell me how." She turned her face away from him. "It's not fair! I could do it if you'd just—"

"Feel this," Basil commanded, his aura penetrating hers and squeezing.

"Ow! Yes!"

"Good. What you can feel, you can control. Push back."

"But there's nothing there!"

He squeezed harder. "Push back!"

Was he going to crush her skull? Sharibet wouldn't let him do that, surely?

Basil was still pressing hard, like a mountain looming over her, creeping toward her, threatening to smash her flat. No! She didn't want him to—She pushed. His aura moved away. It was like ... holding a broom. One hand pushing up, one hand pushing down, to make the broom move.

"Very good," Basil said. "Now make a shield."

He was going too fast. She was just getting used to this part. *Hold and push*. Basil's aura moved and she quivered with delight. She was doing magic, djinni magic. *Hold and push*. Take that! No one would tell her what to do! She'd give the orders. She'd—

"Nadira."

She had just swept his aura away but the mountainous pressure built again!

"You need to make a shield now."

Why? She was just—Nadira. I hear every word you think, and so can Lord Arjumand.—

She froze. *Every thought? O, Great Forgiver!* Cold horror replaced her delight. Could Sharibet hear her too? *O, Preserver!*

"She can't yet. But she'll want to, one day. So you need to know how to make a shield."

Yes! She needed to know this.

Once more he seemed to push at her aura around her head. She felt him do it, but there was nothing for her to grasp. She scrabbled to touch the intangible. *Make a shield*.

*Stop up their spying ears!* But she had no experience of shields. She was not a fighter. She was a Seer, a djinniah, a woman ... She knew nothing of shields, but she was intimately familiar with veils. She imagined a veil, black Mosul-cloth, sheer and light. She could see out, but others couldn't see in. She could be recognized, but not annoyed by them. *God is forgiving and merciful.* The pressure of Basil's aura eased.

"That's good. Lord Arjumand sends his thanks as well. No, don't stop."

How had he known her concentration had slipped? She hurried to re-imagine, reconstruct her magic veil.

Basil sighed. "Let's practice that some more."

They spent hours on it. Darkness came. Jars of sealed blood were delivered for their meal. Basil the teacher was impossible to satisfy. He insisted that she hold her veil against any distraction, and he invented far too many tests. Finally, somewhere on the other side of midnight, he relaxed, shook his head to dislodge the beads of sweat that had collected in his hair, and said, "That's enough for now. Don't forget this lesson, or let down your guard. Ever."

Though she had passed beyond exhaustion hours ago and felt like a wrung-out sponge, herself, Nadira drawled, "They told me djinni memories were perfect."

"The memories of djinni are perfect. The djinni who use those memories are not." Without another word, he donned his tunica and dalmatica, and left her room.

"Well!" she huffed as his footsteps faded into the quiet of the sleeping house. Wasn't she supposed to have learned Greek?

\* \* \* \*

The next day was better. She sat up and practiced veiling her mind until breakfast arrived. Then Leila, very stiff and formal, entered with one of the Constantinople House cousins in tow, a mousy woman named Margarethe, and introduced her as Nadira's new handmaid.

Nadira's heart sang. *At last, at last!*

"Elder sister, it is good to meet again," her new servant said, bowing.

While Nadira chortled inside to hear this forty-year-old call her 'elder sister,' Leila poked Nadira using her hand of air, invisible to mortal sight. The elder djinniah frowned, mouthing: *It is good...*

Oh, yes. That tedious, overused greeting. "It is good to meet again," Nadira said. "I'm so glad you're here to help me—"

"Elder sister, my true name is Ka-ashbarudda."

Damn! Her name in the old language of the House meant Decision of the Sun, and her life-chip, just showing at her throat, showed the number one hundred and four. All Nadira's pleasure died, and the edifice of friendly service she had been imagining fell down in a crash of baked mud tablets.

All these people had been Sharibet's creatures since the unimaginably ancient past. Nobody here would be loyal to *her*.

Nadira opened her Seer's eyes. Ugly mustard. The old bird was jealous. Damn.

"We will remember you," Leila prompted.

"We will remember you," Nadira mimicked, half a beat behind.

"Margarethe is here to help you bathe and dress," Leila said after an awkward pause. Those had been her tasks for four months. Was there some other reason she didn't want to do it anymore? Was she jealous about Basil?

"You are to meet the elders of the House today. The meeting is at noon. Be ready," Leila said, and escaped.

Nadira concealed her anxiety behind her magic veil as Margarethe stood still in the middle of the carpet, waiting for something. "What?" Nadira snapped. "My clothes are in that wardrobe, and I want a bath!"

The handmaid's expression did not change, but her tone went flat and cold. "Congratulations on becoming a djinniah. It is my honor to serve you."

Nadira nodded in acknowledgment, knowing even as she did so that it was only a pale copy of Sharibet's regal gesture. Galling. It was all galling, what she had expected to be sweet as honey.

When Margarethe went to open the wardrobe, Nadira got another shock. Her Transformation garb was gone! All those beautiful silk garments and the coin-hung cap! She jumped for the jewelry box and wanted to shriek her rage. Gone! They were all gone, her bracelets, necklaces, and anklets. Vanished.

She would kill Sharibet, the thieving bitch.



—Nadira, you must shield,—came Basil's ghostly voice in her mind.

She took the nearest thing to hand, an empty blood jar, and threw it with all her might at the nearest wall. It shattered splendidly, releasing at least some of her resentment.

"Elder sister?" the handmaid asked, apparently unmoved.

"Nothing," Nadira answered. "Pick out something for me, and let's go bathe. You can clean that up later."

Margarethe started pawing through the dusty clothes in the wardrobe, making clucking noises as she touched one or another garment.

Nadira had waited so long, and worked so hard to achieve the status of djinniah, looking forward to the day when others of the House would call her 'lady' and leap at her command. Now it was all a mockery. She herself was still only a possession of the House.

That betrayal lingered through her bath and the primping session that followed as Margarethe plucked her eyebrows and dressed her hair. When they were done, she examined her face in the common bronze mirror Margarethe provided. Her eyes were on the yellowish side of the amber shade prized by the House. Her nose was nicely arched. Her chin receded, but perhaps, as she learned more magic, she would sculpt it, as she had been told that djinni could do. The only other question she had—She opened her Seer's eyes and started shaking. *O Merciful!*

Her aura had once been a vibrant blue-green flame, with the plume of her Raising and Naming rising above her head in

a riot of red and gold. Now her aura was nearly transparent, a feeble ghost. The wings she had been expecting to glow brightly were pallid shadows that barely reached her shoulders. These wings could not cause effects at a distance.

What had gone wrong? What was wrong with her? There was no one she could ask. Leila, Sharibet, and even Basil had seen her, and none of them had expressed any surprise. O *Reckoner*. Had she been robbed?

*Wait, wait, wasn't there something ... ?*

She allowed Margarethe to draw her to the massage bench, and while her maid's strong fingers manipulated her muscles like butter, she recognized with some resentment the truth of Basil's warning about djinni memory. She did recall more precisely and clearly than she ever had as a mortal. But she wanted to remember something from before her Transformation! There was a snippet of conversation she had overheard once, when she was at a gathering of the kin. Was it Roland's Appointing?

"Relax, elder sister," Margarethe calmly commanded. "Let me do my work."

Nadira settled down onto the padded ledge, remembering: *The old woman chats with the young one; both wear lifetime chips above a hundred. Nadira's necklace shows only one. "Remember when Elder Brother Basil's wings were the size of an eagle's? So beautiful—and tickly." She pats her withered breast, and grins wickedly. The younger one asks, "Can you see how large they've grown since?" The older woman's smile fades. "No. My Eyes have closed. Yours, too?" "Mother Sharibet tried to help me open them, several lifetimes ago*

*but..." "We grow blind," the old woman says, with resignation. Nadira promises herself she will gain her prize this life, before her powers dim!*

She had, and here she was, at the beginning of a journey that would, if she were careful, never end.

"That's right. Take deep breaths. Let go your cares."

She couldn't. If djinni wings grew with time, that would make sense of Basil's and Leila's small auras. Sharibet's aura was not nearly as large as Menelaos's, who was called the least of the Apkallu. And Lady Cecilia, the Undying, had the largest aura of all.

Did that mean she herself would have to live nearly forever in order to grow an aura large enough to be able to exercise the full magic of the djinni?

"Take deep breaths. Out with care, in with calm."

She followed Margarethe's instructions, even though obeying her servant stung like vinegar on a split lip. She would do as she was told—for now—and present a complaisant face. Later, she would be able to make better plans. Later, when she knew more magic.

\* \* \* \*

The fusty elders of the House seemed as unimpressed with her as she was with them. But ... She watched them watching her, and read the fear shining in their auras. Did they think she might jump up and tear their throats out? Behind her magic veil she imagined what that would be like.

That was her only amusement in the meeting. Old Philomena, officious as her son, Master Theodoros, welcomed

Nadira with patently self-serving good wishes. Nobody wished her well. They just wanted to use her for their convenience. After all, who was at this meeting? Sharibet, of course. Basil and Leila. The Master, his wife Eudokia, their Raised and Named son and daughter-in-law; the Trader and his wife and their two sons; the other grandmother; the ship captains in port; all those who held power in the House. None of the maids or stable lads—no, she was wrong. There was the youngest of the maids, flaunting her lifetime chip on a silk ribbon around her neck: 159. More than all the others.

But Arjumand? Not here. Another sign of his contempt for her. Nadira forced a smile and pretended gracious acceptance of the elders' meaningless congratulations on her successful Transformation. It went on so long that she started to daydream about the gold and jewels and beautiful dresses she ought to have as a djinniah.

"We wish you to accept this token of our esteem for you..."

*Oh no!* What had she missed? Philomena was bowing to her in front of the group, showing off a lovely triple-strand pearl necklace.

*Oh, yes!* She reached to accept the gift, delight and trepidation warring within her. Would the pearls feel as cool as they looked? Would she be allowed to keep them? Panic descended once she had them in her hands, and the elders just stood there waiting for something. Were there ritual words for a newly-made djinniah to speak on receiving a gift from the elders? Why didn't they teach her these things?

Then Basil's mind-voice spoke to her, as if she had never created her magic veil.—Bow slightly and say, "I accept this token of your esteem with thanks."—

Feeling like a spooked horse given firm guidance by an experienced rider, Nadira complied, and was rewarded by the elders bowing deeply, hands crossed at their middles. She fondled her new pearls. She had waited for this moment all her life!

—Now you must tell them you return their esteem.—His mental instruction was calm, but in the background rode his true feeling:—Don't you have any social sense at all?—

Stung, Nadira snapped, "I return your esteem!"

Quickly suppressed scowls opened bitter wounds. Her life as a Seer had been much easier. She only had to report what she saw. She didn't have to be polite, or politic, or have to think of what to say next.

The elders stood, saying their prescribed farewells. *Thanks to the Compassionate One!* They were leaving. Nadira breathed a sigh of relief, then noticed that the other djinni remained. She quaked in her slippers.

"I see that you'll need some lessons in deportment, daughter," Sharibet said.

Nadira wanted to disappear. But Sharibet added, more kindly, "You did well enough. You cannot know everything at once. That is the reason for lessons, after all. Since you seem to be listening to Basil, he will continue as your teacher."

"Yes, Mother Sharibet," was the only acceptable response. The lesson of prompt agreement was one she had learned very early. And Basil would be the best. As an outsider to the

House before his marriage to Leila, he was also a first-lifer. And he had survived a thousand years. He was friendly and charming toward the elders, yet not at all deferential. If anyone should be her model, it was Basil. He was a good lover, too.

"Very good. Basil, I'll leave you to schedule your lessons with Nadira. I'm sure you'll do your usual competent job."

Basil bowed his acceptance, then followed Sharibet as she swept out of the room, leaving only Leila, glaring at Nadira with a rare and terrible frown.

"Elder sister?" Nadira asked, growing more nervous.

"Don't ever touch him again," Leila said, raising an admonitory finger.

"Elder sister, he said it was the way of djinni," Nadira responded. She had been afraid of just such a confrontation. "I didn't—"

Leila stepped in close and grabbed the shoulder of Nadira's dalmatica. Nadira hadn't realized before that the other djinniah stood taller than she did. And was stronger.

"Stupid cow! The way of djinni is the way of pleasure. I wouldn't care if you'd pleased him, but he came back to me upset." Leila let go of Nadira's garment, stepped back, dusted off her hands, and strode away.

"I don't know what I did!" Nadira wailed.

"I don't care," Leila said, over her shoulder. "Just never do it again." She stopped and turned. "Or you'll be sorry." Her expression was the same as Mother Sharibet's at its fiercest.

*They hate me. They all hate me.* Feeling sick, Nadira rebuilt her armor, and rechecked her magic veil. *O Protector!*

Broken Gods (House of the Rose, Book 3)  
*by Michaela August*

*Let me be doing the magic right!* She placed the ropes of shining pearls around her neck, and stroked them. Let them hate her. She would take what she needed and find a suitable revenge later.

## Chapter Four

*It is the decree of the Eternal Heaven which we make known to you. When you have heard and believed, if you wish to obey us, send your envoys to us; in this way we shall know for sure whether you wish to be at peace or war with us. When by the power of the Eternal Heaven the whole world from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof shall be at one in joy and peace, then it will be made clear what we are going to do; if you are unwilling and say, 'Our country is far away, our mountains are mighty, or sea is vast', and in this confidence you bring an army against us—we know what we can do. He who has made difficult things easy and far off things near, He knows.*—Letter from Mongke Khan to King Louis IX of France, January, 1254, conveyed by Friar William of Rubruck and delivered in 1255

Saturday, May 22, AD 1260

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

Arjumand returned from Court hot, tired, and frustrated. Another day of officious dithering by loud, ill-mannered Franks about treacherous Greeks surrounding the city. Another day of stupid courtiers fighting each other while refusing to see the real enemy just over the horizon. He wanted to shake them. Aleppo had fallen! Damascus had fallen! The Mongols were en route to Egypt, if they didn't turn north on a whim. But the Court of Byzantium didn't care about faraway places.



He threw off his cap and his jeweled dalmatica—Abdulaziz would pick them up later—and sagged down onto his bed. There was a jar waiting for him, and he resolved to do something very nice for Abdulaziz sometime very soon. He cracked the jar's seal, drained it, and sighed, reviewing his options.

All the Houses in the affected territories in northern Syria had already evacuated over the winter and early spring. The houses in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem had up-to-date evacuation plans, should the Mongols change their policy towards Christians. More shifting of personnel was needed. The only unknowns were: which direction would the Mongols turn, and how fast would they advance? If they stayed on a relatively predictable course toward Egypt, he could get everyone out of their path. But if they moved faster than expected ... he didn't want to envisage what might happen.

If the Mongols conquered all the territories in the Holy Land, the House would lose its last farms in the region where they grew most of the roses that were the source of their wealth. The houses in Europe were set up as distribution points, not as farms—although he recalled from traveling through Languedoc in his Crusader days that there were some nice growing areas there.

He'd been told of good land in North Africa as well. But was North Africa still too close to the path of the Mongols? Damn! He needed some way of infiltrating the insular Mongols' command structure!

A tattoo of footsteps heralded the arrival of one of the children of the house, scratching at his door. "Lord Arjumand! Lord Arjumand! There's a meeting of the elders!"

"Coming," he replied. What could have happened?—Sharibet?—*Mon coeur*, it's important, but not an emergency. Let me share the news with everyone.—She left an impression of a smile and a kiss, and closed the link.

He got up and put on a robe. More to do.

\* \* \* \*

The family council gathered to hear Sharibet's news in the Red Solar on the top floor of the oldest quadrant of the house, with its wide high windows latticed to catch the faint breezes of summer from the courtyard garden.

As Arjumand entered, old Philomena winked at him. She was a special friend now, and often helped him puzzle out who was who in the city. She was a clever bird, and much more approachable than Sharibet when he had questions. Likewise, all the elders here had given him immense support. They counted on him to do his best. It wasn't his fault that Mongols were like locusts, or that the Emperor was a weakling!

Basil and Leila entered with Nadira in tow. Arjumand averted his gaze. He was so relieved that he didn't have to train that woman. He had insisted that Basil teach her how to close her links, first thing; it was like a holiday, not to have to hear all of her selfish thoughts. He'd have to do something really nice for Basil soon, too.

Everyone being present, Sharibet entered and sat at the focal point of the room, next to a low lacquered table. Those who had been standing until this point settled down onto the carpet, or cushions. She said, "I have two letters to share with you all. Would you like the good news first, or the bad?"

"Good new first!" was the immediate consensus.

Sharibet opened a tiny roll of delicate paper light enough for a pigeon to carry, printed with the House's wedge-shaped characters. "This is from Lady Cecilia, via the House in Ypres, dated last week. She writes, 'Ea Found, Transformed, Raised, and Named!'" She let go of the paper ribbon, and showed off its gold border.

"Joyful news indeed!" crowed Philomena. "Father Ea! Returned to us again."

Arjumand disagreed with a sick feeling churning in his middle.

"Called in this life Michel de la Roche-en-Ardenne, already Appointed Protector by elders of Low Countries. Concubine Tirgit, True Name Lal-Hamun."

The sick feeling intensified. Arjumand had worked so hard to keep his cousin out of the greedy clutches of the House ... and of Dominic. And he already had a concubine? That was a quick turnaround for Michel, the Templar! Dully, he noted some speculation as to the nature of the emergency that led Lady Cecilia to Appoint an Apkallu so soon after his Transformation, but everyone agreed that there must have been sufficient reason for her to take such a drastic step.

Sharibet delicately cleared her throat, and everyone fell silent. "Lady Cecilia continues."

*Oh, God, is there more?*

"Ea and concubine will come to Constantinople House for Appointing of Nadira."

As a great deal of happy chatter followed, Arjumand relaxed enough to consider the implications. Would Michel unbend enough to now forgive Arjumand for his apostasy in deserting the Crusade? After all, his cousin had thrown over his oaths to the Templars.

Sharibet regained the attention of her children by further unrolling the tiny scroll. "Ninharsag Found. Too ill to Transform. Called—" she paused to let the cheers transmute to wails of sorrow, and gave Arjumand a significant look, "...Mathilde le Pelletier, sister to Lord Michel."

He had thought himself frozen sick before. This news burned his throat with repressed tears. He'd accustomed himself a decade ago to the fact that his cousin Michel was tied to this House of sorcerers, then two years ago discovered his brother also had been a reborn Apkallu—shock enough without the occasion becoming the source of Nadira's promotion. But now to hear that Mathilde ... It was no consolation that she was 'too ill.' *Mathilde*.

Sharibet recited old, thin prayers of protection for this Found Apkallu who could not be approached and offered the safety and immortality of the House. The council reached the end of their nattering about this fascinating topic and Arjumand folded away his feelings once again. There was nothing to be done about them, and he must go on, pretending nothing had happened.

Sharibet opened the second letter, borne by a pigeon from the Sidon House. Everyone waited in deepest silence, aware that Sidon was located not far west of conquered Damascus. "Mongol scouts sighted Northern Judaea."

Arjumand felt the tension, which had stretched bow-tight, loosen as the shot was fired. No more waiting. No more wondering. The Mongols were invading another territory. Their emergency plans could go into effect. He stood up, gathering all attention. "Evacuation of the named houses must begin immediately, per Plan Alpha. We, your Protectors," he said, indicating Basil, Leila, and, perforce, Nadira, "will go at once to provide for a safe and orderly relocation of kin and goods."

Everyone assented soberly, reassured by his decisiveness, except for Nadira, who looked up, eyes wide. *Oh, yes, woman. You wanted to be a djinn so badly? Now learn what your choice really means.*

The meeting devolved into a flood of unanswerable questions and unprovable suppositions. Arjumand sat down and let everybody speak, because if they didn't get it all out now, they'd keep coming at him at inconvenient moments, to make sure he knew what passionately concerned them. Finally, the torrent of questions ran dry.

"So noted. I will remember you, and your words today." And he would, too. What he would give for the ability to forget! *Mathilde ...* "We have much to do. The first step of Plan Alpha starts now. Send the birds."

The pigeon keeper jumped up, bowed, and ran for the dovecote on the roof.

"Now the rest of you—to your assigned tasks. Djinni, remain."

Sharibet peered up at him through her lashes, smiling at his assumption of command; she'd insisted that he take this role, but she still showed her amusement.

Arjumand let himself feel the weight of the project in hand: moving hundreds of kinfolk out of their centuries-old homes, and into houses where they would be extras, not masters. He quailed at the difficulties he foresaw, and the risk of losing some of the kin. They might be Found again in the next life, but while still in this life they were his responsibility.

The mortals departed, and he was free to address an apprehensive Nadira directly. "Plan Alpha details our next action."

She hung on his words like a mouse watching a cat's paw. Basil, who knew the plan, looked grim but determined. Leila seemed calm—or vacant, he couldn't tell. Sharibet waited, encouraging him with a tiny nod. "We follow the pigeons."

Nadira blinked, trying to make sense of this.

"We will fly there."

Her jaw dropped. "But we—but I can't—"

"I'll be carrying you. It's already in the plan."

"You—but you—"

"Complete sentences are so graceful in a woman, don't you agree, child?" Sharibet chimed.

Nadira's mouth closed. Her jaw muscles bunched.

"Tell Margarethe to pack for you per Plan Alpha," Arjumand ordered. "Wear what she puts out for you. Be ready to leave

in three hours—just after dark," he clarified. He would not give her the opportunity to make a mistake.

"But I have had no training!" she wailed.

"No, you have not. But you are a Protector now, and protect, you shall!"

She bowed and murmured with false humility, "As you wish."

To Basil he said, "You know what to do. We'll meet by the dovecote."

"In three hours, lord," Basil agreed smartly.

"Don't forget your medical kit," Arjumand said to Leila.

"Oh! I won't," she said, as if, until he'd reminded her, she would have done exactly that. "Goodbye, Mother Sharibet," Leila said. "May we meet again."

"May we meet again, my daughter," Sharibet replied. "Make a swift return. Protect my children!" she commanded them all.

"We will," Arjumand promised.

\* \* \* \*

There were only a few pigeons left in their cages when Arjumand reached the rooftop, shortly after sunset. The bird-keeper was sweeping up after his charges, neatly avoiding the pile of strapped bags that lay near the stairwell.

"My thanks for your good work with the birds," Arjumand said. "I will remember you."

The keeper hid his blushing face. "I am glad to be of service, lord."

Footsteps on the stair announced the arrival of Basil and Leila—and Nadira, carefully herded by Basil. Good man! A parade of those wishing to say farewell quickly followed, some carrying jars of sustenance for the departing djinni. Gratefully, Arjumand opened and swallowed his. He was uncomfortably full when the jars were empty, but he knew he would need it before the night was through.

"Where are the ropes?" he called to Stephanos.

"Here, lord," the stable-boy said promptly, showing the webbing of light silken cords.

Basil was strapping on the bags that he would carry; he helped Leila shrug into hers. They both adjusted the weight of the packs for comfort, and then tied the ends of the ropes, separately, to the straps that crossed in front of their chests.

Nadira stood to one side, watching the activity with obvious misgivings.

Annoyed, Arjumand motioned her to come close. Overhead, light clouds scudded across the sky. On the eastern horizon the full moon rose, majestic and helpful. The wind was southerly, which made him uneasily grateful for heavenly favors. Tendrils of Nadira's hair floated free in the breeze. "Bind your hair with a scarf," he said gruffly, handing her a webbing of straps.

"Wha—? I mean, yes, lord," she said, holding the ropes as if they were dead rats.

Margarethe passed a scarf to Nadira; she put it on, but only wrapped the ends around her neck.



"Tie it," Arjumand commanded. When she looked blankly at him, he growled, "Look how Leila's doing it. I don't want it in my eyes. Hurry! I want to be in Konia before dawn."

Nadira's white-eyed glance went sideways to the other djinni. "L-lord?"

He wished, echoing Sharibet, that Nadira would speak in complete sentences. "Konias three hundred miles. We'll make Antioch tomorrow night. I want to be in Jerusalem by the third day."

"But, lord. That's so far, so quickly. How?"

"We're flying. Or—I'm flying. They're gliding, when I'm not towing them. I'm carrying you." He didn't care that her knees visibly shook. She was a djinniah. She would come with them, and do her best. "The harnesses are secure?" he demanded of Stephanos, indicating Basil and Leila.

"Yes, lord," the youth replied.

"Fasten Nadira's ropes," he ordered. The youth hastened to bind her to his back.

"Nadira, your part is to stay still. Don't clutch or squeeze my neck." He had a sickening thought. *Better test it now, rather than later.* "Here, let's see if the movement of my aura goes through you, or not. Put your hands on my shoulders."

Nadira obeyed hesitantly. He stretched his aura, and beat the air. Of course she shrieked in his ear. Shaking his head to dislodge the ringing, he turned violently, but restrained himself before doing serious damage. He opened his Seer's eyes to check her aura. Undamaged. "Did you feel anything from that?"

"You came off the ground!"

"Yes, of course," he said, gritting his teeth. "Did you feel any effect from being in the way of my aura?"

"N-no, lord," she quavered.

"Get back into position, then."

Stephanos gave a final tug to the tie-rope. Nadira clutched his shoulders nervously, panting in his ear. Basil gave a hand signal: *all ready*.

"Let's go."

He stepped up onto the roof's parapet, scanning for any outsiders in the streets below. Nothing. Taking a deep breath, he leaped into the sky. Nadira's scream made him snarl so she could hear it, "If you do that again, you'll find the ground by yourself."

Silence was his best reward.

His aura wings lifted them up into the sky. He stared down in sickened fascination at the lights of Constantinople, twinkling from torches and lamp-lit windows until he felt Basil and Leila on the ropes tied to his waist. Their aura wings, even after a thousand years, weren't strong enough to fly this entire journey by themselves. They could manage a few miles, bearing only their own weight. But a thousand miles? Impossible.

He carried them up, and up, straining his power to the utmost. At the height of his climb he paused, looking down. The kingdoms of the earth lay spread beneath him, carved in moonlight and shadow. The Bosphorus, to his left, was a wide crooked finger separating the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. From far enough up, the Black Sea looked like a crouching leopard with one long extended paw.

He shook off this fancy. The downward glide provided only a short respite. When the earth came too close for comfort, he beat his wings again, clawing for the upper air. He repeated this pattern all the way to Konia.

\* \* \* \*

Gul'un Evi, Konia

Konia was a walled Seljuk Turkish town, with tiled mosques and tree-filled gardens. Arjumand spotted it gratefully, shining in the waning moonlight at the edge of a flat plain. The House of the Rose, an impressive building even for Konia, stood not far from the Mevlevi dervishes' complex, south of the old Greek Acropolis, now the Sultan's palace.

The watcher on the rooftop bowed as they alighted. Well, Basil and Leila alighted. Arjumand crashed. He set Nadira down with a thump, and panted while he waited for someone to untie the straps that bound him to the young djinniah.

Someone placed a jar in his hand. It was already opened, and still warm. He drank it down in deep draughts. It was replaced by another almost before the first one was empty. He drank it more slowly. Finished, for now, he handed the jar back to Nadira. Good, they'd untied her.

"Show me my room." He hoped he could get there before he fell down.

Nadira, still shaking, looked toward a member of the Konia house, and presented her arm for Arjumand to take. Feeling old and creaky, he stumbled in the direction she went. There was a ladder, rooms with carpets and tapestries. There was a padded pallet. That was all he needed.

\* \* \* \*

It was late afternoon when he awoke. A girl with dark hair and the amber eyes of the House waited by the side of his pallet. She bowed, and said, "It is good to meet again, lord. Do you wish anything?"

*Another week of sleep. A world without Mongols.* "No. Uh, yes. Water."

She poured lemon-scented water into a silver goblet, and offered it. He drank, his arm trembling. *I have to do this again tonight, and tomorrow night.*

"Lord, my father, Arshya, the Master of the House, awaits your pleasure."

Arjumand groaned, and fell back onto the pillows.

Into the silence that followed, the girl spoke. "Lord, he said I should give you anything you wanted."

*Oh, God.* He cracked open one eye, and saw that she held a small tray. On it was a sharp knife, and a towel. The girl sat, demure and desirable, in a sleeveless shift whose deep neckline showed that she was no girl at all, but a woman grown.

These supreme perquisites of Apkallu life were always offered at the most inconvenient times! He started to shake his head, but a fierce headache dissuaded him.

"Good, thank you," he said, patting the divan next to him and rolling over onto his side. "Come. Let me hold you."

She crawled next to him, and he turned her so they could cuddle back to front. She was warm. Her hair was clean. He was asleep again before he remembered to exhale.

\* \* \* \*

The Maghreb call to prayer woke him at sunset. The girl was still next to him, sleeping softly. He laughed a little. Boring for her! But he felt more like himself, no longer so exhausted. He nuzzled the sweet young neck so delightfully close to his nose. She woke up with a squeak.

"Easy, easy, I won't hurt you," he said.

"I know!" She relaxed.

He stroked her arm. She shivered. He sighed. "Are you a virgin?"

"No, lord," she said, slightly offended. "I'm Raised and Named. My True Name is Kishib-gir. I'm called Too-cheh." Or that's what it sounded like.

"Um. It's good to meet ag—"

"Yes, it is, Father Enlil." She spoiled the formality with a giggle.

"Well you know who I am, and that's good." He sighed regretfully. "I'm Sharibet's consort."

"Um. Yes, lord." She stroked his arm this time. "That never stopped you, before."

He sat straight up, tumbling her off the pallet. "Out! Now."

She jumped to her feet, holding her shift together nervously at her breast.

He unbent a little. "Tell your father I'm very pleased with you, and I'll want some more supper before I leave. The lamb was wonderful."

She ran like a rabbit.

He got up, washed his face, and put on his clothes. By their scent they had been washed and dried while he slept. The house was treating him like visiting royalty. Well, they'd been in a city paying tribute to a different horde of Mongols for sixteen years. Konia's Mongols had believed in taxation after conquest.

Hulegu's Mongols ... might not care to leave anything standing to tax. Arjumand hoped they weren't moving faster than he could fly.

## Chapter Five

*"Ea, Enki, one who delivers decisions, sends greetings to his beloved people of the House in Marseilles 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 the sixteenth day of May Anno Domini 1260"

Received via pigeon post with annotation by Hector de la Rose: *"Copy to Critias, Master in Antioch. No word on why urgency. Have you heard?"*

Monday, 11th of the Moon Jumada II, 658 AH (May 24, AD 1260)

The second night was a repeat of the first, only harder, though the distance was not so great. There was no tail wind, and Arjumand was too tired to summon one. Basil and Leila tried to carry their own weight for a few hours as they climbed high over the Taurus Mountains, glowing under the moon, but their smaller wings did little to help.

Arjumand was faltering as they crossed the Gulf of Alexandretta, a giant's square thumb-print pressed out of the

edge of the Middle Sea. Gliding lower and lower, he was barely able to crest the next range of mountains. Finally, with Antioch in sight to the west, he had to call a halt, just to rest.

Hoping they were invisible to the Franks in their citadel on Mount Silpius to the south, he stood, bent over, wheezing like a spent horse, sweat running down his face and his sides. From the rocks he felt traces of the day's baking summer heat through his boots. After a while, he looked downhill at the city by the Orontes River. Huge crumbling defensive walls, visible more by their shadows, crawled down the sides of the mountain, surrounding much more territory than the present town occupied. There were palms and gardens and olive trees between the brick houses in the town, and somewhere in there was a House of the Rose.

Nadira had moved away from him as far as her harness would allow. She hadn't said anything to him since last night. Small blessings on this hideous journey. And Basil—oh, he was really going to have to repay favors—had secreted an extra jug in his pack tonight. Arjumand broke it open, and drank it all without offering to share. None of his companions asked, either. Standing there, he dreamed of the warm bed he'd left behind in Konia, and the warm girl that had shared it with him.

He gave the empty jug back to Basil, who smashed it to pieces on the rocks, taking care to crush the seal into unreadable fragments.

"Thanks," panted Arjumand. "When we get—into Antioch—I'm not going to—be able to—say or do much—until I've rested. You'll be in charge. Do what's—needed."



"I will, lord," Basil said.

Steeling himself, he gulped a few more deep breaths, wishing he didn't have to face the dark depths that fell away from the mountain. He wasn't able to lift his head to search out the moon and the stars above. "Hold tight," he said to Nadira. She did. "Ready?" he called to Basil. Receiving a terse, "Yes," he said, "Go!" and leapt into the dark air once again.

*Soon, it will be over.* But even with a rest, he had trouble seeing where he was going. *Were those rooftops below? Or the river?*

—Turn left, lord!—Basil said urgently.

Left?—Guide me. I can't see anymore,—he sent to Basil, grateful he didn't have to breathe to talk.

—We know,—Basil sent.—Further left a hundred feet. About twenty feet down. Down now!—

Arjumand backfired, hovered briefly—very briefly—and let himself and his passengers drop straight down. Basil had better be right!

Solid rooftop under his feet. Nadira leaping off his back. No screams. Darker night than he'd flown through ambushed him.

\* \* \* \*

Tuesday, May 25, AD 1260

Principality of Antioch

When he realized he was seeing red through his eyelids, he decided he might possibly wake up. Maybe. There was a

strong smell of lemons and honey. Disguising blood? He hoped so. Painful hunger awoke too.

He groped blindly for the jar he hoped was there. Someone put it into his hand. He groaned his thanks. The jar was already open for him. He realized he was face-down on something soft. The jar stopped against the edge of the something, too far away from his face to reach it. A bent straw was placed against his lips. He opened them, and sucked. Blood through a straw. How good it was. He swallowed until there was only air. He made a distressed sound, but before he could finish it the straw was sucking up more liquid. Ahhh.

After the third jar, he found he could open his eyes. It was Nadira again, giving him his food. Well, she was making herself useful. "Status?" he croaked.

"Lord?" she asked, stupidly.

—Status?—he sent to Basil.

—All secure here,—Basil replied immediately. He was in the office of the Antioch House, a comfortable room with a graceful desk and carved wooden scroll case. Critias, the Master of the House, perched anxiously on the other side of the desk.—Bohemund, the Christian count of Antioch, became a willing vassal of the Mongols this last March. He's married to the daughter of Hetoum, king of Armenia, who has been an ally of the Mongols for seven years.—

An alliance between Christian righteousness and Mongol savagery seemed more frightening to Arjumand than Mongols by themselves.

Basil continued,—The Antioch House is secure. The Mongols don't seem interested in conquering Crusader territory.—Understood. Time now?—

Basil sent a picture of some kind, but it went smeary on Arjumand, and swirled madly until he disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

He realized, as he felt warm air on his backside, that it was now late on a hot afternoon, and he was flat on his face with cramps above his back in muscles that he didn't have. His head hurt, and was still spinning.

*Can I die now?* he asked nobody in particular.

"Lord!" somebody gasped.

Had he said that aloud? Who had he offended this time? He cracked one eye, then closed it again. Nadira. Why couldn't she just leave him alone? He wondered if he should just say that to her, but ... She was his responsibility. *Damn.* "Yes, Nadira."

"You're awake, lord! How are you feeling?"

*Like kicking you.* He tried to recast it into kinder terms, but the attempt spun around in his mind for too long. He settled for, "My head hurts."

Nadira shoved a jar in front of his face. "This has henbane. They made the lamb eat it."

The herb was a pain reliever and muscle relaxant. He could use it. Another jar of blood disappeared down his greedy maw. *Someday, I'll have the time to savor my food again.* The drug worked splendidly. He was able to roll over, sit up and stand almost immediately. However, his knees gave way

right after that, and he had to lean on Nadira. She was right there, under his arm, to hold him up. He tried to be thankful. But the best he could do was grunt.

He was naked. "Clothes," he said roughly. He hadn't been doing any screaming or yelling lately. Why was his voice such a wreck?

Nadira brought him new clothes and helped him don them. She stood back when he was fully dressed, waiting patiently for his next command. What did he want to do, anyway? Besides sleep some more? Find out about Mongols. Right.

He accepted Nadira's arm. "Take me to the master of this House," he said. He let her lead him and bear some of his weight. It was easier than falling down.

\* \* \* \*

The stairs to the roof seemed endless. Nadira wanted to scream. Everyone was being so cold to her—especially Arjumand. And this flying! She couldn't fathom why he put himself through such an ordeal, night after night, only to save time getting to Jerusalem. It wasn't as if the kin couldn't run away from Mongols on their own!

The birds were faster for sending notices, anyway. But she stood still for the straps to be fastened again and did not yelp as they swooped up. She hated the not-feeling of Arjumand's wings, going through her. She hated the roar of the air past her ears. She hated flying as a passenger. She wanted to do it herself.

Hour after hour, they soared and fell, climbing toward the stars, swooping down to earth. Doing it over and over again.

She was heartily bored by the terror of it after so long, although the sound of Arjumand's heavy breathing remained repulsive.

If she'd been on a horse, or in a litter, by now she would have fallen asleep, waiting out the boring journey. But how could she sleep when they kept passing through damp, cold clouds? Clouds that were starting to stream past faster and faster. With a snap, the ropes fastened to Basil and Leila whipped up past her, and the other djinni cried out at the shock of lines going taut. They were now hanging above her, rather than below.

They tried to hold themselves in the air, straining—Leila even flapped her arms, as if that would help, but they were pulled inexorably downwards, like birds tied to a falling rock. The sensation of Arjumand's aura wings, throbbing inside her, had stopped. There was an instant of relief before panic set in. She was falling!

—Arjumand has fainted!—Basil shouted, through their mind-link.

—What am I supposed to do?—Her clothes and head scarf whipped angrily.

—Hero defend us! Wake him up!—returned Basil.

Nadira was falling face downward, the raging air nearly taking off her skin. She made the mistake of opening her eyes. Before tears flowed, she saw the wrinkled ground leaping toward her at unimaginable speed.

"Wake up!" she screamed in Arjumand's ear. But he didn't. The ground loomed closer, and the wind screamed louder.

—Hit him with your aura,—Basil recommended.

How was she supposed to do that? Could she even move her aura? In the extremity of the moment, she screamed and whacked Arjumand solidly on the back of his head. "Wake up!"

Basil pulled on the rope from above as hard as he could. Leila too, she supposed, from the tightness in the slack, although she was out of sight behind Nadira.

Arjumand twitched.

"WAKE UP!" She hit him again.

"Wha—?" he slurred.

"WE'RE FALLING! WAKE UP!"

He didn't waste energy in speech, verbal or mental. He flexed his aura wings—she felt the silky, disturbing sensation go through her—and they stabilized in the air. Another beat, and the ropes that tied Basil and Leila went loose, then leveled at the same height.

Arjumand shook his head. Sweat flew from his hair, and spattered Nadira's face. She recoiled. The earth, huge and all-pervasive now, was only a hundred feet below. She sighed, and sagged against Arjumand's back.

"Don't cling," he said harshly. "Can you see any height where we can land?"

She sniffed, contemplating telling him to go to his burning Christian hell, but decided, reluctantly, that she should wait until they touched down. She looked. "There." She pointed carefully over his right arm toward a rocky ridge.

"All right ... that's where ... we'll stop." He labored to reach the spot.

Once her feet hit rock, she spat to get the taste of terror out of her mouth, and ignored Leila's dirty look. She unfastened the straps holding her to Arjumand, and stepped away from him as he collapsed.

"You're trying too hard, lord," said Basil, pretending that he hadn't been scared shitless.

"Maybe..." Arjumand gasped. "but ... if I don't ... who will?"

Nadira choked back curses. He was killing himself—and her!—to save the kin, who were the most arrogant, ungrateful people in the world.

Basil handed a jar to Arjumand. *Boot-licker.*

Arjumand gulped the contents of the jar, and his color went from ghastly to merely sick. He straightened up. Basil took the jar and smashed it as he had the one last night.

She felt the solidity of rock beneath her feet, and said some of the prayers she had learned as a child, wishing she had been the one to hand Arjumand the jar. She sighed.

"Nadira," Arjumand said, crooking his fingers for her to come closer.

"Yes, lord," she said, as pleasantly as she could.

"Nadira, your mind-links are open. Close them."

Shock rooted her to the spot. *Oh, Merciful! He knows everything. Everything I feel. Oh, Humiliator!* She wanted to die—no, not that. She wanted to live forever. Just not within earshot—or mindshot—of any of these fiends!

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday, 13th of the Moon Jumada II, 658 AH (Feast of Corpus Christi, May 26, AD 1260)

Dar al Warda, Jerusalem

Jerusalem was quiet. The only light that burned in the city, this close to dawn, was the one on the rooftop of the House of the Rose. Arjumand fell onto the roof by the welcoming lamp. Basil and Leila landed neatly behind him. Nadira lay heavily across his back, breathing almost as hard as he was. He wanted to succumb to the gathering blackness, but there was too much to do.

The watcher, who hurriedly named himself Hussein, helped Arjumand to struggle out of the harness, shedding Nadira along with the silk cords. When he was free of his burden, Arjumand whispered, "Call a conference."

"Yes, lord," Hussein said. "Would you like refreshment here? Or in your rooms?"

"In our rooms," Nadira answered. "Call the conference for when Lord Arjumand wakes."

He wanted to slap her. But, cursing himself, he realized she was right. They—he—needed some time to rest before the elders came together.

Hussein guided them swiftly down the ladder, and into the maze of this ancient House. It had stood, Sharibet had told him, since the days before the Jews had been conquered by Romans. As he walked, lightheaded, through its stone-walled rooms and hallways, his nose agreed with her. The smell of long-time habitation was a palpable presence, despite the surface attempts at cleaning.



As Hussein opened the door to the djinni's suite, he bespoke Basil,—Try to spy out the current situation. We need the best information available.—Of course, lord.—Basil sounded lively and willing. *Damn him.*

His room was spacious and tightly shuttered against prying eyes or daylight. Arjumand felt fully justified in falling to the divan, and staring blindly up at the intricately crafted ceiling with its mind-numbing patterns of six-pointed stars. He wasn't quite sleeping when the polite scratching at his door startled him. He groaned as he sat up. "Enter."

It was Nadira, her gaze downcast in imitation of modesty. He wished for one good reason to snuff her lies and her ambition and be done with her. "What do you want?"

"Some of your time, lord," she said.

He sighed. "All right, yes, you can have a moment. What do you want?"

She opened her gown and he recoiled. She pointedly ignored his response, only falling short of fully revealing her breasts.

"Well, you've shown me your neck. What do you want me to do with it?" His question was harsh, but he wasn't feeling kindly.

"Lord..."

"Speak, or get out."

"Lord, I want—you've bound my thoughts to yours. I would like—I need—would you share your thoughts with me?"

He stood up, unaware that he did so. "Get out!" he roared. He had to remember that he didn't hit women. "Get out!" he repeated, when she didn't move. "If I would not share with

Cecilia, do you think I'd share with you? Go! I don't want to look at you."

She bowed in the manner of the people of the House, closed her robe, and retreated.

He didn't want to see tears on her cheeks. He didn't want to know her grief.—Keep your damned shields shut!—he concluded, knowing she would not hear him. Thank God she couldn't. He would go to hell before he'd be the victim of her ambition.

The fine tremor of rage, of harmony wrung by shock, remained even after she was gone. That she could so upset him! He laughed, shortly, at himself. In the privacy of his own heart, he admitted he would rather leap off a cliff into the fathomless air without his wings than to bare his soul to such a creature as Nadira. He reclined, slowly, hitting the soft pillow that had cushioned his head only scant minutes earlier. It was still warm from his body heat. He relaxed into it, breathing deliberately, trying to replace the calm he had lost to her intrusion.

*Oh, Michel. Oh, Mathilde. If only you were here!* But they weren't here. They were on the other side of the world, and just as ensnared as he was by the House of the Rose.

*Oh, God, Arjumand* groaned.

## Chapter Six

*Its lord has destroyed that city and its temples, has despoiled it like an evil wind ... Enlil turned that former city into a city no longer. He made its mind wander. He threw its intelligence into disorder and made it haunted. He took away its food and its water ... No one touches the arm of the lord of the city, he who removed its mes. No one intercedes ... How did Enlil fling away all his best mes? No one ever touches his arm! No one ever intercedes!—Lament for Nibru by Ishme-Dagan (reigned in Isin, 1953-1935 BC)*

Thursday, 21st of the Moon Jumada II, 658 AH (June 3, AD 1260)

Dar al Warda, Jerusalem

Nadira fumed silently, careful to maintain the veil over her thoughts while trapped in this stuffy meeting. There were dozens of kin crowded into the House's reception hall. Not just the local inhabitants, but kin from far-flung holdings, who had been gathering here since the pigeons were sent out.

Had it only been a week? Her life had changed so much already. She glowered in Arjumand's direction. His refusal the day before yesterday had been a complete humiliation! She wanted to crawl into some deep, dark grain jar to hide with the mice and spiders.

There, one of the elders was speaking. "Lord, if we recall the families from the farms where we grow our roses, we will have no profit next year. All the farms in the Land Between the Rivers and Persia are already lost."

"How soon can we bring new farms in Tunisia and Provence into production?"

Deep scowls and meaningful glances passed back and forth. "Three years. More, if the plants won't root."

"We—that is, djinni—can make the plants root, correct?"

"This magic has been wielded by djinni," the elder said cautiously. "But not for a thousand years."

"Are we so diminished?"

Everybody's eyes rounded. Even Nadira was shocked that he dared voice it.

"Well, *I* don't remember," Arjumand snapped.

"Lord." The old man judged Arjumand's temper from under grizzled eyebrows. "In a word: yes. The skills of the Apkallu are less than they were in earlier days. Sharibet still does the Transformation of Teeth, but no one else has done more than minor healing since the age of the Christians began in the year the earthquake struck Crete and the sea struck Alexandria."

"We wondered," piped in another, "why this was so. We didn't want to ask..."

Nadira would have sneered at their guilty faces, but she retained some sense of self-preservation.

"What else have the Apkallu forgotten?" A babble of voices answered. Arjumand held up his hand for silence. "One at a time."

"Healing," the old man said.

"Transformation of plants," said another.

"Creation of demons," said a third.

"The granting of the power of mind-to-mind speech to mortals," added another.

"The calling of lightning," said a young man, staring at Arjumand in a very confrontational way. But the moment passed, and yet more people spoke up.

"The calling of fish into the net ... The finding of water ... The lifting of stone ... Flooding ... The fecundity of the vine ... The restoration of fertility ... The reading of the future ... The rule of nations ... The transference of souls ... The easing of birth ... The drinking of life..."

The voices stilled.

"What has *not* been forgotten?" Arjumand asked, sounding strained.

The Master of the Jersusalem House answered: "Lord, great powers remain. Raising and Naming. Seer's Eyes. The Hand of Air. The calling of fire. Flight. Mind-to-mind speaking between djinni. Transformation. The voice of coercion. Illusion. Writing. Reading. The shaking of the earth. The word of death. But the last two powers are Lady Cecilia's alone. Some of the forgotten powers belong to those who have been Lost for an age," he finished sadly.

"This has not been spoken," added someone's grandmother, hunched and wrinkled. But her teeth were good, Nadira granted. "We revere the Great Lady. She has our best interests at heart."

No one else said anything.

Nadira was still annoyed with Arjumand, but she wanted those powers. When would they be given to her?

"Well, it can't be helped," Arjumand said, frowning. "We need the roses, and we have to evacuate. Now, how can we do both?"

"We could leave volunteers and hired people on the farms," said a young council member. "It is a risk, of course—"

"We have reserves for a few years of resettlement," said the eldest grandmother. "But it is better not to have to use the reserves."

"We've just finished this year's harvest," someone else interrupted. "Will we have time to distribute to our regular customers?"

They were off and running on the stultifying details of the perfume business. Nadira examined her fingertips. They needed henna and she was trapped here for hours, while they debated—and she didn't dare yawn.

\* \* \* \*

In the garden of the Jerusalem House, two evenings later, Arjumand awaited Basil's return from his latest scouting trip. He had a rare moment to think, sitting in a backless Roman chair in a quiet corner bounded by thick-trunked olive trees. A mosaic-topped table held jars of blood and maps, including one of the city of Jerusalem.

When he had taken the cross twelve years ago, green as grass, he had vowed to liberate the Holy City from Saracen hands. Now, to all outward appearance, he was one of those Saracens. He hadn't even tried to visit any the sacred places: the Via Dolorosa, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the

Temple Mount. True, he was in the middle of an emergency, but he could have snatched an hour or two if he really wanted to.

When the Mongols came, they might protect those sites, or destroy all. *I have no time to play the pilgrim.* Unfortunately, he was too familiar with his own lies to believe it.

But here was Basil, landing neatly, pushing back his wind-disarrayed hair. "Despite the rumors, no actual Mongols have been sighted in the Jerusalem district, lord."

"What's the bad news?"

"About twenty thousand Mongols are headed south—that's down from an original estimate of three hundred thousand. Hulegu Khan and the main body of troops rode back to their capital, Karakorum, after word came in February that his brother, the Great Khan Mongke, had died. Now, if it please the gods, they'll fight each other for the succession, and leave us alone."

"God grant small favors. Do we know when or if they're coming through Syria?"

"The remaining Mongols, under the command of Kit-Buqa, or Ked-Buga, or some such barbarian name, sent a letter to the Mamluk Sultan Kutuz, advising him of their annihilating enmity, so ... probably soon."

"If it's not a ruse."

"They do not have the reputation for ruses, except in battle. They are disconcertingly, bloodily direct. Lord." Basil added the honorific as an afterthought.

Arjumand waved it away. "We can't assume. God's Bones! Three hundred thousand men! How do they feed them all?"

As Basil took a breath, he held up his hand. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Basil's smile was brief, and wry.

"Twenty-four Houses between Aleppo and Gaza. Seven already evacuated ... that's..." Arjumand counted on his fingers. "Seventeen left, and three farms to hire workers for. That was a good suggestion, by the youngster at the meeting. He seems smart."

Basil nodded. "His true name is Zu-Enki, if he has not told you himself."

Arjumand shrugged. "He mentioned it. Why do you?"

"His name was given when he joined the House. It means 'He Understands Enki.'"

"Yes. So?"

"In the language of the House..." Basil continued patiently.

Arjumand threw down the map. "If he understands Enki, he must be as smart as Enki?"

"Lord Enki, who was the Lady Honoria when I first had the privilege to meet her, was once the God of Wisdom. So yes, Zu-Enki is smart."

"You could just say so," Arjumand said irritably. "Maybe we should summon him to help plan. God knows, I don't feel competent to do this all."

Basil gracefully offered one of the waiting jars. "Maybe you're just hungry."

And tired. And dispirited. Even though they faced only a fraction of an army of three hundred thousand men, it was still more than he wanted to face alone! And nearly five



hundred family members were depending on him to save them.

"Lord?" Basil asked tentatively.

"What?"

"Shall I open the jar for you?"

Arjumand turned his palms up on his knees. Were his hands trembling? "Please."

A warm smell of blood and cinnamon emanated from the jar Basil handed him. The blood was his meat, his drink now. He took it, still wishing for something different. But when he had finished it, he did feel better. "What other bad news?"

"The sultan of Mayyafaraquin, one of the towns the Mongols sacked on their way up the Tigris, was forced to eat his own flesh, torn from his body. He choked to death."

Arjumand coughed. "What was the reason?"

"The Mongols claim it was because he crucified a Christian priest they sent as an envoy."

"Charming people. Your point?"

"It's my belief..." Basil ground to a halt. Arjumand waited.

Basil said reluctantly, "In Persia, the Mongols are already building a state. They've been stable overlords of the Seljuk territory for a generation. They're barbarians, certainly, and they brook no defiance, but we should start trying to reclaim our properties in Persia, to reestablish Houses, and put rose farms in production around Konia. Sharibet won't listen to me, but you—"

Arjumand growled, "Do you count on me to sell your message?"

Basil stood, bowed, and began to kneel, as prelude to a full face-to-floor obeisance.

Arjumand cursed. "Get up, you flatterer. Don't I know you well enough by now? Fine! Eat dirt, if you like, and to hell with you." He stood and stepped around the now prone djinn, walking almost blindly into the depths of the garden. Surrounded by ranks of Sharibet's experimental roses, double-blooming, five-to thirty-petaled and colored red and pink and white, he ground his teeth and grabbed a scarlet bud, ripping it from its thorny stalk and crushing it between his fingers. The rich, spicy scent rose up from bleeding petals, reminding him of Sharibet, her passion, and her inflexibility.

His hand of air crushed the petals, too, surrounding them, penetrating them. He felt the fading life of the bloom sparkling away, escaping, no, liberated by his aura's grasp.

He opened his hand and found the petals were gone. Only dust remained. He spilled the dust in a fine rain onto the gnarled trunk of the rosebush, knotted with the scars of many prunings. What had he done?

The voice of the old Mistress of the Jerusalem House echoed in his memory: *The drinking of life*. Oh, God. That he should have such a power and find it at this moment!

A single mourning dove gave its plaintive call, and his heart ached, remembering the same sad song, echoing from the hard walls of Ypres' houses. He had left Ypres, still wanting to see Mathilde one last time before he went on Crusade to atone or die ... Neither of which he had managed to do. He turned back to Basil. "Go to Persia, then! See if you can get the properties back. See if any of the bushes are still

producing. See if you can talk to Mongols and sell them perfume!"

"It has been a generation, lord," Basil said, his voice neutral.

"While you're there, see if you can make any of their leaders pass any faster."

"They drink themselves to death, I understand."

As Basil began to rise, Arjumand said, "Leila stays with me. You can go, but I need one other reliable djinn while you're gone. I don't care how flighty everyone considers Leila, she's still better than..."

Basil frowned. "Lord, do not speak of my consort in such a way."

"This has not been spoken," Arjumand quoted sarcastically. He spat onto the rich black dirt of the garden. "What do you want for this?"

"Ah, lord. You, too, are learning. I desire nothing." But Basil stood, stiffly.

"Be careful. I might take you at your word. Then where would you be?"

"In Persia? With Mongols?"

The feeble attempt at a joke made Arjumand suspicious. "What do you know that I don't?"

Basil coughed.

"Just tell me, unless you want me to reach in and take it from you."

"Yes, lord," Basil bowed deeply.—I'm well aware of your reservations regarding Nadira,—he said.—It is my estimation, based on my unhappy contact with the writhing snake-pit she

calls a mind, that her chances of becoming a successful djinniah are less than Aleppo's chances of survival, faced by three hundred thousand Mongols. I want to be well away and yet still be seen as useful to the House, when you have to destroy her. Clear enough?—Basil ended with unleashed anger.

"What if I need you?"

"You already planned for us to watch over different Houses in this territory. You can ship the kin and the cuttings out, now that Acre is solely in Venetian hands. You'll send some to Italy, some to Provence, some to Tunis ... and we'll have new properties, new farms, no matter what happens. You don't need me." The last was said with peculiar emphasis.

Arjumand opened his Seer's eyes and caught Basil's aura reaching for his head.

"Don't you ever try the Voice of Coercion on me again." He wrapped Basil in one wing of his great aura, lifting him effortlessly off the ground, and boxed him on the ear.

Basil's urbanity began to slip. He couldn't struggle. He couldn't move. His dwarf aura wings fluttered ineffectively.

Arjumand shook him. "Understand?"

"Y-Yes, lord," Basil replied.

"Don't you forget it." He let Basil drop onto the stone terrace. "Go to hell, for all I care. Send regular reports from Persia. Maybe there will be a House left for you to return to when you're done."

"Yes, lord." Basil bowed, deeply, hands clasped at his waist, and walked swiftly away.

Arjumand picked up the second, unopened jar. He considered, briefly, throwing it down onto the stones. He wanted to smash something. But he could still feel the softness of dust on his palm. He broke the seal neatly and drank off the contents. A rim of blood, drying rapidly on the jar's lip, gleamed the same crimson as the rose petals.

*Persia. Damn.* Surely he had fully repaid Basil's good deeds by now?

\* \* \* \*

Nadira smelled something rotten in the wind when Arjumand called another meeting of the elders that afternoon. They all filed into the same dreary room, bowing to the djinni, including herself, which was nice, and sat down onto their cushions. All the wrinkled faces looked as curious as she felt.

Arjumand, standing to one side, wore a determined expression. *God is Gracious*, she prayed, hoping it wasn't about her!

When everyone was seated, he started to speak. "I have decided that we will split up our forces. Lord Basil will go to do my bidding in the East. I will continue protecting the Houses in Judea and Syria. The djinnia will be placed in Houses to the north and south to relay messages to me. We have just enough time to make the evacuations orderly; to gather the cuttings we need to make a new start in the west; and to hire outsiders to harvest the roses next Spring, in case the Mongols don't destroy everything, after all."

So Basil was getting shipped east? That was a new one. Where was she being sent?

"Elder Sister Nadira will go to Sidon," Arjumand said, pointedly not looking at her.

She closed her shields tighter.

"Elder Sister Leila will go to Acre, our main entrepot. Most of our ships in the Middle Sea will be arriving there in the next few weeks to pick up evacuees. We can't assign definite destinations. The kin will have to go wherever the ship they catch happens to be going. We'll try to keep Houses together, if we can. Any questions?"

"What of the outsiders among us? May we bring them, too?" asked a matron.

"If you want them, and they're willing to go with you."

"If they don't want to go," she sniffed, "they can take their chances with the Mongols." Nervous laughter greeted her pronouncement.

"Then let us get to our tasks, and the saving of the House. May we meet again," Arjumand said.

"May we meet again," everyone said in unison.

Sidon, eh? On the coast, in Christian hands—that was not in its favor. They were such dirty people! But better than Jerusalem, near Arjumand.

After the elders left, Leila started weeping noisily, clinging to Basil. "Why are you sending him away, lord? In a thousand years, we have never been parted! Why must he go? What did he do?" She sobbed pitifully as her consort patted her on the back.

Why was Basil looking daggers at *her*? Nadira hadn't even rolled her eyes, although she'd wanted to.

"I'm not angry at Basil," Arjumand said patiently. "Or at you."

"You say that as if you're lying," she hiccupped. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Leila." Arjumand said harshly. "Be calm. Right now, you must be a Protector, and not Basil's consort."

"Not his consort? For how long? I miss him already, and he hasn't even left yet!"

"Dearest, I'll miss you, too," Basil said. "You are always first in my heart." Nadira would have believed him if she hadn't seen his expression of harassed resignation.

"Leila, you'll have time for farewells later. Now you need to establish a bond with Nadira," said Arjumand.

"Bond with her?" Distaste flickered across Leila's face.

Shock hit—*they all hate me!*—before rage boiled. *How dare she?* Nadira was ready to do battle when Basil stopped her in mid-stride with his hand of air. She knew better than to fight him.

"Now, Leila," Arjumand was saying. "You'll need to relay messages for me when Basil's out of range."

"Why don't you bond to her? Why do I have to?"

—Don't say a word,—Basil warned Nadira. There was a lethal glint in his eye.

She closed her lips on what she would have said. Her only cold satisfaction was Arjumand's discomfiture as he tried to avoid answering Leila's question.

Basil saved him. "I'll buy you silk and pearls for a new dalmatica, Leila, dearest. You can wear it while I'm gone, and think of me."

"Will you stay until it's made and I can wear it for you?"

Arjumand nodded weary acceptance to Basil.

"Of course. But you'll have to take it off, just for me, before I go."

Leila's smile earned her a kiss from Basil that made Nadira wish she could push the other djinniah out the window and take her place in Basil's embrace.

Arjumand coughed. "Time for that later."

Leila turned around without moving from the circle of Basil's arms. "I'll bond with her, lord, since you so command," she said, smiling at Nadira with no affection. "If you're willing?"

Nadira contented herself with a bow and a formal, "Elder sister."

Leila held out one hand. Nadira stared at it, uncertain. What was she supposed to do?

—Roll up your sleeve and give Leila your arm,—Basil instructed.

Leila's teeth broke the skin at the inside of Nadira's elbow. She took a sip, then twitched. Nadira felt the pressure of an invisible bandage—Leila's aura—for the few moments her wound took to heal. By that time, Leila had folded her own stiff embroidered sleeve up and offered her bare arm.

"Ow!" said Leila as Nadira bit down. "Not so deep!"

Nadira didn't hear anything more. She was: *flying above a hilltop town as Basil shouts—Beware! There's an army at your city's gate.*— Then she was ... *running along the Mese, crying and carrying a soot-streaked baby, dodging grasping hands, as Crusaders and Venetians loot the city, house to house.* And



*she was ... whirling in the infinity of Justinian's new Church of Holy Wisdom. And she was ... standing with the kin at the Appointing of a Found Crown of Service djinn as he tastes the blood of his concubine. The kin gasp in horror: he has taken his taste, and won't stop. Mother Sharibet binds him with her aura. Lord Menelaos cares for the fainting concubine. The Man of the Ax steps forward, gives the djinni one chance to speak his contrition. Hearing no word but the roar of hunger, down comes the ax. The head rolls straight to her feet...*

Nadira gasped, too, as Basil pulled her away from Leila by the braided hair at her nape.

"I said stop!" Leila said, holding the wound tight with her aura.—Can you hear me? Answer this way.—Yes, Leila.—

Leila slapped her smartly on the cheek. "Call me 'Elder Sister!'" She bowed toward Arjumand. "I have done as you commanded, lord." She white-knuckled Basil's arm. "Take me to shop for the silk *now*."

"As you command," Basil said, and went away with her.

"Why did she have to hit me?" Nadira asked, rubbing her cheek. But she was savoring the images she had seen. *A setting full moon limns ghostlike banners ... smoke rises in turbulent pillars from the docks and palaces ... mosaic faces glitter under the floating dome, the whole vast space breathing incense and piety and grandeur ... The torches in the new house in the new city of Alexandria flicker...*

"Nadira. Nadira!"

She shook her head and looked up at Arjumand's scowling face.

"Do you remember promising to take only what is willingly given to you?"

Fear cramped her voice. "Wasn't she willing? She gave me her arm." Would she be killed now? *The severed head blinks astonished amber eyes at her while blood baptizes everyone...*

Arjumand sighed. Dizzy with relief and the various shocks of the day, Nadira sat down. "What do you want me to do? I can't be other than I am."

"I know."

What right did he have to sound sad for her? "You have to teach me!" she said.

He might have been saying something like, "You have to learn the lesson," but she was lost inside the visions Leila had shown to her.... *stiff silk encrusted with pearls and polished gems ... earrings made of beads of gold that drape from ear to breast ... glass vials of red and gold and amethyst smaller than a thumb, which when opened evoke roses in the cathedral's space...*

"Nadira!"

She wanted to ignore him, but he jerked her upright, and started dragging her toward the door. She couldn't resist as he brought her to her own room.... *thick rugs that caress her hand as she touches them, lost in the labyrinth of their convoluted ornamentation...*

"Get some rest," he ordered.

"Mm-hmmm..." she murmured. Was he putting her to bed? Would he join her? A draft of air brushed her face. The sound of a door closing seemed to mean something.

Broken Gods (House of the Rose, Book 3)  
*by Michaela August*

The images consume her.... *blood baptizes everyone...*

## Chapter Seven

*You have heard how we have conquered a vast empire and have purified the earth of the disorders which tainted it. It is for you to fly and for us to pursue, and whither will you fly, and by what road shall you escape us? Our horses are swift, our arrows sharp, our swords like thunderbolts, our hearts as hard as the mountains, our soldiers as numerous as the sand. Fortresses will not detain us, nor arms stop us: Your prayers to heaven will not avail against us. We mean well by our warning. At present you are the only enemy against whom we have to ride.*—Letter from Hulegu Khan to Sultan Kutuz of Egypt, received July 1260

Tuesday, August 17, AD 1260

House of the Rose, Sidon

Nadira woke up to sweltering morning heat, hating it. Hating her lumpy bed, hating her sticky clothes, hating being marooned here in Sidon with nothing interesting to do but wait for urgent messages from Leila, who hated her. Yet she didn't want to seem useless, especially since the Mongols had, for the most part, packed up and gone home to Mongolia. Somebody important had died and they had to go home to elect a replacement? All that trouble, all the Houses evacuated, for nothing?

She rolled over onto her back, flexed the edges of her wings, and had the deeply satisfying sensation of sheets moving beneath her. The satisfaction evaporated when she remembered it would be hundreds of years before her aura

became large enough to let her fly by herself. She rolled onto her stomach, and pretended to fly. The air moved; it was cooler for a moment. Then, at the edges of her hearing, she heard a scream. Another scream, and she stood up. Whoever was making that noise was truly in pain.

She got up, quickly threw on a gown and ran into the hall. "Massimo! Carolus!" She called for the Master of the House and his son. "Donna Genevra!" Where were they?

One of the little ones—she hadn't thought his name important to learn—ran toward her. "Elder Sister! Papa wants you on the roof!" he panted.

Wanting to be affronted by the summons, but feeling more and more afraid of what might have occasioned it, she started climbing the stairs. Walking turned into a run when she heard more screams. She was running *toward* them? *Oh, Giver of Peace!*

The edge of the flat roof was screened by a knot of bodies, all peering anxiously over the city's skyline. "What?" She couldn't say the rest, her throat was too tight.

"Mongols at the city wall," said Massimo.

"How?"

"Can't say," he answered, sounding entirely too calm. "Lord Julian rode out to fight against the Mongols last week. Most likely, this is a reprisal. Can you tell us anything?"

"I hear screaming," she said. "Shouldn't we be packing?"

"Invasion stations! This is not a drill!" Massimo announced to the people gathered nervously around him. They scattered like leaves in a hot and heavy wind, leaving Nadira standing with Massimo, feeling more and more frightened.

"Um," she said uncertainly. Basil had made her practice for so many unlikely events! Which one applied now? Imminent evacuation? No, it was still too early in the day to risk transporting the members of the House, one by one, over the city walls. And besides, she couldn't fly! Cloak the house in a glamour of invisibility? No, only an Apkallu had powers strong enough for that. Gather the valuables and hide?

"Lady, come with me to the office and take the title documents," he said. She had just been about to say that!

He hurried down the narrow stairs and into the office. Shuttered windows blocked out harsh morning light. She took the packet of oilskin-wrapped papers that he gave her, and fastened them under her clothes, under her breasts.

He opened the strongbox, bound with heavy iron fastenings, and took out a handful of the gold coins that filled the box to the rim. These, he transferred to a smaller strongbox that stood nearby. This second strongbox would serve as decoy, should looters enter the house. Massimo set the ledgers on the big strongbox and hefted the whole huge set in his wiry arms. Grunting, he carried them down into the basement, through the camouflaged entrance, and into the fortified chamber built long ago into the rocky foundation of Sidon.

She followed him, more frightened than she had been since her Transformation. If she had died then, she would merely have died. But who knew what Mongols would do to her before killing her? Djinni didn't die easily...

She tried to keep her mind deliberately blank as she joined the group within the man-made cave under the house, and

watched Massimo slide the protective stone wall shut, both sealing and camouflaging the room. The only light came from an oil lamp suspended above their heads by a chain. The too-small space was filled with the smells of swaddled babies, children with remnants of breakfast still on their faces, and adults exhaling rank anxiety. Her own fear was bitter copper.

Massimo called out names. All responded, save one. Carolus.

"Lady," Massimo said. "My son went out to check on the ships in port this morning. He should be fine." His voice cracked, giving himself the lie. "He's a smart boy. He'll be fine."

His wife, Donna Genevra, came up to him and put her arms around him. "Hush," she said. "We'll know if he knocks in code." She sounded much calmer than he did, but, opening her Seer's eyes, Nadira saw Genevra's aura pulsing with the same pale gray as her husband's. Fear.

The sounds Nadira could hear now, through the stone, would have turned her bowels to water before her Transformation. More screams. Clanging steel. Arrows hissing. Women shrieking. Men screaming in rage and terror. Time froze like a rock in her heart. Nobody in the refuge spoke. They huddled, not moving except to embrace one another.

The lamp guttered. Eliana, one of the Raised and Named maids, wearing her 252nd lifetime chip, refilled it, grim serenity showing in her every movement. Nadira hated her.

Days, weeks, months later the sounds diminished. The sounds of galloping horses receded. The Mongols were gone. No knock relieved them of worry for Carolus.

Finally Massimo gave the signal. The hideyhole doors were opened. The basement appeared untouched, but as they climbed the stairs, they saw all the after-effects of a thorough raid; hangings torn from their hooks; kitchen pottery too big to carry tossed and smashed; beds overturned and their ropes cut. The office's cabinets had been kicked in and completely demolished. The decoy strongbox had been shattered and the gold was, as expected, gone.

Massimo opened the shutters, letting in noontime heat and shocking brightness. Only noon?

"Carolus," Massimo wavered, looking into the street and seeing the destruction. "Will you look for him, lady?"

She found herself agreeing, although she didn't want to. Oh, how she hated this life!

\* \* \* \*

She never found Carolus, alive or dead, though she and Eliana, with the older stableboys for protection, searched all the afternoon and into twilight. The boys had no other work to do, anyway. Their horses had all been taken.

The walls of the city were breached, but the enemy had departed. As others from the town searched also for their dead, or survivors, or for loot, Nadira found bodies: mangled, hacked, bloody. That was hard enough, but having to touch some of them, to roll them over and look at their faces! Her



stomach was still willing to give up its liquid food, joining other streams and splotches of gore on the torn-up ground.

A weary, horrible time later she saw something, like a soiled shimmer over a toppled ruin of corpses.

Eliana heard her gasp. "What is it, Elder Sister? What have you seen?"

"There," Nadira pointed. "An Apkallu."

"Lords of the mountain!" Eliana shrieked, startled out of her damned composure for once. "Is he still alive? Gods have mercy!" The stableboys, alerted by Eliana, moved in closer as Nadira picked her way through the bodies. Eliana looked wildly around, searching for what Nadira had seen. "Where, elder sister?" she begged. "Which one?"

Did Eliana hoped to get the credit for this find? Well, let her see for herself what life was like for a Crown of Service djinn. Nadira faltered as blood-mud, already adhering to the soles of her sandals, squelched between her toes.

"Lady!" Eliana whispered, pointing out lanterns appearing in the distance, carried by scavengers coming out in the dusk upon this field of death.

Nadira didn't want to save a damned Apkallu. What would he see in her, anyway? Just another servant. Then the aura flickered over the fallen warrior. "This one," she said.

Eliana shrieked again. "A Mongol? A *Mongol?!?*"

"Oh, yes," Nadira said, weary beyond words. Just try to let them blame her for this!

\* \* \* \*

There was as much uproar at the House as Nadira had predicted. Exclamations of: "Surely he can't be—" "Are you certain, lady?" and "Not that we don't believe you..."

Nadira was glad to know that Sharibet's annoyed glare worked well when *she* copied it.

The wounded Apkallu had been tenderly placed in the best bed in the djinni's suite, with great care not to disturb the arrow embedded in his side. His Mongol blood smelled like any other mortal's. It made her thirsty and itchy at the same time. She wanted it, and knew she dared not taste it or they'd kill her.

The pigeon-keeper hurried to send his messages. No one seemed to breathe in the crowded chamber as Eliana, who in her last lives had been a physician, inspected the Apkallu's wound.

"Ah," she said, peeling away the overlapping shoulder-fastened coat, dyed dark green and embroidered with pearls under red-lacquered lamellar armor. "See how his silk shirt has kept the arrow from digging too far into his flesh? This will be easy to withdraw; if he will take liquid, and does not already have a fever, he may yet live."

Everyone sighed with relief.

"Hot water!" Eliana ordered.

Nadira sniffed. Just because the girl had centuries of experience didn't mean she could escape the period of apprenticeship every young member of the House must endure. Only in an emergency was she allowed to revert to her former role.

Eliana pulled the arrow gently from the wound between prominent ribs. Blood flowed, dark red, in thick clots. When the tip emerged, triple-barbed, the room gave another collective sigh, which quickly turned to a gasps of alarm at the sucking sound of double breath.

"His lung is punctured," Eliana said. "I revise my prognosis. He will not live past dawn."

Watching the feeble flicker of his aura, Nadira concurred. Would they blame her, if he died? Unless ... "Lord Arjumand must be summoned," she said abruptly. "If this Lost one can be Transformed, then perhaps..."

"Did he consent?" asked Donna Genevra.

"He can give his consent to Lord Arjumand!" Nadira said, thinking fast. "How may we summon him most swiftly?"

Eliana the physician looked at her oddly, then seemed to remember something. "Elder Sister, you can summon him, djinn-to-djinn."

Nadira didn't want to open her mind to that sanctimonious Franj. He hated her! And didn't care that she knew. And yet, he might hate her even more if she failed to rescue his brother. Whatever crown the new Apkallu might claim, she alone would have the fame of finding him. He might even be grateful to her, when he awoke, transformed, a god amongst gods.

"I will do so immediately," she said, bowing her head and opening the mind channels that Basil had taught her to close.—Lord Arjumand? I have Found a Lost Apkallu, but he lies close to death. Only your help will save him for the

House, as I know not how to perform a Transformation. Come swiftly!—

Elder Sister Leila's mental voice replied, faint with distance, but clear.—Lord Arjumand says, "Well done," and he'll be there in about two hours.—After a brief pause, as Leila listened to a voice Nadira couldn't hear, she said,—That's a coup for you, little sister. The House rejoices, I'm sure. Don't let it go to your head.—

Then there was only silence and Nadira's own, simmering indignation until a tentative cough broke the waiting expectancy of the room. "Lord Arjumand will be here within two hours," Nadira announced sourly.

People hurried away, no doubt to ensure their designated areas of the House were clean and tidy for the arrival of Lord Arjumand. Eliana was busy doing something to the wound that Nadira didn't want to watch, so she examined the rest of her perilous find. He was so young! Still gangly with late adolescence, he had a fringe of mustache and reddish hair, braided in loops, over small, beautiful ears. An eagle's beak of a nose, with flaring nostrils, jutted out of a broad, tanned face. His eyes were closed. He looked more dead than alive, except for the fitful throbbing of his aura.

She watched it for a while until she understood what the broken rhythm of that flicker meant: it was his heartbeat.

Abruptly, she stood and left to comb her hair and make herself presentable for Arjumand.

\* \* \* \*

Nadira paced angrily around her shabby sleeping room. It had been much tossed by the invaders and not yet put to rights. Worst and most painful of all, her pearls had been stolen by the invaders. Or perhaps, given that they had been taken out of their hidden box, someone from the House had done it. She brooded over the injustice of her life. She had found another Apkallu for them, and this was her reward?

She was just feeling the first awful sensation of hunger when someone scratched at her door. When she said, "Come!" Eliana entered, bearing an unsealed pottery jug.

The scent of fresh, warm blood drew Nadira halfway across the room before she was aware of moving. She snatched the container and downed the contents in a breath, and when she was done, she sighed deeply in disgust. Would she ever become accustomed to this vile sustenance? She handed the empty jug back to a waiting Eliana, and was about to complain about her missing jewels when the girl rushed into speech.

"Thank you for finding another of our Lost, Elder Sister. It is a great thing you have done for us today. We are grateful. May you find honor, and grace in this deed." Eliana bowed formally, hands clasped at her waist, and slipped out the door without waiting for Nadira to reply.

*Honor?* Nadira snorted and sat down on the cushioned bench. She was more worried about her position within the House with one more Apkallu to lord it over her. If he lived. But what had the little cat meant by *grace*?

\* \* \* \*

## Above Jerusalem

In the air again, Arjumand groaned. The dark countryside unscrolled beneath him, dry stony ground, low hills. The land was almost as barren as his hopes for the coming meeting.

What would he find when he arrived? Would he have the strength to deal with it? Would he recognize the Apkallu who had been Found? How would he? He didn't have any of his own old memories to draw on. From the scant pictures that Nadira had sent, the Mongol was certainly an Apkallu. Wings long enough to cover his body did not grow in any mortal span. The faint color of the aura had offered Arjumand no clues as to identity. Leila had said she had a suspicion who he might be, but had never encountered him herself. For the first time he regretted not being Raised and Named. If only Cecilia weren't the one to perform the ceremony...

He knew he was pondering the unsolvable. But he needed some kind of distraction from the depth of air below him. The air was chill on his skin, with a hint of salt from the sea.

How would a Mongol Apkallu adapt to the House? How would the House adapt to a Mongol Apkallu?

Arjumand's instincts were clamoring at the obligation to Transform an enemy. He was charged with returning the Lost Apkallu to their rightful stations as djinni. But he was also a Protector of the House. In this case, how could he protect the House while admitting a member of a savage conquering race?

Nadira had reported that this Lost one lay near death—perhaps he would die before Arjumand arrived, and thus

spare him the decision. Or perhaps he would refuse to consent. That would be the best thing. For everyone.

If the Mongol didn't die? *I could refuse to perform the Transformation.*

But even as he flew steadily toward Sidon, Arjumand knew that he had no choice. Neither Sharibet nor the House elders would allow him to deviate from the narrow path of the law that bound them. He was an Apkallu, mightiest of the djinni; and yet, by the oaths he had sworn and the restrictions that fettered him, he was not free to exercise his judgment if it ran counter to sacred tradition.

When the night-shrouded buildings of Sidon finally appeared, waves crashing against the city's unbroken seawalls, Arjumand had resigned himself to what lay ahead.

\* \* \* \*

Arjumand had hardly touched down on the flat roof next to the dovecotes when the watcher offered refreshment. Drinking gratefully, he handed the jug back to the youth, who bowed and murmured, "I am called Benjamin, lord. My True Name is Dumuzibani. It is good to meet again."

"It is good to meet again," Arjumand replied. "Where is he?"

"This way," said the youth, turning to descend the ladder to the uppermost floor of the house, which had three more stories down to the street. Arjumand followed swiftly.

Members of the House swarmed around the door to the dying man's sickroom. They opened a path without complaint

or murmur, watching Arjumand pass with mixed expressions: hope, wariness, and some with barely restrained despair.

"May your power save him, lord," whispered the old woman standing guard.

"May it, indeed," he answered. *Not dead yet, then.* He would just have to see.

The room was dimly lit by single oil lamp. On a heavy table next to the bed, a pile of neat bandages and bottled medicines waited for use. Nadira perched on the head of the bed where the injured Mongol lay stripped of his clothing, his chest wrapped in dark-stained bandages. The scent of human blood made Arjumand's teeth ache.

A young woman stood on the other side of the bed, holding the Mongol's wrist between her fingers in the manner of a physician. "His pulse is slowing, lord," she said urgently. "He hasn't much time."

Arjumand steeled himself. He knew what he needed to do next. "Remove the bandage," he said, his voice sounding remarkably calm to his own ears.

Nadira gasped, or started to, and smothered the sound. He didn't bother to look at her. He didn't want to hear her thoughts.

The young woman swiftly sliced away the bandages over the Mongol's ribs. The wound gleamed wetly, although a plug composed of herbs, resin, and wax had been set into the middle of it.

Arjumand listened grimly to the man's irregular breathing. With his Seer's eyes opened, he inspected the flickering aura, lying limp along the body, festering black over the wound. He



stooped and set his lips against the torn and bleeding flesh. The taste of the Mongol's blood was sweet, like spring grass. He drew it into his mouth and swallowed, opening his mind to allow the attachment of the bond, stiffening in unwanted ecstasy as the images of this stranger's past rushed into him.

*Sidon's towers gleam in the light of dawn, and the bitter scent of incense announces their attack. Arrows fly like hail. He is mighty, victorious. This day will prove him finally worthy of his father's blood! Pain strikes him down, searing pain and the injustice of defeat ... Earlier: In the courtyard of the high castle, heresies crackle in a fifty-foot bonfire. The heat feels good, but better still is the soft skin of his new concubine ... and earlier: In a deep and twisting canyon in a land of mountains, a graceful fortress hugs the top of the ridge, empty siege towers arrayed against its walls. The gate cracks open, and a hundred thousand men cheer as one. "The Assassins are fallen, and the world is cleansed of their polluting evil," shouts the Persian historian. "But save the Library!" ... and earlier: Tiny hands, grip the reins of a patient, sturdy pony. Over the pony's ears, an endless horizon of grass stretches forever...*

Arjumand came back to himself, knowing he had to look further into this barbarian's past. Who was he? Who had he been to the House? There was no denying the wings of an Apkallu. He took another mouthful of blood.

*Grass ... grass ... grass ... fire ... the burning air screams and the sky falls, a tiny, brilliant point, brighter than the sun, falling and falling. Inanna's face is ashen, and her hands cover her mouth. The land buckles, smashed like a cup. The*

*air burns. Inanna burns. His body burns ... Inanna, the radiant jewel, first daughter of the moon, stands by the bed, the royal bed, the bed of kingship, the bed of queenship, the bed that rejoices the heart. "The bed is ready. The bed is waiting," she calls to her king, to her bridegroom. To him. He puts his hand in her hand. He puts his hand to her heart, to her soft skin, rejoicing. She sings: "Dumuzi, your fullness is my delight, My lord sweetens me always. My lord is the one my womb loves best. His hand is honey. His foot is honey. He sweetens me always..."*

Arjumand jerked out of the memory. "Dumuzi," he croaked. "His True Name is Dumuzi."

"It is good to meet again," cried the young woman, still holding the bloody shreds of bandages. "Did he consent to be Transformed?"

Arjumand shook himself. "Not yet." He licked his lips, cleaning them of partially-dried flakes of blood. Had it been so long already? No wonder she was worried.

He put his hand on Dumuzi's head, although he wasn't entirely sure what to do to get consent. The man was unconscious. And even if he did regain consciousness, would he speak any language Arjumand knew?

Only one way to find out. He grimaced, and bit his finger, letting a drop of blood fall into Dumuzi's open mouth. With a blood bond, they could speak mind to mind. They would have this bond for seven years, if Dumuzi agreed to be Transformed.

Arjumand closed the slack mouth, rubbed the throat to make him swallow, opened his mind, and got the dying man's attention.—Dumuzi!—he called.

—Why do you call me that?—

The Mongol's mind-voice was faint, but he was responding rationally, and in Arabic, praise God.

—You may know all, in time,—Arjumand answered.—Your life is forfeit, unless you agree to join the House of the Rose, your true home, your family. I cannot guarantee your survival, but I can assure your death if you refuse. Will you consent?—What House of the Rose? Who are you?—Mental questions came unabated by a wheezing gasp.

Under the sounds of choking, Arjumand heard the feeble flutter of his heart.—Choose now. Your life is done, else.—Let me live!—Dumuzi said as he gasped for air. Bloody froth seeped around the edges of the plug in his wound, and from his mouth.—Murderers! Rebels! How dare you lay hands on a prince of the Mongols? We will ride you down. We will bury you, and the grass will eat your bones ...—

Arjumand lightly cuffed the dying man's head to get his attention. "Consent!"

—I consent, though I know not to what,—said Dumuzi.

"He consents!" Instantly, Arjumand wrapped the Mongol's body in the wings of his aura, plaiting the strands of life with all the speed and skill that he could summon.

The bustle of the people of the House outside the door faded. There was only the work to be done. A life to be Transformed. Arjumand worked feverishly, praying that he was doing the right thing.

## Chapter Eight

*"His army is as numerous as ants and locusts. His warriors are as brave as lions, so that none of the fatigues or hardships of war can injure them. They know neither ease nor rest, neither flight nor withdrawal. Whithersoever they go, they carry everything they need with them. They satisfy their hunger with dried meat and sour milk, disregarding the instructions as to what is allowed or what is forbidden, but eating the flesh of no matter what animal, even dogs and swine. They open a vein in their horses, and drink the blood ... When the Mongols effect a conquest, they leave nothing alive, either large or small, and they even rip up the bellies of the women with child. No mountain or river can arrest their progress."* Report of a spy in the service of Mohammed Shah of Khwarizm, 615/616 AH (AD 1218)

Wednesday, August 18, AD 1260

House of the Rose, Sidon

Nadira sat and seethed behind her tight mental shields. This Mongol Apkallu was her find. *Hers*. Hers to tend. Hers to ... She tossed her head.

"Be still, girl," Arjumand growled. "Or leave."

Nadira hunched resentfully. At least he had not turned her out of the room as he worked the magic of Transformation. Not that she could see what he was doing, other than stroking his aura slowly down the body. The Mongol already sported wide wings, so Arjumand hadn't had to tear his aura.

She wanted to know more. To have power ... There was magic to be learned here. Slow, boring magic, but magic nonetheless. She would gather whatever crumbs fell. She was certain that her gleanings would be more valuable than the lessons Basil taught. Those were lessons designed for subordinate djinni.

She wanted to shift in place, but remembered Arjumand's command. Resentment ran like an ache along her muscles. It wasn't as if her movements would disturb the dead! Or the being-reborn. She took a long, slow breath, and as Arjumand had already taught her, practiced patience. She could wait. She had all the time in the world.

Finally, Arjumand finished what he was doing. Now the young man lay there, limp on the bed. Only an erratic heartbeat and the flickering of his dim aura betrayed that he still lived. Thump, went the Mongol's heart. His aura brightened, and Arjumand exhaled with satisfaction.

Was he going to live, then? The brightened aura faded again, but not to the same dimness it had had before. Nadira watched even more intently. Had that been the sign?

Arjumand settled back, relaxing. There was no doubt, then. The Mongol would awaken as an Apkallu djinn.

Nadira ground her teeth in jealousy. From nothing, he would become a god: revered, crowned, immortal, powerful.

She wished she could be him, to take his place, receive his honors, wield his powers. It was gall on her tongue that she could not. But what if she could become something, everything, to him? Be his mother, his sister, his breath, the thoughts that went through his mind...

He might cure the bitter poison of being denied her rightful place within the House. She began to plan how to make it so.

\* \* \* \*

—So, who is he?—

Leila's voice whispered into Arjumand's mind in the depths of the night, when the rest of the world was sleeping, and the only sound in the room was the Mongol's fitful heartbeat.

—Dumuzi, as he remembers.—The Crown of the Shepherd? Hai! I thought so. He's been missing a long time. Longer than Basil and I have been together. What other news shall I pass along to Mother Sharibet?—

Arjumand sent a visual impression.

—He's a Mongol! May the House rejoice!—Oh, yes.—Arjumand was not looking forward to his awakening. How willingly would he learn the rules and the strictures of the House he had so precipitously joined? Luckily he had a much smaller aura, so that in any contest of strength Arjumand might confidently expect to be the winner.

—Let me know if you need any help,—Leila said, unexpectedly.

Touched, Arjumand said only,—Thank you. I might.—Although what a lesser djinn, and a woman at that, might accomplish against this Apkallu, Arjumand did not know.

After Leila's touch faded, uneasiness disturbed his spirit. Then the room spun. Had he been holding this vigil for two nights and a day already? He stood, reeling, and said to Nadira: "I must rest, and sup. While I am gone, you may repeat the litany."

"Yes, lord," she said submissively.

He didn't like the gleam in her eyes as she watched the sleeping Mongol. Too predatory. Too calculating. Too greedy. But what harm could she do?

As he stepped through the doorway, she cast another pinch of frankincense into the smoldering incense-burner next to the bed. She intoned, "Let the gates be opened, let the wanderer return. Let the gates be opened, let the house be prepared. Return to us, O wandering spirit, and dwell in the immortal temple of thy body!"

Arjumand shut the door on the sight and his qualms. He said to the dozing Benjamin, holding the family's watch outside the room of Transformation, "Where can I rest? Can supper be sent to me there?"

"Yes, lord! At once! Let me show you to the rooms prepared for you."

The room Benjamin showed him was dark, but the bed was firm. That was all he needed.

\* \* \* \*

Feast of St. Bernard, Saturday, August 21, AD 1260

He woke to afternoon light, slanting through the bars of high windows just like Sharibet's house in Alexandria. Had his life as a Protector, a sorcerer, for the past ten years been a dream? A nightmare? Or did he have to do it all again, over and over ... ?

There was a sealed jar on a tray just out of arm's reach. He picked it up with his hand of air and it swam through space toward him. *So. Not a dream.*

The jar's clay seal was stamped with the wedge-shaped marks that meant 'djinn.' He broke it and drank the lemon-laced blood to the bottom, feeling numbness recede with the energy the lamb's death provided him. Time to relieve Nadira. Time to continue the nightmare.

He set the jug down, and heard a crackle. What was that? He sat up, and saw a folded and sealed letter on the tray. It must be for him. Was it from Sharibet, missing him? He split his hand of air to lift the jar, and pick up the letter underneath at the same time.

His heart stopped. Parchment. It wasn't from Sharibet. She always used paper.

*Oh, God.* Carefully he opened the letter, scattering the wax seal in all directions. Had it been opened first? There was a smudge beyond the impression of the wax, but he didn't have the self-control to investigate it further. He angled the surface into the sunshine to read the handwriting. *Oh, holy Jesus. Mathilde.*

*Right worshipful and well-beloved cousin, in my most humble wise, I recommend me unto you, & etc. And heartily I thank you for the letter which you sent me by your brother Robert, may God rest and keep his soul, whereby I understand and know that ye be alive and in good spirits, albeit in strange lands.*

He frantically skimmed various bits of family news, looking for the meat. There!

*...I have hesitated to write you of mine illness, a consumption of the lungs, which causes mine heart to be full of heaviness, and which progresses and hastens mine end. It*



*is of the greatest comfort to me in this dark hour that mine own well-beloved brother Michel hath come to Ypres, where he is in much regard by the good knights of the Temple, and raised to the rank of Preceptor among them, and trusted in every wise with the prospering of their affairs on God's behalf here. He has become a fine man, and my happiness lacks only that you should come.*

*And as for myself, Lady Cecilia hath shown me the greatest kindnesses since her arrival, and through her good offices, done more in the matter of an advantageous match for my beloved daughter Blanche that I can or may, as God knows; and I know not how to ever repay her every good deed. Evrard de Bressoux is of noble lineage and heir to a fine estate near Liege; he is also near unto age with Blanche and I hope heartily that they shall find companionship within marriage with one another. My lord de Bressoux and his wife shall foster Blanche until such time as she may consummate her marriage; it is of great reassurance to me to have such noble folk show us this kindness and I pray assure you that she will be well. If you have recommended Lady Cecilia unto me, then I owe you my great thanks and prayers for giving my mind ease to know that my daughter shall be well cared-for when I am joined with God.*

Since receiving your letter, I have thought much upon the days of our youth, and my foolishness thereof, but cannot find it my heart to regret the pleasure of your company; nor to withdraw my affection from you. Wherefore, if that you could be content with that good memory, and keep my poor person in your heart and your prayers, I would be the

merriest woman on earth; and if you think not yourself so satisfied, or that you have your Lady Sharibet only in your heart nowadays, then take no such labor upon yourself, as to come from that matter, but let it pass, never more to be spoken of, as I may be your true kinswoman during the remainder of my life.

No more unto you at this time as a messenger from Josef de la Rose awaits in my parlor, but Almighty Jesus preserve you, both body and soul, &etc.

By my own hand on the day before the feast of the Ascension, in the year of our Lord 1260. Your ever-loving cousin, Mathilde

The parchment still held the ghost of lavender. Arjumand sat there, heart too full of feelings to move. *She still cares for me* warred with *she writes as if she's dying*. Oh, God. *She is dying*. 'Too ill to transform.' Oh, God. He held himself very still, afraid what he might do if he let himself go. *If only I were there, with her...*

*You would do what? Transform her?* A hard, cynical voice in his head reminded him of what he had just done for Kobegun. *After all your efforts to keep her free from these sorcerers?*

He took a deep breath. No. No, he wouldn't condemn her to this life. But God, the thought that he would never see her again...

Or ever see her daughter. Married, already? It was for the best. *The House takes care of its own*—though he felt a prickle of unease that Cecilia had taken such an interest, rather than leaving the details to the Ypres House.

He brought the parchment to his nose again, and breathed in the scent of lavender. *Mathilde*. He would not weep. This was nostalgia. The past was done, and gone.

But he could not stand, just yet. The past was gone, yet lived within his faultless memory, torment to recall. He would not flay himself with images of what could never be again. He wondered if Michel, as an Apkallu djinn, suffered the same pain of remembrance, or a worse agony, as he was Raised and Named, now. How had Cecilia gotten his consent for Transformation? He was as stubborn as any of their family, and so firm in keeping his oaths. How had he been content to renounce his vows to the Templars, after becoming a Preceptor, of all things? Michel had certainly been adamant about refusing Arjumand's own, admittedly half-hearted, invitation ten years ago in al Mansurah. It was a mystery that he could see no answer to.

Mysteries, and nightmares. It was time to find out if his own magic had been successful.

*God, let her be at peace.*

\* \* \* \*

Something was wrong. Where Kobegun lay it was too soft, too smooth. The smell of incense hung in the air, but not battle incense, bracing to the sinuses and stiffening to the nerves. Some decadent flowery scent, fit only for women and eunuchs.

He sniffed again. No smoke. No horses. No grass. Iron. Wood. Silk. A woman smelling of flowers, and flowers alone.

Should he open his eyes? He remembered pain—a damned arrow—but he breathed easily now, with no pain. And he was naked.

Where was he? Where was his horse? His men? His clothes? His *paitz*? Without it, no one would recognize him, his rank, the honors due to him! Had—Heaven forbid—they lost the battle? Why was he indoors? Who was this woman? Why was he here?

A door opened and closed. Someone stood over him. A man? He smelled of flowers, too. But he held something that reeked of blood.

Kobegun leaped up, ready to strangle his attacker with bare hands. But before he could reach the man, a stranger, with hair like gold and sky-colored eyes, his forward motion was stopped. He was held as if by a harness, unable to move and yet not falling.

No one was touching him. "What are you doing to me?" he snarled. "Release me!"

The hidden harness let him go, but only to let him fall backward onto the soft surface. He tried to sit up, and couldn't. "I said release me! If you know what's good for you—"

"I know you understand Arabic," Gold-hair said in that language.

"Yes," Kobegun admitted, throttling guilt. "Who are you? What are you doing? Why are you holding me? Let me go now, or it will go hard with you."

"I am Arjumand abd al-Warda, Protector of the House of the Rose," the man said. He had some sort of clay jar in his hands. "Are you hungry yet?"

Kobegun's belly rumbled angrily. "Yes."

Just like that, he was free. He scrambled to sit up against a wooden wall made soft with pillows.

Gold-hair handed him the jar. It was indeed full of blood, fresh, and warm. He drank a few swallows, surprised at how delicious it tasted, then set the jar down, still hungry, and glared at Gold-hair. "You offer me starvation rations. If you would feed me, bring food! Meat, bread, milk."

"That is your food now," said Gold-hair. "Drink more."

"Pah! You want me to puke it back up on you?"

Gold-hair smiled in a way that made Kobegun want to cut his lips off. "You won't puke. I promise."

In fact, Kobegun's belly was groaning as if those few swallows had only whetted an appetite that could never be satisfied. He drank the remaining blood, suspiciously. But his belly quieted. Grudgingly he said, "I receive this with thanks," before demanding, "Why are you feeding me this?"

Gold-hair took the empty jar, and handed it off to the woman standing by the door.

Kobegun stared for an eyeblink. She looked just as soft as she smelled; glossy smooth dark hair, round shoulders and soft arms, nursing mother breasts, curvy hips, draped in silk and gold. Her smile flirted, though her gaze was cast down.

"Possibly you don't remember just at present," Gold-hair was saying. "But I saved your life, and you swore allegiance to our House in return."

"I never—!" *Swear allegiance to city people? It was a trick.*

He struggled to get up again, but the damned invisible harness returned, holding him down. He paused in his efforts, trying to trick the magic hands, but he could not find a time when they were not holding him. Finally, out of breath, he subsided.

"If you don't want to keep your promise, I don't have to let you live," Gold-hair said in a deceptively mild voice.

What finally frightened Kobegun was the indifference in those sky-blue eyes. Gold-hair would be equally pleased to keep Kobegun alive, or to kill him

"We're not your enemy, we're your family," the woman said, her voice lilting.

—If you speak another word, you will lose your voice for the next thousand years, Nadira,—came a voice in his head. Though Gold-hair had not moved his lips, the voice had emanated from him. However, the woman did not react, as though she had heard nothing.

Kobegun shook his own head in confusion.

Now Gold-hair's eyebrows rose.—You heard me? Well. Interesting.—His mouth still didn't move. Nor did his throat work, as would have happened if he were a ventriloquist.

"How did you do that?"

Now the woman stared, and frowned as if she was being left out of gossip.

—I may tell you nothing unless you acknowledge your promise. And I shall know if you lie.—

Suddenly, that seemed like a credible threat. "I don't remember any promise," Kobegun grated, hating to admit any weakness.

"Yes, you were near death. It may have escaped your mind. Shall I refresh it for you?"

It was a trick. It was all a trick, but what choice did he have? If invisible hands could hold him down, they could strangle him. He stared at Gold-hair, who stared back, waiting patient as a hunter. Kobegun cracked first. "Why? What's in it for you? Why are you doing this to me?"

"It's a long story, and I may tell you nothing until you agree to abide by your promise," Gold-hair said, aloud. "You are valuable to us. Your life is valuable. Your death benefits no one. But your promise is the price of your life. Without it..." He shrugged.

Kobegun had looked death in the face before—on the battlefield, in the hunt, and once or twice in the sleeping furs. He knew the hatred of battlefield enemies, the desperation of hunted animals, the thirst for revenge of defeated women. He also knew the detachment of executioners, the slight regret and steadfastness of those who had many prisoners to dispatch and little time to obey their orders.

"Why?" he snarled, struggling against his bonds again.

Gold-hair sighed. "I may tell you nothing. Will you abide by your promise? I shall not ask again."

"I don't remember," Kobegun said desperately. "How can I agree?"

"I can refresh your memory. It will not be a lie." he said, as if recognizing Kobegun's objection. "Do I have your permission?"

"Yes. But if it's a trick, I'll kill you!"

Gold-hair merely smiled. He reached with his hand and touched Kobegun's forehead.

The room disappeared. *Darkness surrounds him with the scent of blood, and flowers.—Dumuzi!—someone calls him.—Why do you call me that?—The response comes, as if in a dream:—You may know all, in time. Your life is forfeit, unless you agree to join the House of the Rose. You don't remember, but this is your true home, your family ...—Outrageous impertinence!—What House of the Rose? Who are you? Why are you doing this?—Choose now. Your life is done, else.—Let me live!—His lungs gasp for air ... "Consent!" rings in his ears. His heart falters. Death's darkness surrounds him now, pressing close.—I consent, though I know not to what ...—Light surrounds him, blinding him. He's falling, like the instant between leaving the saddle and hitting the ground...*

Jolted, he came back to himself, lying on the soft city-bed. Gold-hair's name was Arjumand, he knew now, and there was another name behind that, and another name as well, back to a past that loomed like a sacred mountain shrouded by fog. Dizzily, Kobegun watched the ceiling and the walls whirl. "I consented. What have I consented to?" He felt weary beyond any battle he had ever fought.

"You have agreed to join the House of the Rose. To outsiders, the House is a clan of merchants, perfume-sellers."



Kobegun groaned. Merchants! He'd sold his life to merchants? But merchants with magic? Merchants who lived a thousand years?

Gold-hair smiled, as if he could hear Kobegun's thoughts. "Indeed. We know the secrets of life and death. We do not always triumph." His smile faded. "You have been Transformed into a Protector of the House. This is a role you have held before, though you do not remember."

"How could I have done this before and not remember?"

"An excellent question! Here is the answer to the secret. Life. Death. Life. Death. Life."

"You're as bad as damned Buddhists," Kobegun complained. "What use is a life if you can't remember it?"

"That's the House of the Rose's secret. We know how to remember."

Kobegun stilled. "How?" The implications were huge. The secrets of life and death, indeed. "Why me?"

"We recognized you."

The woman coughed, and Gold-hair tilted his head in her direction. "Nadira recognized you."

Her lips quirked; glad to be appreciated, annoyed that she had to fight for recognition. Yes, he knew her type.

"How?"

"You shine in the dark."

Kobegun snarled, tired of being teased. He came up off the bed—the bonds were gone now—and stood face to, well, chest. Damn. Gold-hair was tall. Kobegun had to look up to see that pale, stern face.

"Would you like me to show you how to see?"

He would have snarled again, but he caught the woman's soft snicker and glared at her.

She stared back at him, appraisingly, head to toe. Then she looked away in feigned shyness that left him feeling even more naked.

"Give me some clothes, first."

The woman lifted a robe, dyed rich indigo blue, and handed it to Gold-hair, who held it out for Kobegun to step into. He held it by the collar so that Kobegun would have to turn away, exposing his neck to put it on, making himself helpless against attack.

Kobegun took a breath, resentfully trusting that they would not offer this princely gift only to kill him, and turned away, putting his arms out. The soft silk slid up his arms. The collar, smooth and cool, lay like dew on his neck. The hem of the robe whispered against his calves. Gold-hair released the robe, and Kobegun wrapped and tied it, finding a short cord at the ribs as a fastener.

Gold-hair smiled faintly. Kobegun wanted to wipe that superior expression off his face.

"Would you like to sit down? Have some more drink?"

"No. You answer."

"Very well. Open your eyes."

"My eyes are open!"

"Yes. Your body's are. You must open your Seer's eyes."

"How? I have no incense! I have no trance! I have no sacrifice!"

"Do you need assistance? If you permit me—"

Kobegun knocked away the hand Gold-hair was extending toward his forehead. "I've been trained in the ways of the shamans since I was ten summers old."

He concentrated, and his Third eye opened, more easily than he'd ever been able to manage before. He was immediately blinded by radiance as bright as midday sunshine on the steppe. He covered his face with his hands. The radiance leaked past his fingers, and shone through his flesh. Awe and terror merged. Gold-hair was no man! This was a Shining One. He would have fallen to his knees, but a strong arm held him upright.

"As you see me, so we see you. You shine in the dark. In the light of day, as well."

"I do?" He was shaking. The shamans of his father's camp had seen the shadow of wings upon him, which had helped his status immeasurably when his brothers had cast him out. But they never said he shone!

Gold-hair held out his hand, and the woman put something into it. She shone, too, Kobegun noticed, but her glow was fainter, starlight to Gold-hair's sunlight.

"Let me show you." Gold-hair held up a thing, a circle of silver, two hand-spans across.

"What is that?"

"This is a mirror. Here. You hold it. Look in it at me."

Kobegun held the heavy circle of silver. His father had food dishes like it, taken from the sack of the Assassins' castle. The Chinese engineers coveted them, but Kobegun had found them a nuisance to carry around. This one was so highly

polished that the room reflected in it; the room, and Gold-hair, and the radiance that surrounded him.

Curious, Kobegun angled the mirror up and down. The light did not completely surround Gold-hair, but formed a definite shape: wings, like eagle's wings sized for a man, rising above his head, extending, even folded, beyond the length of his arms from side to side.

"Now look at yourself. Give me the mirror."

Kobegun obeyed, and stared, bewitched, as Gold-hair stepped back a pace. The mirror began to turn toward him. He saw bright wings, smaller than Gold-hair's, but still large, blood red with a tinge of green at their tips.

"That is how we recognized you. You are one of us. An Apkallu."

"No. It's a trick." It had to be a trick.

"Feel this." Gold-hair's right wing—lapis shading to amethyst—swept through the air between them. It went through his body. He felt it! Something moved through his flesh, through his own wing. *Oh, Heaven, oh, sky! It hurt! No, it was sweetest pleasure ...* He sat down abruptly onto the soft city-bed. "Have you *airak*?" He wanted to get very drunk. Even beer would be acceptable if there was no fermented mare's milk.

"Drink this to content you." Gold-hair handed him another clay jar. "We'll leave you to rest. Ring that bell when you wish to speak further, or bathe."

"Bathe, pah!" Kobegun spat, and saw Gold-hair and the woman exchange disgusted glances.

*City people!* As they turned to go, he added, "I'd like a woman in half an hour."

More glances. The woman nodded, but not submissively. "I'll return."

"What if I want someone else?" He was testing them now, and they knew it.

The soft woman spoke. "Lord Arjumand and I are the only ones in the house. As is customary, the kin have withdrawn for your awakening. I'm a Protector as well. You won't harm me. And I liked what I saw." Her golden glance was no longer mere flirtation.

"You sound like my mother!" Kobegun laughed harshly. "Very well. Come back. Bring more drink."

"As you wish," she said, her tone teasing rather than properly servile. "I am called Nadira."

"Welcome to the House, Kobegun," Gold-hair said with obvious insincerity. "It is good to meet ag—." He closed his mouth on the rest, and let the woman lead him out of the room.

When they were gone, Kobegun lay back on the city-bed. Where had they hidden his *paitz*? How soon could he escape this house of magicians and rejoin his regiment?

\* \* \* \*

Exactly a half-hour later, Nadira stood at the doorway to the new djinn's room, her heart thumping in anticipation. Kobegun was in for a surprise. Hopefully pleasant for him. Certainly it should be for her. This was the first step in

accomplishing her plan. Bind his flesh to her, his blood, his thoughts, his love ... But first, his flesh.

She set her hand on the latch of the door. It trembled with the force of her heartbeat. Did she dare? Did she really want to pursue this course?

The djinn inside said something in his own tongue. It probably was 'Come!'

She opened the door, and entered.

It was dark, since the shutters had been fastened to admit no light of sun or stars or moon. But she knew where the bed was, where the table stood. She knew where the naked man—djinn—was, too. He shone to her Seer's eyes, giving off heat like a banked fire, like a lover, primed and ready for sex. He smelled hot and musky, too. She undid the loop that held her single garment. No need for clothes, now.

He patted the bed impatiently. She slid in beside him. His skin was softer than she expected. He wasn't overly hairy. His hands found her face in the dark, framed them, followed the lines of her body, touching the outsides of her breasts, her waist, hips, thighs. He rolled atop her, letting her feel the hard length of his phallus along her belly, showing her without need for words how deeply he would fill her, once they joined.

She showed him, too, with her hands and her open, eager mouth, how she felt about his demonstration.

He rubbed against her belly, leaving a wet spot of further promise, and she had a swift, satisfying realization that she was going to take the seed that he should only spend into a virgin of the House, in order to entice a Lost Apkallu to find

flesh again. She would take his seed, and the hope of the House, into her own barren body. She would be his hope, his light, his partner. The House would get no joy from either of them.

He shifted lower, pressing her thighs apart, pushing into her ready wetness with a grunt. He had no finesse, not even the cold politeness that Arjumand had shown her. After a short, unimaginative rut, he came, exploding his seed into her womb, braying into her ear. When he relaxed, breathing deeply but no longer panting, he trailed an exploratory finger down the side of her face, along her neck, down the front of her body.

He palmed her breast now, kneading it like a baby in search of milk. He moved down and nuzzled, taking her nipple in his mouth and licking it. He began to suck, as if he expected to drink indeed. She felt the hard pull, the tingly tightness of resistance, and then, to her astonished alarm, her milk let down, rushing in a flood into his mouth. He drew it in, but before he could swallow, he jerked away, spitting and cursing and rubbing at his mouth.

She didn't need to taste it herself. It reeked like vomit. Old. Stale. Dead. She rolled over, coughing, trying to get the stench of failure out of her mouth

\* \* \* \*

Oh, Heaven, it was foul, foul, foulness in his mouth, on his tongue, in his gullet. He wanted to retch. *Airak* was sour, but the bite of alcohol made it desirable. This—even the taste of vomit would be better.

He settled for cursing, and wiping the inside of his mouth with the cloth covering the city-bed.

\* \* \* \*

Nadira found a towel, and expressed into it the milk she hadn't known she still carried. When both breasts were empty, the towel was sodden and stinking. She bundled it up and opened the door, tossing out the soiled cloth. Let the servants take care of it when they returned!

\* \* \* \*

"Water! Wine!" he commanded, but the bitch was too busy sponging herself. He grabbed her by her glossy hair. "What were you trying to do to me?"

She gasped, her breath warm on his face as he held her head at an angle. "I'm sorry. I didn't know—I had a son, over two years ago. Then Lord Arjumand Transformed me after I finished weaning."

He let her go. Her head dropped to the bed-cover. "You've borne a child?" *Outrageous! These people had offered him a used woman!*

"Four. Live and healthy."

"Well! That's a fine thing for your House, I'm sure. But what—how—" Damn. He was asking too many questions again. Yet, if he didn't, would they tell him anything?

"No one warned me this would happen. No one told me, not Leila, not Mother Sharibet." She laughed, dry hacking chuffs. "Leila never bore a child. Sharibet calls us her children, but the last babe she bore is five thousand years old



now, and living somewhere in Hind. I'm sure she's forgotten how it was, to nurse."

"Here, I want to see you. Light a lamp."

"Open your Seer's eyes."

How dare she give him orders! He raised his hand to slap her but paused, his elbow cocked above his head. Was she a power in this House or not? He opened his Third eye, and radiance filled the room, illuminating the geometric patterns on the ceiling, the bed and table, the intriguing shape of the naked woman next to him.

Naked, but not merely human. He saw again the stunted aura around her body. Nascent wings, smaller than a hand-span of cloth, shining with rampant colors of ochre, green, red, with veins of near-black.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Youth," she replied. "I'm just a baby djinniah."

"You didn't know that—" He spat again, the foul taste lingering, "would happen?"

"No!"

"Will it happen again?"

She turned her head slowly to look at him out of hot golden eyes. "I doubt it."

"Hmph. Do you have something a man can drink?"

She sat up, and reached toward the table by the city-bed, which had somehow become more comfortable. She picked up another of the clay jars. "I will share it with you."

He grabbed for it, and got it away from her. He reached for the clay plug to break it out, as he had seen Gold-hair do. But

the knack of it proved impossible. He tried again, and when he failed again he lifted the jar to smash it.

She slid it from his grasp. "Let me show you." The jar's round mouth was sealed with dried clay, one lip marked with some funny indentations. "The clay is thicker on this side," she pointed at the mark. "It's thinner on the other side. Press that side first." She showed how to do it, pressing until the seal broke. With a deft motion, she caught the plug's clean edge and pulled it straight up, without dropping cracked-off bits.

She set the plug, wet face up, onto the table, and handed him the jar. "There."

He sniffed suspiciously at the blood. "Something is in it."

"A preservative. Harmless."

He thrust the jar at her. "You drink it first."

She half-smiled and took three swallows. He didn't wait for another invitation. He grabbed the jar and drank it in a few large gulps of his own. The blood was cold, mixed with something sweet and tangy. It had ghosts in it of sheep's milk, sunshine, sudden pain, and...

"Death," Nadira said softly, answering the question he had not voiced. "You taste its death. In the House, they want us only to drink the blood they willingly give us. Willingly!" She laughed wildly, then went still. "You promise, or they'll kill you."

"They?"

She lifted stained lips to his. Her mouth tasted of blood and death. When she broke from the kiss, she said, softly, "I'm a Crown of Service djinniah, a commoner transformed

and raised to the status of Protector. You're..." her fingers traced the edge of his nearest wing. "Apkallu. A fallen god. I don't know anything yet and you don't remember. Together, we need to learn the House's magic."

He stroked her throat. She stretched into it as he caressed her breast, the soft flower of her nipple. Nature reversed as it budded, releasing desire like potent pollen.

He set the jar back on the table. Then he turned to her, pushing her flat beneath him on the cushioned bed before entering her warmth. When they were melded, he put his mouth to her ear and whispered, "Do you want to leave this House?"

Her nails raked his back, sending tremors through them both. When they faded, she put her lips to his ear and breathed, "That's not safe to speak aloud. We can only speak together if you drink my blood and I yours."

Her muscles clamped along his *ba'atur*, and he grunted, remembering that Gold-hair had spoken mind-to-mind. "Won't he hear us?"

She knew of whom he spoke. "Not if we're careful. There are ways. I'll teach you. When you remember what you have forgotten now, you'll teach me."

It was a strange bargain, made in the radiance they cast unimpeded by flesh and bone. He didn't know her or the people of this House. But it couldn't hurt to have two sources of information, both of them ignorant of the other. He wished he had more thorough intelligence. Oh, well. Better to ride the luck down, than wait for it to chase you.

"It's a bargain." He pumped into her, long and hard, making her groan. He kissed her into silence, sucking at her tongue.

He wasn't expecting her next move. She jammed her tongue onto a tooth. Her blood welled into his mouth, and made him arch and spasm with—was it ecstasy? Pain? He couldn't tell. But he saw...

*...the triumph of Seeing Robert D'Agincourt's aura, and knowing she had gained the House's greatest prize ... wedding Jamal and bearing sons for the House ... her nights with Arjumand: hot slick lovemaking and impersonal kindness ... discovering in her own Raising and Naming that she was a newcomer to the House ... waiting impatiently for her older sister's Raising and Naming. The shock of meeting the different person Amina had become...*

He lay back, swallowing blood and the impressions of her life. He started to laugh, and couldn't stop. So that was what girls felt! He kissed her, hard. He moved in her again, the way he knew, now, that she really liked. He felt her, feeling him. He nipped the side of her neck, feeling the ghost of her pain, then lipped the quickly fading mark as she stretched. Oh, this was a marvel! Magic to make a man feel like a god—and she spasmed around him while he drove to his own climax.

When his head finally cleared, he had the uncomfortable realization that the magic made him feel like a woman, as well.

She purred as she kissed him back.—Now let me, too, drink.—

He thrust his tongue into her mouth. Her tooth was sharp. The pain was negligible, but the quiver that started at her mouth went down to her toes. He felt it as she felt it. Then he saw what she saw: *Tiny hands, gripping the reins of a patient, sturdy pony. Over the pony's ears, an endless horizon of grass stretches forever...*

Was that what his life compressed to? Was that all that mattered to him? But no—she drank more blood, and the visions rolled through him in a different kind of climax: *Inanna the young girl, the radiant jewel, first daughter of the moon, stands by the bed, the royal bed, the bed of kingship, the bed of queenship ... "Dumuzi, your fullness is my delight, My lord, my honey-man, the one my womb loves best. His hand is honey. His foot is honey. He sweetens me always." Their bodies press together...*

Ahhh! He climaxed again, as she writhed with him, panting. All too soon, as they sprawled comfortably together, she began to tremble.

"What now?"

"Inanna," she whispered. "Inanna, the Cursed One."

It didn't make any sense to him.

—Inanna is our enemy now,—she told him.—You were her consort once, a long time ago.—Might not be good, eh?—But what were those images that she had seen in his mind?

—That was your life, before.—She stopped speaking.

"What's wrong?"

—Your previous lives. You're not supposed to remember anything before you're Raised and Named!—Tell me this! What is this?—

She explained it: the probation period, the Raising and Naming ceremony, the Appointing; and he laughed. The shamans had been violently anti-Buddhist. Yet those saffron-clad monks were proved right. The things he'd seen and felt in his previous lives made him hard again.

He found Nadira still wet, still throbbing. He pushed into her and she shook. Well, if he was only getting this one woman, it was good that she was hot and ready. Better, really, than five or six terrified virgins.

After he'd come again, and was finally sated, he asked the woman,—What about this Inanna?—He could think of her, now, the young woman, with only mild interest, not the raging need that had gripped him since the memory appeared.—Who was she? Where is she now?—Inanna,—she whispered in his mind as if afraid of being overheard, even in their sorcerous privacy.—The Cursed One. They say she destroyed the world—twice—and they have Forgotten her.—

He snorted.—Forgotten? Unlikely, if they still tell stories.—Forgotten means she cannot be Raised and Named. She will never again know who she is, who she was. She dies and is reborn, but she is no longer of the House, she no longer knows her True Name.—Why is this so bad—

Nadira paused.—I may not be the best person to answer that question. I have only lived in the House this one life. Others,—her mind-voice dripped jealousy,—have served for hundreds of lives.—They live so long?—Perhaps he should reevaluate his strategy...

—No. They live and die, and live and die, normal spans of human life. But when they are reborn, those who have

previously been Raised and Named have distinctive auras, like a flame, or a feather, above their foreheads. If they're recognized by a Seer or one of the djinni, and the Found soul consents, they are Raised—that is, their past-life memories are returned by a djinn—and Named—they remember their True Name. They remember everything they knew before. As if they didn't die. As if ...—

What a sweet arrangement. You only had to threaten to lock somebody out of this life, and they'd jump like rabbits into the net, do whatever you wanted for the chance to do it again. No wonder they wanted him back, if he could be the bait for such a trap.

But there was a niggling wrongness to the story about Inanna.—How can she have destroyed the world? It's still here. And large, I can tell you. Most of it is good, fertile grassland. What else did she do?—

The woman squirmed in his grasp.—Let me go. You're bruising my arm.—

He didn't let go. He held her still, and plunged within her once again. When he had her completely motionless, except for the quivers in her sex, he said,—You will tell me.—He could tell she enjoyed being mastered, overpowered. He felt her climax building, building, and when it crested as explosively as a thunderstorm, then drained away to a peace like clean-washed air, he repeated,—Tell me.—I don't know. I wasn't there. She's supposed to have destroyed the world, but it was probably just the House's world: the nation that the djinni ruled, in the land between the two rivers, at the dawn of time. Not much, as you say, of the entire world. But

she killed all but one of the Apkallu in her first destruction, and the House, especially the eldest of the House, who is called Cecilia now, does not tolerate such treason.—

His ears pricked.—Who is this Cecilia?—

Instead of words, she sent a picture: a young woman, with a foxy face. Her Apkallu wings spread to an awesome breadth. He extended his own aura, measuring. *Half her size. Damn.*

—She knows everything.—Even what we think? Even what we say here?—Yes.—Then why are you talking about this? Stupid whore!—He slapped her.

She covered her face, whimpering.—No, no! She doesn't care what you think, only what you do.—

He dropped his hand, changing the motion into a rough caress.—So we can think as much treason as we like, as long as we come when called?—Something like that.—Hunh.—He didn't know whether to believe her. Better to be safe.—So tell me, who was I?—Although he recognized himself in the memory: head over *ba'atur* in lust with the one they called Inanna. Beautiful as a goddess, and keen as a fine new blade. Damn.

—Dumuzi. Your True Name is Dumuzi. Your Crown is the Crown of the Shepherd, and you have been Lost to the House for two thousand years.—They didn't look for me very hard, did they?—

She didn't answer this; perhaps she couldn't, not if she'd been one of them for so short a time.

—You called me 'consort.' What does that mean?—he demanded.



—Royal husband, as I understand it.—What the hell is a royal husband? Was I king or not?—Not,—she said, spitefully.—Inanna was the goddess. There's a song the family sings at festivals, that tells how you tried to become king, and how she banished you to hell.—

Damn. Not king, eh? Well, it looked like he'd have a second chance now.

—You remember our bargain?—she coaxed.—I'll teach you what I know, and you'll teach me your magic.—Oh, yes,—he agreed.—I'll teach you.—*What I want you to know. When you've given me all I want.*

King. He smiled. King of the World. A Shining One, maybe even a god. It sounded good.

## Chapter Nine

...the noble Saracen ambassador who was sent to the king of France to report these things on behalf of all the men of the East, and to seek help from the men of the West, that the Tartars might be pushed back the more effectively, in turn sent an envoy to King Henry III of England, to say that unless the Saracens were able to withstand the attack, the inevitable sequel would be that the invaders would fall upon the West. He sought assistance, therefore, so that the Saracens, with Christian help, might hurl back such assaults.

The Bishop of Winchester, who happened to be present, and who had taken the Cross, replied in jest, "Let us leave these dogs to devour each other until they perish. Then when we set out against the enemies of Christ who still remain, we shall slay them and cleanse the face of the earth, so that the whole world shall be brought under the Catholic Church, and, in the words of St. John's Gospel, 'there will be one flock, one shepherd.'"—Matthew Paris, *Matthaei Parisensis Chronica Majora*, entry for the year 1238

Tuesday, August 31, 1260 AD (22nd of the Moon  
Ramadan, 658 AH)

House of the Rose, Acre, Kingdom of Jerusalem

The bells of the city's churches began to ring an alarm just as the djinni returned to the House. Arjumand, Kobegun, Nadira and Leila had been seeing the last group of refugees off on the *Rose of Tunis*, headed to North Africa. Now they would hold a final conference with the caretaker who had

volunteered to stay in Acre and take his chances with the Mongols.

The sonorous clangor jolted Arjumand back into a different life, a different self. His hand, almost by itself, rose to his forehead to initiate the sign of the cross. He stilled the motion of his traitorous extremity. The other djinni were all looking at him, to see what his next order would be. *God's Nails!* "I guess we'll have to find out what that's about," he said, wearily.

"I'll go," Leila offered with enthusiasm. "I love to gossip. I'll be right back!" She darted out the door and into the street, pausing only to ensure her headdress and veil were correct for this time and place.

Arjumand restrained the sigh that threatened to erupt. "Sir Jean," he called.

Sir Jean de Pézenas, a Crusader, had been Found by Dominic on the same night as Arjumand. He had been Raised and Named, recovering all of his past-life memories as one of the kin. Arjumand, who had known him before and after this startling change, still felt mildly repelled by the fervor with which Sir Jean had embraced his new life. *How many children did he have now? Four? Five?* They were en route to Toulouse, where Sir Jean hoped to join them, if he survived. And being Christian in a Christian city, he was more likely to receive mercy from the Mongols, if—when—they conquered Acre.

"Yes, lord," Sir Jean replied from the front office, where he had gone to record the final transaction of port fees and taxes. The Acre house was a primary transshipment point for

perfumes, peppers and other spices, cloth, resins, and all the luxury goods traded by the House from Hind to England, so there was always paperwork.

"Now!" Arjumand called, curbing his irritation. He didn't want to chase after Leila himself, and it wasn't as though he could send Kobegun after her with any real hope the boy would return. Nadira? Hopeless.

"Yes, lord?" Sir Jean said, popping out the door.

"Please go after Lady Leila and—" He bit his tongue before could say, *Keep her safe.*

Fortunately, Sir Jean seemed to know exactly what Arjumand meant. "Yes, lord," he said, and winked. He trotted out, leaving the atmosphere significantly less cheerful with his departure.

"Is supper ready for us?" Nadira whined.

Arjumand pondered her obliviousness. Hadn't she just witnessed the exodus of the entire family?

"Nobody is here," Kobegun said, nuzzling her ear. He wrapped a muscular arm around her waist. "So we can feast on each other." He grinned and patted her backside.

Arjumand read his expression clearly. It said, *I know you need her kept quiet. I'll do this for you. What will you do for me?* The young Mongol took his silence as license to pinch Nadira. When she squeaked, he rubbed the area he had just pinched.

Arjumand wanted to complete his sign of the cross. Surrounded by demons he had created himself. What had he done to deserve this?

It was a good thing Kobegun was trying to be helpful. Arjumand moved away from the two of them, trying to focus on what else could be done to ensure the survival of the House, should the Mongols come. If Kobegun really decided to cooperate, he could be very helpful, indeed. A prince of the invaders ... Another Apkallu to carry the burden of protection ... Someone to keep Nadira out of his hair...

When he looked back, Kobegun and Nadira had disappeared. *Thank God.*

\* \* \* \*

It was an hour before Leila returned, beaming. Sir Jean was flushed and sweating, but seemed pleased with himself for running his quarry to ground. "They're not here?" Leila asked about the other djinni, peering into the office where Arjumand sat and brooded. "Are they..." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "Together?"

"I believe so," Arjumand said, keeping his tone even. "What news?"

Diverted from her salacious imaginings, Leila said, "The Mongols are coming from the east, and the Egyptians have arrived from the south. Everybody's talking about Sultan Kutuz because he brought up his army along the coast road in record time, and, guess what?" Not waiting for an answer, she continued, "He begged the Crusaders here for provisions and safe-conduct, as if they haven't been mortal enemies for centuries!" She batted extra-long eyelashes at him.

Arjumand wondered what sort of cosmetic she used to make them so long and dark as she angled her face close

enough for him to kiss and waited somewhat impatiently for him to do it. He didn't. He'd been seduced by older women far more clever and lovelier than she was. Firmly reining in his own memories was easy, but it was harder to ignore the memory Dominic had given him, of the night he learned Arabic from Leila in the way of djinni.... *she held him skin to skin in a night warm as bodies, the taste of grave dust still hanging in the air.*

He looked away, uneasily, and asked Sir Jean for a further report.

"Gossip has it that the Mongols will not attack Crusader towns which refrain from hostilities against them. Acre, unlike Sidon, should be safe on that score."

"What happened at Sidon, then?"

"Sir Julian Grenier, the lord of the town, was greedy for Mongol loot and attacked. He expected support from John of Ibelin and his Templars from their base in Beirut, but when the Mongols retaliated, the monks were slaughtered, and Sidon was sacked."

*Mongols defeated Templars?* For the first time, Roland was glad that Michel had left the order and joined the House.

"Yes, but what will the Christians do about the Egyptians?"

"Let them camp before the gates." Jean replied. "Anno von Sangherhausen, Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, wanted to ally with the Mongols, since many of them are some sort of Christian. But news came that Pope Alexander declared the Mongols anathema. Then he excommunicated Count Bohemund of Antioch for declaring himself their vassal,

and threatened to excommunicate anyone else who made an alliance."

"The Mongols are Christians?"

"As far as we can tell, the men aren't, but many of their women, who can be very influential, are. Their local auxiliaries, such as the Armenians and Georgians, definitely are."

"And the Crusader Christians are helping the Muslim Egyptians against them?" Arjumand knew that people could be foolish, but...

Leila smirked at him. "I told you! They're helping their enemies!"

"The Mongols who are Christian are Nestorians—heretics, after all," Sir Jean said, sarcastically. "The Armenians and Georgians are Orthodox. None of 'em bow to the Roman Pope, so..."

Arjumand remembered that Jean, before he was Found and returned to the House, had been a Cathar, a heretic to the Catholic Church. He had fought Crusaders and been handed over to the Inquisition, tortured, and forced to recant his faith. Arjumand shook his head. There was nothing he could do about those past wrongs. There was a present danger he had to defend against. "What other news do you have for me?"

"Since Kutuz and the Egyptians came north up the coast road, and the Mongols are coming down the Decurion road by the River Jordan," Sir Jean said. "They're going to fight somewhere in the Jezreel valley. From what I've heard of Mongols, they're not stupid enough to try to fight by Megiddo

or Nazareth, since the valley's seven miles wide there. They'll want to set the battlefield in the tight spot."

"Ayn Harod."

Sir Jean nodded.

Arjumand remembered winter nights in the peaceful river valley, fertile where it wasn't marshy. He had traveled there with Sharibet and her caravan, escaping Baghdad's imminent fall to Hulegu Khan's Mongols. Had only two years passed since then?

They had not been in any hurry. Sharibet and the other Raised and Named members of the party had taken turns relating tales of the battles and exploits that had happened in that valley since the Flood. The stories in the Bible were the more recent tales.

The farm at Ayn Harod, Herod's Well, grew the bulk of the roses that made the perfume which gave the House its wealth, and had done so for millennia. Now they stood to lose it. He would not allow that to happen.

How he was supposed to stop it, he wasn't sure. But he would do his duty. Somehow.

\* \* \* \*

Sir Jean begged to accompany Arjumand and Kobegun, but Ajumand was firm. "Keep watch over the djinnia," he said as they spoke man-to-man in the Acre House's office. "Keep them out of trouble if you can." No telling what either of those women would get up to without supervision—for their separate reasons.

"Yes, lord. What else do you need?"



"Are there birds at Ayn Harod?"

"Yes, lord."

"Let Ahab know we'll arrive tomorrow night. I don't want our visit to be a surprise."

Sir Jean laughed. "You will certainly be one for the armies! I wish I could be there."

"I wish I weren't going," Arjumand said with rare honesty.

Sir Jean made a scandalized noise.

"Kobegun probably wishes that, too. But if he's going to be a Protector, let him learn now."

"Do you believe he's ready for this?" Sir Jean lowered his voice, although they both knew where the young Mongol was spending his time, day and night, two floors higher than this ground floor office.

Arjumand shrugged. "I hope so."

Sir Jean bowed and disappeared through the doorway.

\* \* \* \*

That night, the waning moon would not rise until close to dawn. Arjumand decided it was perfect weather to teach Kobegun to fly. At midnight he roused the young Mongol out of Nadira's bed, took him to the roof of the Acre house, fastened the flying harness onto him despite his protests, and without any warning, seized him and took off into the sky over the harbor.

Kobegun managed not to scream, or piss himself, as Arjumand had done at his introduction to flight. But he demonstrated that he knew an impressive number of Arabic

curses. Perhaps his inventiveness was stimulated by the two hundred yards of air between him and the ship-crowded sea.

"Open your Seer's Eyes," Arjumand commanded. "When you can see your wings, begin to move them."

"Move them how? Where?"

"You've seen birds, haven't you?"

"Of course," sneered Kobegun.

"Now I'm going to tell you more than my teacher told me," Arjumand warned. "Pay attention. I'm not likely to save you if you annoy me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Kobegun growled.

"Move your wings."

Kobegun did, awkwardly at first, then gaining more and more surety, as if remembering muscles he hadn't used in a very long time. When he judged Kobegun's progress sufficient, Arjumand said, "Now make your wings more solid."

Kobegun just gaped at him.

"More solid," Arjumand said again, "as if you're trying to touch something."

"Nothing here to touch!"

Arjumand slipped into a glide, angled toward the water far below. "Feel anything against your face?"

"Wind?" Kobegun answered reluctantly.

"Is that nothing?"

"No, but—"

"That is what you want to touch."

"But I can't see it!"

"Neither can your wings be seen without Seer's eyes. Nobody has Wind eyes, but you can feel it, touch it. Feel the wind with your body and your wings."

Kobegun wriggled around at the end of the harness like a fish on the end of a line, and then seemed to find his balance. His wings stretched out. His body found a level, and without warning, Arjumand released the tether that held him.

Startled, Kobegun dropped like a rock. Then he made a frantic effort to stretch and snap his wings. They caught air, then failed to hold it. He dropped faster.

Arjumand spiraled downward, enclosing Kobegun's fall within his own graceful maneuver. The water rushed closer. Arjumand remembered his own fall from the height above Lake Manzala. He did not want to save Kobegun as Dominic had saved him, breast to breast, within his own strong arms. The boy had better learn to fly! "Fly!" he shouted. "Fly, or swim!"

"Damn you!" Kobegun yelled. But, in anger, his wings solidified, his balance stabilized, and suddenly, he was flying. He snapped his wings powerfully and shot up into the air, coming almost level with Arjumand, who braked, dropped precipitously, and then glided again, catching a warm updraft coming from the land still radiating summer heat.

Kobegun scowled ferociously as Arjumand slid by him, going up. "How are you doing that?" He flapped noiselessly.

"Feel the air. Warm goes up. Cold goes down."

Using the blood bond, Dominic had simply transferred the information to Arjumand, and he might have done the same for Kobegun, but, really, it was more satisfying to teach Kobegun

this way. The boy wasn't half bad at flight. Clumsy, but for someone who hadn't been flying for a thousand years, this djinn was relearning his skills exceedingly quickly.

"Now try a turn," Arjumand called.

"Damn you," Kobegun cursed again, under his breath.

Arjumand snickered. The boy was angry now, but he'd be thankful, later. He shut up as Kobegun performed a very passable bank, and changed direction. "Now turn again."

Following orders, Kobegun rapidly learned how to steer himself through the air. Ascents, descents, finding and catching warm updrafts—he learned all within the space of a short hour. Finally Arjumand and his store of teaching were exhausted. "You learned quickly," he began to say, but the Mongol youth was already busy congratulating himself.

"Did you see how I turned there?" he asked, vain as a boy on his first pony. "A very tight circle! I'm a great flyer!"

"To be sure," Arjumand agreed wearily. "You'll need to be. We fly for Ayn Harod tomorrow night."

Kobegun's silence was icier than snow blowing from ice-choked mountain passes. "What?"

"We're going to Ayn Harod tomorrow night," Arjumand repeated.

"We?"

"None other."

Kobegun obviously wanted to ask 'why' but natural reticence or strict early training kept him from opening his mouth. He set it in a grim line, squinted, and shot away into the air, traveling east toward land.

—Come home when you're hungry,—Arjumand bespoke Kobegun, deliberately passing along a frieze of mental pictures of likely outcomes if he didn't show up: Moslem clerics, beheading him as anathema in a tile-lined plaza; the noisy bleating of sheep protesting as he tried to capture and drink from them; the stony visages of members of the House, refusing him sustenance, since he had violated the agreements that bound djinni to mortals ...—Don't get into any trouble I'll have to kill you for.—

Damn, but Arjumand hated having to be responsible. He had done his best. If the boy didn't want to return ... The blood bond between them was an unbreakable tether. He could always find him.

He headed back to the Acre House, gliding over the huge Templar fort that guarded the harbor. Even at this deep hour of the night, lights burned in the slitted windows. *How do they sleep? Did they know Michel? Did they lose men at Sidon, too?* He contemplated the upcoming days. How would he sleep? Not much chance of doing any such thing soon.

*God, let me not fail,* he prayed, hoping without confidence that Someone would hear, and answer. There had to be someone greater than himself, holding together the fabric of creation. There must be some Author whose words built reality out of the chaos of nothing. *Oh, please. Be there,* he prayed. *Don't let it all be on my shoulders.*

The roof of the House hit his feet harder than he expected, and he stumbled as he came in for a landing. The stars overhead throbbed in the darkness. He gave the expected

password to Sir Jean, the only man left in the house. Kobegun would be back in a while. He had no place else to go.

\* \* \* \*

Kobegun cursed Gold-hair up one side and down the other. *The asshole! The bastard! Sheep's arse-licker! Ewe-fucker! Camel-raper! May eagles eat out his liver!*

After a while, he ran out of curses. He was flying high above the plain of Acre, both reveling in and clenching his chattering teeth at the fact that he was flying.

Gold-hair had just let him go.

Kobegun wanted to go home, back to the *ordu*, the army camp. He could explain his disappearance. It wasn't desertion! But he didn't have his *paitz*. That would look bad. They might execute him for incompetence. *Shit*.

He couldn't go home. *Damn Gold-hair! Damn that slut, Nadira*. He wanted his *paitz*! He wanted some virgins! He wanted to keep flying.

The sky started lightening in the east, subtly changing hues. He had to go back to that damned House. He didn't want to have to chase sheep for their blood. Horses ... he'd have to fight someone to get their horses. That wouldn't work.

He had to go back, although he didn't want to. There was nothing for him at the House but stupid rules, and stupid city people, no better than frightened livestock in a walled pen.

He flew in tight circles, alternately watching the steady encroachment of light into the darkness, and the flickering of stars setting into the Middle Sea. He'd always wanted to visit

this sea, and compare it to the endless steppe. But it didn't seem to matter any more. He could travel it forever, or die tomorrow, which was more than likely if they were going to stand in the path of the Army.

*What can I do?* He wanted to keep flying forever, and never land except to fuck. But the bloody images that he had received rose up before his mind's eye, sickening and terrifying. *Damn Gold-hair.*

He turned toward the House, screaming from the sky, heedless of whether his cry would waken any of the sleepers below. *Let them wake! Let them wonder. Let them fear.* His life smelled as rotten as a dead horse. He wanted everybody to feel as bad as he did.

A fatalistic calm descended on him as he lost altitude over the rooftop of the House. It had been easy to find, even in the dark. Gold Hair left him a lantern as a guide. *Heaven damn him.*

Tomorrow. He might escape tomorrow, army or no army. He would not linger here forever. He would go. As soon as he learned enough to survive.

## Chapter Ten

*"They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty ... Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon."—Revelation 16:14-16*

Thursday, 24th of the Moon Ramadan, 658 AH (September 2, 1260)

Jezreel Valley, Judaea

They touched down at the Ayn Harod farm before dawn. Ahab, the old caretaker, was overjoyed at the presence of two Apkallu. Short, brown, and wrinkled as an almond, he announced proudly that he had worked on this farm for nearly all of his lives. "I helped plant the first bushes," he told them.

Arjumand could barely get a word in. He finally escaped the old man's ramblings with the excuse that he and Kobegun needed to check the boundary of the farm, and ensure that none of the combatants had penetrated it yet.

"Why are we here?" demanded Kobegun, once they were out of earshot of the garrulous old man. "What is all this?"

Arjumand had not fully briefed Kobegun before they left Sidon; he had only barely trained the Mongol youth in how to use his aura wings to fly. He owed some sort of explanation. "This is a rose farm. Those are flowers." They were standing on the southern face of a shallow hill above a cultivation of slightly more than five acres. Hundreds of man-high clumps of thorny canes and thigh-thick twisted trunks covered the



hillside. The valley to the west was a patchwork of fields and reed beds fed by a narrow river, and, to the east, settlements clustered where there were wells.

Opposite them rose the low, irregular hill of Moreh. Beyond it, they could see Mount Tabor, as gently rounded as a woman's breast. In the clear air of a late summer dawn, every worn feature was crisp, delineated by light and shadow. Mount Carmel lay miles away, a blue chalk blur at the southwestern horizon. Behind them to the southeast, the roughly fashioned, dry Mountains of Gilboa were scarcely higher than the thickly-forested hills of the Ardennes, where Arjumand's Uncle Girard bred horses. But these puny prominences were the enclosing gates for two armies, presently maneuvering for battle.

"Yes, I see they're flowers," Kobegun said in a voice that conveyed he had reached the end of his tether. "But why?"

Arjumand groaned silently. Was it only a fortnight since he had met Kobegun? He already felt decades older. He gathered patience rather than wrath, and answered. "We're Protectors of the House. We have something to protect here. This farm is our property. These roses make the perfumes which the kin sell or trade. Any questions?"

Kobegun's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "Perfume? From these bushes?"

"Three hundred-odd rose bushes bear about fifty thousand roses per day each April. That many roses, boiled down, make a single ounce of attar," Arjumand explained, as patiently as he could. "A third of an ounce sells for six

hundred dirhams in a civilized city. You can buy two strong young slave girls for that."

Kobegun blinked repeatedly. "You farm, you make, and you sell? All at once?"

Arjumand resisted the impulse to smile at him. "That's right. If we don't farm, we don't have as much to eat next year." He studied the nearest bush, leaves dark green and dusty. With luck, the people of the House would be able to return for the spring harvest.

"But we don't eat any more."

Arjumand gripped his sword hilt. "By 'we', I mean the House people, including djinni. Grain feeds livestock, too, you know."

"Huh," said the youth.

The increasing light was revealing even more details of the Jezreel valley, including a force of twelve to fifteen thousand Mongol troops encamped with three times that number of horses to the east on the flatland. Arjumand supposed they were technically Mongol, although Kobegun had assured him that most of them were Georgian and Armenian auxiliaries with a large contingent of recent Syrian conscripts. The rest of the princes, Kobegun had explained resentfully, had been recalled to Karakorum for the *kuriltai*, the supreme gathering to determine who would become the next Great Khan.

The last Great Khan, Mongke, had died untimely of drink. Kobegun's subsequent rant against the evils of drunkenness seemed out of character, but Arjumand supposed every man was entitled to a contrary streak. Shaking his head, Arjumand pointed at the various black and white flags and standards he

saw hanging above the heads of the mounted troops at various intervals. "What are those?"

Kobegun surprised him by replying in detail. "Each *arban* of ten brothers and each *zagun* of ten *arban* has its own flag. The *mingan* of a thousand have banners, and the *tuman*, or army of ten thousand, carries the horse-tail *sulde*, the soul-banner. We rally to them in formation. The flag messengers relay the orders of the general, who today is Kit-buqa. He's just a jumped-up Persian, not even a Mongol by marriage!"

"He's supposed to be angry because his nephew was killed at Sidon."

"Keh!" said Kobegun, contemptuously. "For the duration of this campaign *I* was his 'nephew.' He was supposed to take care of me. But no, he loses me. What a fool."

Arjumand really wanted to ask why Kobegun had not been recalled with the other princes. What would cause one Mongol to exile or ostracize another? Fearing the answer, he focused on the flags, instead. "So you can tell each other what to do in battle?" No wonder the Mongols were sweeping over every enemy they rode against!

"Of course," said Kobegun off-handedly. "Most of the new troops take a while to get the idea, but once they do—Hoy! That's my *mingan*! I can't believe that Kit-Buqa put Nokhor in charge! Disloyal piece of goat shit!" he shouted at the small figure, too far away to hear. "You show your butt to strangers!"

Arjumand had to hold him in place. "They're not your men anymore, remember?"

After a few seconds of struggle, the young Mongol grew still. "If you hadn't stolen my *paitz*, I could go back."

Arjumand said, for the hundredth time: "We didn't steal it. It wasn't on you when Nadira found you. We don't have it to give back." He was still amazed at the idea of an engraved rectangle of metal that gave the name, rank, and army unit of the bearer. How did these fiends devise such things? But then, it was very like a life-chip, wasn't it?

Kobegun glowered.

Arjumand let him. Time enough for action later. When the other enemy turned up.

\* \* \* \*

The Egyptians didn't show before noon. Long before the sun reigned high in the heat-drenched sky, Kobegun was bored. Pinned on the edge of a battlefield and forbidden to fight! He should be leading his unit, not Nokhor. That ass-wipe was sure to get all the troops killed—*his* troops, whom he had trained personally.

It was a bit of excitement when a couple of Mongol scouts showed up mid-morning, their ponies trotting smartly through the rows of the thorny perfume-bushes towards one of the stone-walled wells.

*Finally! A chance for some action!* Kobegun growled when Gold-Hair commanded "Stay!" as if he were a dog, and went by himself to confront the two scouts.

They waited calmly for him to approach, an apparently unarmed man, but Kobegun opened his Seer's Eyes and saw how Gold-Hair's great wings stretched out and flexed. *Heh,*

*but this was getting interesting!* Perhaps he could learn something about his newfound abilities ... the thought salved his wounded pride, a little, and made him more willing to stay crouched in behind his concealment of thorns and leaves.

Gold-Hair and the scouts were too far away for Kobegun to overhear what was said, but he kept his Seer's Eyes open, and saw the other djinn's lapis-and-amethyst aura, misty-looking in the strong sunlight, surround the scouts. He saw the two men stiffen, then turn slowly to remount their ponies and ride away.

*What? Gold-hair's just going to let them go?* What sort of magic was this, anyway? For all the talk of protecting these thorn-bushes, Kobegun had expected dismemberment, or at the very least, some blood spilled.

"You let them get away!" Kobegun accused, as soon as Gold-hair was back. "Why?"

Gold-hair looked at him coldly. "You tell me—what happens if scouts fail to return?"

"Oh." Kobegun hated Gold-hair for making him feel like a boy too young to ride.

Gold-hair raised his brows in that irritatingly superior way of his. "This way, they'll return to report of nothing interesting here. I made them think the wells were dry."

"Hmph." Kobegun settled down again, but it wasn't long before curiosity overmastered pride. "Say, Gold-hair. What other magic can we do?"

Gold-hair sighed. He did that a lot, so Kobegun ignored him. "Well?"

"If you're so eager to learn, I guess we'll have a lesson," Gold-hair said. "Let me teach you how to make fire."

"Go on. I already know how to do that. I've got my flint and steel."

"No, I mean by magic."

"Fire by magic?"

"You don't want to start it where you'll set yourself on fire," Gold-hair explained pompously. "Put the spark where something will burn, but not too fast. If you try to put it somewhere too solid, it will tire you out, and, depending on the strength you use, tear up the object."

"Show me," Kobegun said briefly, figuring a display of sycophantic enthusiasm would be lost on Gold-hair.

"All right. You take your aura wing, and you tighten it. Make a fist with your hand of air."

That was not a really helpful instruction. None of the djinni magic was real magic, the kind that left you speechless with awe, your bowels trembling. It consisted merely of 'move this with your aura wing' as if an aura was just as real as a right hand. *Keh.*

"Here, this is how you close your fist of air," Gold-hair said, thrusting his aura directly into Kobegun's face. There was a clash of ... something. Kobegun didn't like that feeling. He opened his Seer's eyes.

Inside Gold-hair's aura hand was a tiny point of heat. Fire hot. Forge hot. How could Gold-hair bear the heat of that fiery atom? Apparently, he couldn't for long. He loosened his hand of air, letting it go with a pop and a shake, just as if it were a real hand.

"All right. Now you try it."

This was bad. Kobegun didn't want to try to hold onto something hotter than a live coal.

"Go on. Try it."

Kobegun considered what Gold-hair had said about squeezing with your hand of air. Would that work with heads? But given the dire sensation of their two auras crossing, it might not be worth trying.

"Here, like this." Gold-hair seized Kobegun's aura wing with his own, and proceeded to demonstrate exactly how to squeeze with it.

If brushing through another's aura had been eerie, having another djinn take hold of your aura was ... *wrong*. He yelped as the point of heat forming in his aura hand went from warm to blazing hot. His other wing of its own accord buffeted Gold-hair, trying to make him let go, but Gold-hair's free wing was more solid, somehow, and didn't allow the blows to touch his body.

In another second, Gold-hair had him pinned.

"Let. Me. Go!" Kobegun ordered, breathlessly.

"Calm down," Gold-hair returned. "Loosen your grip." His aura hand let go of Kobegun's aura hand. Immediately, the heat began to dissipate.

Kobegun began to breathe again, and stopped trying to struggle. Gold-hair released him, stepping quickly out of range.

"Never do that to me again," Kobegun warned. He took the chance to make one more swing at Gold-hair, and missed.  
*Damn.*

Gold-hair smiled tightly. "Now you try to make a spark."  
*Eternal Blue Heaven! Can I kill this djinn?*

"Go ahead. You can do it," Gold-hair said in a falsely encouraging tone.

Kobegun glared at him through slitted eyes, the only defense he had left.

"Go ahead."

Kobegun grunted in rage and closed his hand of air, squeezing it tighter and tighter until he felt a burning that matched the hatred in his heart. He smashed his fist of air into the pile of dry straw gathered for the exercise. It burst into flame. He jumped back, terrified and elated at the same time. *I did that!*

"Good," said Gold-hair. "Now this is how you put it out." He brought his aura-wing down flat over the flames, and the fire went out.

"You want me to do what?"

"If you make it, you have to know how to unmake it. If you want to destroy something, you'd better know how to create it. Or how will you make things right if you've made a mistake?"

Kobegun just looked at him, uncomprehending. Fix a mistake? No Mongol prince ever admitted to making mistakes.

Gold-hair patiently pointed to another pile of straw. "This time I'll light it and you put it out." He suited deed to speech.

Kobegun did not want to put his wing into the fire.

"It's really simple," Gold-hair urged. "You make your wing solid, and just slap."



*No, no, no.* Kobegun wanted nothing to do with it. But he didn't resist when Gold-hair took hold of his wing and slapped it down over the fire. He felt the burn, and then the fire was dead. The awful sensation of mingled auras continued, however.

"You have to make your wing semi-solid, remember?" Gold-hair was saying.

Kobegun aimed a solid stiletto-shaped dagger of air directly into Gold-hair's eye. He was going to scramble some brains in that gold-maned head—

The pressure of Gold-hair's aura immobilized him, yet again.

"You will do what I say," Gold-hair's voice was very quiet. "Your probation isn't over for six months. If you fail that probation..."

Kobegun jerked away, and Gold-hair let him go. "I didn't mean—"

"Don't lie to me. You can't, anyway."

Kobegun felt shame burning him as though he were the pile of straw Gold-hair had ignited. To be known, so truly known, and seen ... He looked back at Gold-hair, not bothering to conceal his hate. "You compel me now," he warned. "But just watch your back. You won't always be able to—"

"If you will not willingly serve the House, and promise to protect it, you will be destroyed. Don't try to fool yourself that it won't come to that. Or that you'll win. I am not the only Apkallu, and you have not yet met the eldest and greatest of us."

Kobegun's skin crawled at the thought of a power that could cow Gold-hair. He resolved to save his life for today. What good was immortality if it only lasted half a moon? "I promised," he said. "You just made me angry."

"You've promised privately, to me. You'll promise the people of the House at your Appointing, and keep your promises. Or you'll die, and be Forgotten."

"I understand!" But it nettled.

"Good. Now put out the fire."

Kobegun winced as he brought his hand of air into position. The fire blossomed. He slapped down. The fire died. The pain bloomed and died, as well. He stared at the ashes, shaken. He could make fire, and kill it too.

He could not kill a djinn today. Could he learn to make one? He looked up speculatively at Gold-hair, but the other djinn had turned to gaze at the restless camp.

\* \* \* \*

The hours passed as Arjumand and Kobegun kept watch. In the distance, occasional riders—arrow messengers, Kobegun explained—dashed back and forth in great haste, riding in to report to Kit-buqa, who was distinguished by his gilded helmet and the fine Persian mare he rode, so different from the small hammer-headed Mongol ponies. Arjumand didn't need Kobegun's explanation to know that the skirmishing had already begun. Some of the scouts bore blood-soaked message arrows.

At sunset, a breeze rustled the acres of rose leaves, releasing a dusty, spicy scent. Birds flitted overhead. The

army dismounted, and the men either disappeared into round felt tents, or rolled up in their saddle-blankets and went to sleep. Sentries on the surrounding hills lit watch-fires, bringing stars down upon the earth as they conquered the sky. The two djinni set up a rough camp near one of the deep irrigation wells.

After they supped from the jars Ahab provided, Kobegun found a patch of dry grass and flopped down with a jaw-cracking yawn. "Ah! Much better than those soft beds your people like to sleep on!" he said, his casual tone irritating Arjumand. "Wake me if anything happens."

Arjumand had purposely refused Ahab's invitation of beds in the farmhouse so that they could keep watch. To his disgust, Kobegun fell instantly asleep, his youthful features deceptively innocent. *The pup tried to kill me today!*

In the darkness broken only by the sweep of stars above and the red glows of the fires below, Arjumand found himself with too much time to think. What if Transforming Kobegun had been as grave a misjudgment as Transforming Nadira? He had protested making Nadira a djinniah. With Kobegun ... he had started to hope for an ally. But if things went wrong, then Arjumand could only blame himself. Consumed with his possible failures, he sat watching as the fires on the valley floor began to burn low.

How could he protect this place? It had no walls, nor any towers, and only three to defend it: an old man, an unreliable Mongol, and an Apkallu without the wisdom of centuries—or even many powers.

*Powers...*

He had not had much of a chance to practice the power he had discovered in Jerusalem's garden, or to seek any of the other lost powers. The drinking of life, he was sure, would not be enough to destroy an entire army—all at once. In this silent, watchful darkness he had an opportunity, and a necessity, to seek further for the lost abilities of the djinni.

He wished Michel were here to guide him. What questions would he ask, to reach the heart of this mystery?

*What do we need most? What do we have to work with?  
What can we achieve first?*

There was only himself, Arjumand, with no memory of his own powers except from the stories others told of his past selves. Had Enlil really called lightning from the sky? One might as well call water from stones! And yet—if he once had done it—and the kin all assured him that indeed he had—then *how* had he done it? What would Michel want to know?

*What is lightning?*

*How am I supposed to know?* he thought in despair. *It's huge. It moves as if alive. It appears, and then thunder speaks. It destroys what it touches.*

*Like me.* His humor was too grim to laugh. And yet, what else could lightning be like? If water could be an ocean to sail over, or clouds to fly through, or a drop upon his tongue—what would lightning be, if it were small?

*What flashes, and then makes noise?*

The image of crackling, slippery silk sheets came to him, vivid as Sharibet's perfume. He hated those sheets, and how they made his skin crawl. He remembered the feeling. He remembered it in his aura—and at the point where his

wingtips touched the ground, tiny, crackling sparks lit the dark.

Now he wanted to laugh. He would kill an army with drops of water, yes. If he could only create an ocean of lightning...

He was still practicing when Ahab strode down the hillside from the fortified house above, his Raising mark brilliant in the darkness.

"Lord, will you not take your rest?"

Arjumand sighed. "I can't sleep. But, come, sit with me a while." He indicated the blanket that had been spread on the ground. It was scorched now with multiple pinholes.

Kobegun snorted in his sleep and turned over as Ahab lowered himself with more grace than Arjumand expected from those aged limbs.

"I've seen at least ten major battles fought in this valley," Ahab said. "None of them with Apkallu attending. This will be interesting."

He sounded more cheerful than Arjumand would have expected of a man whose life might be forfeit if the battle spilled onto the farm. Of course, Ahab had also volunteered to stay in the path of Mongols. Perhaps he was senile.

"The Egyptians under Thutmose, who was the she-king Hatshepsut's heir," the old man continued without pause, "came through the Wadi Ara, known as the Aruna Road back then. They figured the rebel Canaanites would expect them to avoid it, since the rebels' best offense would be an ambush there."

"I guess that just goes to prove you can never plan too much before a battle," said Arjumand.

Ahab chuckled. "I have seen Israelites against Philistines, Hellenes against each other, Romans against Jews, Byzantines and Crusaders against Saracens, and now Mongols against Mamluks. Where will they come from next?" In an entirely different tone he asked, "Lord, will you be able to save my roses? They are as children to me."

Arjumand scratched the back of his neck. "I have an idea," he began hesitantly. "Tell me what you think..."

Ahab listened with gratifying attention, and replied with astonishing good sense. The night passed quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Arjumand was ready, but still worried when the sounds of the second army approaching from the northwest became perceptible well before dawn. Not so much sound, really, as the overwhelming vibration of the tread of feet and hooves.

Kobegun woke, yawning and stretching, as rested as if he'd slept in the softest bed. When he heard the army's approach he crowed and leaped up. "Today! We fight today!"

Arjumand wished they didn't have to fight at all. Perhaps that was unmanly of him. But the roses didn't need a sacrifice of blood to bloom. And he was djinn enough to regret the waste of what could have been his food. He and Kobegun broke their fast from pre-packed jars as the sound of war drums, coming from the fast-approaching Egyptian force, echoed like angry thunder through the valley.

The crescent moon shone in a sky whose color had shifted from gray to citrine. The sun had not yet risen, but the surrounding hilltops glowed, showing the borders of today's

arena. From the farm's slope, Arjumand studied the results of his planning and Ahab's know-how. They had worked through the remaining hours of darkness to set dozens of filled clay pots in a loose perimeter around the farm.

Would it work? Was he right to refuse Enlil's memories? Perhaps he might have been able to plan something much better, or see some flaw in his strategy, and remedy it. Would his stubbornness in resisting Raising and Naming prove his undoing now?

"It won't be long," Kobegun said, watching the west. "I see the Egyptians."

A cloud of dust marked the mass of horses and rag-tail infantry advancing up the valley. The Egyptian drums changed cadence, then stopped as the sun finally cleared the horizon. The entire army seemed to hold still in fateful silence. Then a horse neighed and a roar of recognition and defiance rolled along the valley floor.

Arjumand remembered that sound from tournaments, and from the battle of Mansurah.

Kobegun's face lit up at the noise, and even more when the Mongols took their turn to shout. The waves of sound crashed like competing storms, and Arjumand felt an almost palpable pressure in the air as he and Kobegun walked to the boundary of the farm.

"Is it true that Muslims don't eat during Ramadan? They don't look starving to me," Kobegun said suspiciously.

"They don't eat during daylight hours," Arjumand explained. "They probably just finished eating on the march."

Those who survive will eat whenever they get a chance to, after the battle, whether it's daylight or not."

"But still, fasting every day for a month? They can't be in very good fighting trim."

Arjumand didn't answer as the battle drums began to beat again. Over the sound, he said to Kobegun, "You see those rose bushes?" He pointed up the slope to the right. "You make sure nobody gets in and tramples them."

"What will you be doing?"

"I'll be making sure nobody gets into those," He pointed to the acre of bushes down-slope to the left.

"How are we going to keep them out, just the two of us?"

"We set fire to these." He pointed to the pots half-buried in the stony ground. "Don't let any of the contents get on you. You won't like the result."

"What if that doesn't work?"

"Then I do this." He found the sources of power he had discovered last night in the air and in the earth, and drew on them carefully. The air crackled and a spark of something brighter than the sun flared before his outstretched hand.

After jumping back, and pretending he hadn't, Kobegun said disdainfully: "That's not much of a deterrent."

"I can make it a lot bigger."

Ahab chuckled at Kobegun's expression. "No one harms the House."

"More than once," Arjumand added grimly.

The armies, their enemy in sight, sorted themselves out, arranging their units in battle configuration.



Thanks to Kobegun, Arjumand knew that the Mongol Army of the Left Wing, a nearly full strength *tuman*, consisted of Armenians. The Army of the Center (in this case, only a *mingan* of a thousand) was staffed by Mongols, and the Army of the Right Wing (less than five thousand Georgians) was positioned to the north, paralleling the mountains.

In the Mongol camp, they were dousing the breakfast fires, checking horses' equipment, and pulling down tents with practiced efficiency, careless of the enemy's proximity. The heavy cavalry arranged themselves in front, the light cavalry to the rear, and the conscripts, on foot, were human buffers between the Mongols and their enemies.

The Egyptians advanced raggedly, and it was soon plain to see that they had fewer men. Shortly—all too soon for the combatants below, Arjumand imagined—they were close enough to fight. The two armies met in a rain of arrows. The first womanish screaming of wounded horses began, and did not stop. The scent of blood wafted from the battlefield and Arjumand, sick in his soul, resented the fact that his stomach growled.

None of the fighters approached their hill for the first hour. Then Kobegun yelled loud enough to be heard from his station up the hillside, "Look at those cowards!" He jumped up and down, pointing. "They're running away already."

Arjumand recalled the reports he'd received about Kutuz, the Mamluk who'd become Sultan of Egypt by deposing murdered General Aybeg's young son—not a child of his murderess, Shajar ad Durr, but Aybeg's offspring by a concubine. Kutuz had declared that he would not surrender,

decapitating the Mongol messengers and hanging their bodies at the four gates of Cairo. This act was guaranteed to draw Mongol wrath upon a kingdom. But Kutuz had exerted all his power to form his army: he had sold the state's assets, extorted funds from the rich, conscripted the poor, and exhorted his fellow Mamluks to follow and trust Allah for the victory over the Mongols.

And now he was retreating.

Arjumand wondered if the Mongols would spare Sharibet's house in Alexandria, or the House in Mansurah, if the folk there all pretended to be Christians. The people of those Houses hadn't yet evacuated, and there might not be time for them to do so, now. If the Egyptians lost, he would fly there as soon as it grew dark, to prepare them. No, first, he'd go to Jerusalem.

Damn. He shouldn't have hoped that the Mongols might be defeated. They had swept over every obstacle until now.

The Mongol right, the Georgians, began to overtake the splintering Egyptian left, the front farthest away from Arjumand, which shattered and scattered as fast as its horses could run. The Mongols pressed their Syrian conscripts against the central core of the army, which had not yet engaged.

The riders were some miles away now, almost to Nazareth, across the valley from the heap of old stones called Har Megiddo. Suddenly from the hills of Galilee a fresh army of Egyptian horsemen thundered down upon the Mongols, arrows swooping ahead of them like flocks of deadly birds. The Egyptians who had been fleeing turned around, and

another flight of arrows arced into the sky, falling into the Mongol van, raising screams of enraged surprise. Horses and men toppled. The Mongols shot back, but their arrows fell short. Now they really screamed. The Egyptians shouted victory, and fired their missiles again.

The Mongol advance evaporated like dew under the desert sun.

"Those pieces of goat shit," Kobegun yelled. "They tricked us!"

Another wave of Egyptians rode down from the distant hills, and the sound of dying and the scent of blood carried far on the morning breeze. The Mongols' Syrian conscripts broke and melted through a suddenly porous Egyptian right.

Arjumand saw them approaching, a great mob of men clad in rags and random bits of armor, carrying spears and pitchforks, and plain wooden staves. They'd be halfway back to Damascus by nightfall if they didn't decide to destroy his farm first.

The wells that fed the rosebushes would be a powerful temptation to thirsty men.

"Watch out!" he called to Kobegun. "Enemies coming!"

The men ran as if pursued by demons, yet to Arjumand it seemed to take hours for them to arrive, struggling up the sides of the hill as they swung wide around the Mongol reserves and camp. He dreaded the deeds he planned. They were only panicked deserters escaping certain death, running straight toward the arms of another certain death. Yet he had sworn an oath to protect the House. These roses were part of the House. He had sworn...

Panting, terrified men pounded past, staying clear of the thorny rows of bushes. A few scrambled up the hill to avoid being trampled by the chaotic mass behind them. There was no time to warn them. There was only time to light the fires.

*Clench.* His hand of air burned. He snatched it away from the pot just in time. The fire exploded upward. Screams. The stench of burning flesh. More panic. Kobegun's demented laughter.

Arjumand steeled himself. Were more men coming? He moved to the next pot.

*Clench.* A towering pyre shone bright as the sun and cascaded in a beautiful, lethal fountain. He wondered if he would ever be free from the memory. But he could not ponder for long. The next wave of deserters surged up the hill, despite the fires.

*Clench.* Another pot gave up its fatal contents.

The mass of running men began to sense the new danger threatening them from the hillside. Heads turned. Arms flailed in terror. Fights broke as some of those already higher on the slope strove to rejoin the crowded stream of men lower down. A knot of writhing bodies formed as someone fell, and others tripped. The mob swirled around them, trying to avoid becoming a bigger pile.

Kobegun lit one of his pots, just for fun, as far as Arjumand could see. No one was actually close to his position.

This next inferno—and its lack of targets—changed the temper of the mob. Instead of flying away in blind panic, some of the men slowed down.

Arjumand saw them assess the obvious fakery of his defense, and the scarcity of genuine defenders. They also probably didn't understand what needed to be protected. A few acres of rose bushes did not look like a legitimate crop. Even Arjumand, who knew to the last dirham what these fields brought as income, had not understood their value at first.

The oncoming men yelled and charged up the hill.

*Please don't*, Arjumand prayed to a deaf God. *Please don't make me—*

The men charged on.

Counting under his breath, he estimated their rate of approach, and started gathering the power needed to ignite his final defense.

Thirty yards ... Twenty-five yards ... Twenty yards. The power pooled in the ground. The channel—he could feel it, sense it, like the network of veins in his body—started to sizzle, reaching up into the limitless vastness of the sky. He could sense the channels rising up, up, to ranges of air he could never have flown up to. All the channels gathered trickles and rivulets and streams of power. Fifteen yards. It was the farthest he could influence the earth with his aura, combining both wings into one agonized stretch.

Running men crossed his invisible barrier.

The dam between earth and sky shattered. A lightning bolt as big around as Arjumand's waist, twisting with subsidiary strikes like writhing snakes, slammed down in a sound like the earth itself was breaking. The brightness dazzled, overpowering daylight. The men in the path of the bolt fell

forward, smoking and twitching. Other men not in its path stood trembling, eyes clouded, mouths drooling, before they dropped.

The next screams seemed dim and far away. His ears hurt. His eyelashes hurt. His aura hurt.

The men running up the hill wavered.

He roared at them, feeling the noise in his throat and chest more than he heard himself. He raised his sword, and in a display he had never before imagined, made his aura wings visible by grabbing the still-writhing bits of power streaming away into the ground. He pushed them through his aura wings, raising them up in majestic menace. The reflection of his awful glory shone in every eye turned toward him.

Men screamed in terror. They covered their eyes.

He flexed his wings again, beating them in a threat display worthy of the mean-spirited gander kept in his mother's garden.

Men ran away. Kobegun snarled. Ahab whooped with triumph.

The next group of runaways somehow got the desperate message not to attempt to climb the hill. Arjumand didn't care how the deserters passed their warning on, just as long as they left his roses alone. Before too long, the madly fleeing men had passed completely by.

The armies on the plain were still fighting. Arjumand looked up, seeing streaks and sparkles in his vision. The Mongol right, the Armenians, were mostly down now, their horses either screaming or roaming riderless. The Mongol left, the Georgians, were still fighting fiercely. In the center, the

Mongols seemed entranced by a shining figure, riding back and forth ahead of them.

"That Kit-Buqa," Kobegun said. "He's a show-off. He should be raising the 'Retreat & Regroup' signals, but no, he's out there, exhorting them to do their best and die for the Khan. Did I mention he was a fool?"

"You did," Arjumand replied. *It takes one to know one.* The boy had left his post.

The Egyptian center advanced, drums throbbing. Their archers sent volley after volley into the mass of Mongols, firing from beyond the range of the Mongols' bows. Kit-Buqa, riding back and forth, back and forth, stiffened and fell from his horse. The Mongols charged haphazardly, falling by ones and twos and tens.

Shockingly, their war drums fell silent. A separate foray by the Egyptians had ambushed the drummers and their camels. The remaining Mongols bayed like hunting dogs, then charged headlong and disappeared under the hooves of their enemies. The Georgians, distracted, suffered heavy losses, and suddenly raised a single banner.

"Those pig-fuckers!" Kobegun yelled. "They've given the signal for retreat. Retreat! They're running away!"

The Georgian units turned, in a well-coordinated maneuver, and streamed eastward.

The Egyptians hooted and started to chase them. But they halted at some signal—perhaps the silence of the war drums—and shortly the valley's only noise was the wind, and the sound of the wounded, crying out for succor.

The Egyptians efficiently dispatched their fallen enemies, and collected their casualties. No more deserters scrambled by the hill.

Arjumand, with Ahab chattering away, walked the perimeter of the farm to ensure no fires had endangered the rose bushes. He considered collecting and disarming the clay pots full of naphtha—originally intended to fuel the huge cauldrons that boiled the roses—that had not yet been fired, but he remembered there was still an army in the valley. No matter that the House paid taxes to the Egyptians, an army was an army.

It wasn't until Arjumand had walked the boundaries, and made sure no unwelcome deserters were hiding in the thorny greenery, that the realization struck him. "The Mongols are defeated!" he said aloud, marveling at the miracle.

Kogebun was trailing him with a dazed expression. He hadn't said a word in hours.

"Will they return to lay waste to this area?" Arjumand asked him.

Kobegun frowned. "We conquer by the will of Heaven. If Heaven ruled a victory for our enemies..." He spat.

Arjumand looked over the acres of rosebushes. He had saved the farm. He had *saved* it. There might be another army here again tomorrow, but for today, he had saved the House. And he had done it by his own efforts and with nothing more than he had brought with him. A lightning strike of triumph exploded in his heart. He had *won*.



## Chapter Eleven

*As for those on the left hand (wretched shall be those on the left hand!) they shall dwell amidst scorching winds and seething water: in the shade of pitch-black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. For they have lived in comfort and persisted in the heinous sin, saying: 'When we are once dead and turned to dust and bones, shall we be raised to life?'—*  
*Surah 56, "That Which Is Coming," verse 27, The Holy Qur'an*  
Sunday, September 5, 1260  
House of the Rose, Acre

There was a pigeon post waiting for Arjumand when he returned to Acre, heady with the unaccustomed feeling of triumph. The Mongols' advance had been halted, and the next years would not be as lean for the House as he had feared.

Sir Jean greeted them with goblets of blood (fresh from a lamb killed less than an hour ago) and one of the tiny pigeon-post containers. As Kobegun snatched his goblet and drank greedily, a thin trickle of blood dripping from his chin, Roland took the tightly-rolled cylinder of paper, noting with relief the edging of gold-leaf. Good news, then.

*From Josef de la Rose, Master of the House in Ypres: greetings. Mathilde le Pelletier, True Name Ninharsag, successfully Transformed. Married Lord Dominic, True Name Ninshubur, on feast of St. Alexis (6th of the moon Shaban, 658 AH). By my hand on the feast of St. Bartholomew (24 August, AD 1260/15th of the moon Ramadan, 658 AH)*

The sweet, fresh blood on Roland's tongue curdled and clotted as the import of those words sank in. *Mathilde a djinniah?* Mathilde, who had been deemed too ill to survive the rigors of Transformation? *God, why did you allow—?* And done by Dominic, that vile, half-mad djinn, killer of children and slave to unnatural desires ... *Dominic* was now Mathilde's husband? *God's Nails!* And Blanche's step-father as well? Thank God, the girl was already fostered away from home with her betrothed's family! Because, separated by four kingdoms and the width of the Middle Sea, Arjumand found himself powerless once more to protect those he had loved in his life before the House. *First Michel, now Mathilde ...* And where was Michel in all this? What was his part? How could he have countenanced any of these events?

His imagination curdled like the blood on his tongue, presenting images of Dominic and Mathilde together, as lovers ... Arjumand's stomach rebelled, and the just-drunk blood came up again, all over the white tiled floor.

As Sir Jean and Kobegun looked at him with shocked faces, he dropped the message with its bitterly deceptive guilt edge, all his triumph evaporated in the space it had taken to read those few brief lines.

\* \* \* \*

Monday, December 20, AD 1260

Ca' dalle Rose, Messina

Mathilde le Pelletier was relieved to reach dry land again. Winter was the worst time of the year to travel, and she was still not strong. Having barely survived her Transformation,

the journey from England to Constantinople was proving a wearying ordeal. Bad enough to endure the rigors of a winter journey by mule and riverboat south through the kingdom of France, through the snow and the mud. At least the Houses of the Rose had been plentiful along the route that Mathilde's party followed, and the kindness of the kin and the comfort of the djinni's quarters in every House made it possible for her to rest, and go on.

But things had worsened when they embarked at the port of Marseilles and began to sail east, using every bit of Captain Jocelyn de la Rose's skills to navigate *The Rose of Chios* through turbulent waters. Mathilde had suffered the agonies of the damned for a fortnight while the winds blew contrary, and their ship was continually tossed by waves into slate-dark troughs of water. When their supplies ran dangerously low, she had known true hunger for the first time, and discovered that unlike her djinni companions, Cecilia and Dominic, she was utterly consumed in the flames of ravening need. Once she opened the first jar, she found herself drinking until only dark stains remained on her lips and at the bottom. She had not the strength to refuse when Dominic gave her his own ration of preserved blood, even knowing that he deprived himself of sustenance for her sake.

When they finally reached the shelter of the House in Messina, on the island of Sicily, she was humbled, and despair clothed her in sackcloth and ashes. She had thought that her Raising and Naming would be the greatest ordeal, but now she dreaded the Appointing itself. She knew the basic shape of the ceremony—after being Raised and Named,

she would swear her oaths as Protector to the assembled kin of the House. And then she would be tested by taking her first swallow of human blood from one of the kin, in front of witnesses. The Man of the Ax would stand ready to cut her down if she could not control herself, and took more than was offered.

But how could she be sure of moderation? Would she be devoured with that burning heat and would it lead to her bitter destruction? What if she killed someone? She dreamed of a vengeful goddess, wreaking destruction on peasants clad only in linen kilts, and of an ax, shining and terrible, that swooped down upon her like a bird of prey.

A twelvemonth ago, she had been making her peace with God, expecting the terrible sickness in her lungs to kill her by year's end, never dreaming of the wonders that would be revealed to her in the height of summer. But now, having been given the hope of life eternal just when she had resigned herself to the winding-sheet, it seemed too cruel that she might find only Death at her journey's end.

She dared not share any of these fears, only prayed that she would not betray the kin, who had succored her in her darkest hour, nor fail those she loved ... her brother Michel, her good-sister Cecilia, her husband Dominic, and especially her cousin Roland, who had once been her lover, and who still held a treasured place in her heart.

They would set sail again after Christmas, crossing another wide stretch of sea, out of sight of any land. She hoped her courage would last and that they packed enough jars of blood for the journey. She hoped her hunger would continue to be

sated by the preserved animal blood offered to her by the kin. She intensely hoped that she could find the strength to live and prosper within the House.

\* \* \* \*

Tuesday, December 21, AD 1260

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

Sharibet beamed in Arjumand's direction as he ushered into her presence the House's newest Found Apkallu. Arjumand faded into the shadows of her reception hall—or wished he could—as Nadira strutted forward, fully certain she outshone her second Apkallu. Kobegun slouched in like the barbarian he was, while Leila drooped without Basil. They had traveled together and separately for months, returning from Jerusalem, Syria and Asia Minor, resettling the kin, re-establishing Houses and trading partners and routes, and not, not, *not* flying unless they absolutely had to.

"It is good to meet again," Sharibet cooed to Kobegun. "You have been so long away from us!"

Kobegun's cock led him straight to her. Arjumand could see it happening. He'd done it himself. He knew what it was like. Almost, he wanted to let the Mongol have her for good, if it meant he would be free for Mathilde ... *Mathilde*. She would be here before spring. He scarcely believed it. Mathilde, coming for her Appointing, along with Cecilia and Dominic. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed that Michel had decided to stay behind in England to watch over his pregnant concubine.

"And you're so young!" Sharibet exclaimed, as if Kobegun's youth made him more interesting as a potential bed-mate. "Arjumand, thank you for bringing him to me." Those were the same words she had said to Dominic at his own presentation, a decade or so ago.

Arjumand understood her rather better now. "Enjoy your new acquaintance," he said gamely. "I'll be interested to see if you can get him to bathe for you first."

Kobegun snorted.

Arjumand smiled at the little prick. "Best hope you can please her."

"Mother Sharibet," chimed Leila and Nadira.

"Welcome home, my daughters," she said absently, attention on her new prize. "Mmmm," she said, as Kobegun attempted defiant nonchalance. He probably hadn't ever considered himself as prey before.

—You've left me nothing to do but admire him,—Sharibet said, her mind voice lightly tinged with disappointment.—He's even radiating knowledge of his True Name.—Nadira told him much more than was good for him, or us,—Arjumand responded.—I shouldn't have trusted her with him.—Spoilsport. Why don't you take your jealousy and ill-temper somewhere else?—

*She is the most enchanting woman in the world,* he reminded himself. *Just not all the time, and not to a man she's already had.*—Please yourself,—he said. *You always do.*

The people of the House, who knew Sharibet as well as he did, silently vanished from her reception room.

Arjumand found himself kicking his heels in Sharibet's vacant office, leafing through the account books, with watery sunshine wavering through the window. He wondered what he was going to do with himself until Mathilde arrived.

"Lord Arjumand, may I speak to you?" To his disappointment, it was Nadira, scratching at the door. She entered without waiting for his permission, and curtsied. "Lord."

He stared at her, bemused. That curtsey—it was a Franj gesture that she must have practiced just for him. "What do you want?"

"Lord, Elder Sister Leila says she doesn't have time to teach me and I thought perhaps you might, but if you're busy—"

"Teach you what?" he demanded.

"Magic," she said. "Elder Brother Basil's gone and Mother Sharibet is busy, so, um..."

"Right." He wondered if she had even rudimentary strength in her tiny aura. It hardly extended beyond her body, and was still threaded with strands of unhealthy black. She wanted magic, did she? She wanted to fly before she could crawl. *Well, but if it would keep her busy and out of his way ...* There was something she could practice for a long time before she could do any harm. "You need to know how to move your aura," he said, hoping the first lesson would be too hard. When she pouted with obvious disappointment, he asked, "You don't like that lesson?" Hiding disgust was second nature to him now. "You want something stronger?"

She blinked in alarm, showing herself not entirely stupid. Well, perhaps he wasn't as good at hiding disgust as he thought. He located a vase filled with hothouse roses sitting on a small table. "Bring that here," he commanded, pointing.

She scurried to do so, almost dropping them in her hurry.

He caught and steadied the wobbling silver-and-niello vase, and pulled out one of the roses. "Do you remember the powers the Elders claimed for djinni?"

When she nodded, he said, "You can do this with your aura, when you learn how to move it." He held the stem of the rose in his hand and warned, "Don't try this with anything or anyone you care about." He moved his aura through the flower, drinking its life, faded a little since it had been cut from the bush. It was sweet as the fragrance it exuded. The flower crumbled into fine, gray dust, leaving only a trace of its perfume.

Nadira stared at him, terror evident in her trembling. "Was that the Word of Death?"

"No," he replied. "The Drinking of Life. It can only be used on something with some life left within it, and which you can completely envelop."

"Does it taste good, this drinking of life?" she asked, avidly.

He tasted the life of the rose, still sparkling in the midst of the brightness that was his own aura. "It does," he said, and shivered. "But it's only a taste." Even as he spoke, the life of the rose fizzed away like the bubbles in fresh beer.

"How do I do it? How do I do it?" she panted.



Feeling he had glimpsed her true self, he paused before he pulled another rose from the vase, but her aura wasn't large enough to envelop more than a few fleas or a tiny flower. She probably wouldn't live to grow it to effective size.

"First, move your aura," he instructed, hoping she would not be able to fulfill the first requirement. But she moved her nascent wings. They waved to his Seer's eyes like flags caught underwater. He handed over the rose. "Now sweep your aura through the flower."

"What do you mean by 'sweep'?" Nadira demanded.

"Open your Seer's eyes," he said, and showed her.

She caught her bottom lip in her teeth and worried it as she tried to emulate his action. "I can't feel it." Her wings continued to wave slowly.

There was a faint and fading aura surrounding the dying flower. "See the life left in the rose?"

"Yes! Yes, I see it."

"Now pattern your aura to be like what you see."

"Pattern?"

"Make your hand of air the same." Seeing her frown of confusion, he continued: "The same color, the same density. The same ... I don't know what you call it. The same!" he finished desperately.

He needed Michel here to help him think through this. Michel was so good at asking questions about how things worked, and making them work better. He never considered that he could fail. They needed stabling for the horses? Michel found the Templars. He wanted a reasonably-priced Cyprian courtesan? Michel found her, and sweet-talked her into

lowering her fees. Need to see through a sorcerer's glamour? Michel could do that, too. For the hundredth time Arjumand wondered how Cecilia had convinced Michel to forswear himself to the Templars.

Homesick loneliness paralyzed him for an instant. He wished Michel were here to help him make sense of this crazy life, but most likely his cousin was still puzzling over it too. Really, he *was* glad Michel wasn't coming, even if there was only himself to take care of this business of Nadira.

She was still struggling. She had no fine control yet, and though she tried for a quarter hour, she could not make her aura do what she willed it. Arjumand sat with her the whole time, hating himself, hating her, and hating Sharibet, who wasn't here with him. Who was with Kobegun.

"I've got to go out," he said abruptly. "To—" But his power of invention was not sufficient to create a good excuse.

"Yes, lord," Nadira said absently. She was still concentrating on the flower.

He escaped, and found the chaos of Constantinople a welcome distraction.

\* \* \* \*

Nadira practiced and practiced the magic that Lord Arjumand had taught her, but she couldn't do it. She was getting better at moving her aura, but it was still so small! She could barely reach forward enough with her wings to see them with her Seer's eyes. She waited impatiently for the day when she would have wings as big as an Apkallu's. How long would it take to grow wings the size of Lady Cecilia's? The

people of the house called her the Undying. The Queen of the Underworld.

They were pagans, of course, by choice, and of necessity. They didn't believe the word of the Prophet that they parroted publicly, that they taught their children.

Bitterness seeped into her heart, and she let it pool there. If she'd been a true daughter of the House, they would have treated her better. But if she hadn't had Seer's eyes, they would have married her off to outsiders to seal a trade agreement, forcing her to be a junior wife, or even just a concubine. The endless, terrible might-have-beens rose up before her mind's eye in a dizzying parade. She wanted to be valuable! She wanted them to love her! Instead, they treated her as too weak to really be worth anything.

And to crown her humiliation, that heathen Kobegun was off bedding Mother Sharibet.

*May the Destroyer visit them both. He's my djinn.* Or should have been. Perhaps she wasn't old enough or strong enough, yet, to be anyone's consort, but she'd invested a lot of time and effort into Kobegun.

She moved her aura again, finding the motion easier to perform. She still could not do much else with it. But she vowed that she would keep practicing until she learned Arjumand's magic.

All of his magic.

\* \* \* \*

Kobegun panted, sucking in poisonously sweet fumes with each breath. In the scented darkness, he was being ridden by

the most terrifying woman he'd ever had the misfortune to bed. Despite her girlish appearance, he was bedding someone older than the steppe. And he hadn't been allowed to refuse her.

He grunted, and sweated, and panted some more, certain of only one thing. His life depended on this performance. He was very, very obedient to her every slightest whim. She would find no complaint to make. She was to this House as the Great Khan was to the Mongols. Oh, very yes, he would be obedient. Even if he feared her with all the passion he was forced to fake for her.

*Eternal Merciless Heaven, have mercy.*

\* \* \* \*

It was over. Arjumand felt the lowering of Sharbet's shields against his own. He didn't want to open that door. He didn't want to hear all about it, or worse, see and feel all about it. He'd been passing the time with the kin in the kitchen, staying warm and occupying a comfortable niche in the corner while everybody chattered around him. They were happy another Apkallu had been found. They were full of stories of Kobegun's past-life exploits, even more hair-raising than the ones Ahab had been telling at Ayn Harod.

Now Sharibet wanted to bespeak him. He opened his mind to her, to get it over with swiftly.

—*Mon coeur.*— Her connection was disgustingly full of the aftermath of sex.—He was delicious.—I'm so glad for you,— he said, not caring at all if he sounded churlish. Her escapade

might be the way of djinni, but it wasn't how he had been brought up!

She laughed in his mind, amused by his attitude.—How prudish you are tonight! Why should I not taste him? It is good to meet again, although he returns to us in such a rude guise.—Be careful with him,—Arjumand warned.—He already tried to kill me.—

The force of her disapproval hit him through the mind-link.—So you have said. I have told you before, *mon coeur*, we must let them prove themselves. You cannot be the one to decide their fate before they act. It is the House's way.—Why can we no longer see the future?—Have the old ones been telling you tales again?—she sneered, picking the memory of his meeting with the elders of the Jerusalem house out of his mind as easily as a boy catching fish from a pond.—Those powers are lost. Those gifts are gone.—

Deliberately he filled his mind with the memory of calling the lightning to his command at Ayn Harod.—Not quite gone.—Where did you—? When did you—?—Her shields slammed shut.

Hah! He had broken her contempt of him at last.

When she reopened to him, her thoughts were soft, caressing, pretending she was still amused by him, as if she hadn't been terrified to learn of his revived power. —*Mon coeur*, — she said, as if they curled together in her bed, cozy and blended one into the other.—You surprised me! Where did you learn that trick? It's very impressive.—I worked it out from what the old people told me.—How ... industrious of you.—I learned it to protect the House. To better fulfill my

vows to the kin, and to you.—Strange how weary he felt, saying that.

—That's exactly what you did,—she replied brightly.—You're so strong!—

He wanted to slap her for her condescension. He was feeling sad and disillusioned. And hungry for her. *I want you*, said his body. *I miss you*, said his heart.

—I'll bathe, and meet you in your rooms in half an hour,—she offered.

Desire wracked him. No, no, he didn't want her so badly. Not so soon after—

She picked up his unspoken message.—Arjumand,—she sighed, in the same tone as he'd expressed his feelings about Kobegun.—If you would only agree to be Raised and Named, you would have the opportunity to rid yourself of these tiresome current-age morals! There is no place for them in the House!—

*Perhaps there is no place for me in the House, then.*

—I miss Marcus,—her thoughts whispered. He saw his former self through her memory: tall, strong, red-haired, forever young, but the predominant impression he gleaned from her burst of regret was that Marcus had been malleable.

—I've had enough,—he said.—Do what you will. Tell me what you will. I do not consent to be Raised and Named. I will not do it. If I am not good enough for the House, for you, as I am now, then no amount of memories will make me any more acceptable.—Arjumand, no, wait!—

He didn't wait for her to try to talk him into something else he didn't want. He closed his mind-shields tight, and accepted another jug of blood from the cheery kitchen maid.

He was fulfilling his duty, protecting the House. He was satisfied.

If only he didn't feel so cold.

\* \* \* \*

Kobegun rolled over on the disgustingly soft city bed, groaning. *Great Blue Heaven, was this succubus never to be satisfied?* He had never worked so hard in his entire life, and he was a White-bone Noyan, a prince with access to any and all the slaves he wanted.

He had thought Nadira a lusty baggage. He had had no idea.

Everything ached—pleasantly, for the most part, except where she'd bitten him. He heard a slither of silk in the darkness and he tried to hide in the soft bed, wondering if she was coming back for more. What would she want to do this time? She was more flexible than a blade of grass, and tougher than chewed leather. *Ancestors of the steppe!* He had to get out of this damned bed right now or she might never let him go.

"Woman," he croaked. His mouth was dry. "Woman!"

"Mmmm?" she drawled, her voice coming from behind him.

He jumped, and opened his Seer's eyes so quickly he felt dizzy, even lying down. The light from both their auras illuminated only a portion of the huge room, strewn with furniture that looked like good firewood to him. On the floor

were carpets that would make wonderful tent fixtures. At least he understood the carpets.

Sharibet stared down at him from the corner between the bed and the wall. Naked, she wore an expression on her big-eyed, pointy-chinned face that he couldn't read, but it gave him great foreboding. "What did you want?"

"Thirsty!" he croaked.

"No, thank you," she said, making him want to hit her.

"*I'm* thirsty!" he managed to say, reining in his outrage.

"Oh." She didn't make any move to leave the bed.

*Bitch!* If he could only break her. But for now, he was too cowed to plan such a deed. There were too many of them in the House. He wasn't certain he could get away with it. Gold-hair was still bigger than he was.

"I'm thirsty!" he repeated. What else could she do to him, after all? His mind filled with possibilities he might devise if she were his prisoner. So fun to plan, but only if you were the giver, and not the receiver, of pain.

"There's a jug on the table to your left," she said absently.

What? His gaze roved over the furniture and came to rest on the row of clay jugs lined up next to the bed. He felt the sudden craving that came with hunger about to be appeased, and scooted toward the table.

"Getting ready for me again?" Sharibet said, with a hungry smile.

"It will take more than sheep's blood to return my strength."

"Mmmm-mmmm," she said, infuriatingly.



He took the opportunity to open one jug in the way Nadira had taught him, and to gulp down its contents. Very shortly he was tossing it aside to open the other one. That disappeared almost as quickly, and he lay down again, feeling the rush of strength fire along his muscles. Blood tasted better than *airak*. But it was not as intoxicating.

The soft sheets under him gave off the musk of roses and sex. He sniffed, suddenly feeling more capable of going another few rounds with Sharibet. She was not as ungainly as Nadira. He stretched, easing some of the aches.

He almost jumped when he felt Sharibet press against his back. Her breasts brushed against his over-sensitized skin, and her small hand snaked under his arm to rub his nipple. Then her hand stretched lower, grasping his *ba'atur* and balls.

He remembered he'd been planning, at one time not too long ago, to ask her to teach him more magic. Gold-hair never had time for him, and Nadira and that Leila-woman were useless. But Sharibet might teach him, if he just pretended to fawn over her...

He groaned. Expert. That's what she was. Expert. And relentless. And—

All thought fled. Then the only sounds left him to make were groans of pleasure, and increasing dread.

## Chapter Twelve

*The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.—  
Isaiah 35:1*

Christmas 1260

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

It was a cold and windy Christmas morning, and the House was on display, taking up a sizable section of floor space in the Hagia Sophia cathedral for the celebration.

Arjumand, with his own religious orientation more than slightly tilted by now, wasn't the best person to judge the holiness of the ceremony performed by Latin-rite priests in this shrine to Orthodoxy. Sign the cross from left to right? Right to left? It was harder and harder to remember. Mostly he hoped that God wasn't as wrathful as he was often portrayed, just in case the kin were wrong.

The domes rang with silvery voices, singing praise to God, His Mother, and all the saints. Shimmering mosaics covered almost every surface above and below, except where they had come undone with a multitude of gaps like missing teeth. The shapes of the domes and the height of the columns supporting them made him feel as if he were suspended in the air above his body, looking out in all directions, although still confined within the walls of this enormous building.

The family members clustered together, chatting to one another in their silent hand language as the hours of the Mass dragged on. They tried to be unobtrusive about it, but they

were bored. None of them really cared about the Christian beliefs they were supposed to espouse. As usual, Kobegun was being fractious, shuffling and grumbling, and pinching one of the maids. Hadn't Sharibet tired him out?

Arjumand slapped him with a hand of air, just to get his attention. "Keep still," he warned.

"Why?" Kobegun snarled. Under his breath he continued, "You dress me up like a monkey and take me out to this ... this..." He apparently didn't know the word for church, thought Arjumand, interested despite himself. "Do you want me to stand here like a slave while eunuchs screech at me?"

He tried to break away from the group. Arjumand restrained him easily, although he would have preferred to let him go. "If you make me take you out of here, you won't like what I'll do to you."

"I never like it anyway."

Nearby members of the congregation, not as tolerant as the kin, turned their heads and stared, frowning.

"Now you've done it." Annoyed, Arjumand grasped Kobegun and shook him.

Sulky, the youth replied, "Why should I care?"

Arjumand increased his grip, tight enough to feel bones creak. "Because—"

Sharibet slipped up beside them. She looked up slantwise, her amber eyes showing amusement.—Having trouble with the young one, *mon coeur*?—

—No more than usual.—*I'd like to see you try to get him to behave.*

As if she'd heard him, she put her arm with its trailing sleeve through Kobegun's unattached arm, and snuggled up to him. He froze like a rabbit spotting a hawk.

—Braggart,—Arjumand bespoke her, almost teasing. Almost admitting the hard knot of jealousy that rode somewhere beneath his heart.

She smiled at him again. Could she read his mind? He checked his shields. They were as tight as he could make them. She twinkled at him now, and he realized she was just reading his face. Well, let her be surprised for once. He winked back at her. Her smile deepened into one of appreciation, even as she turned her attention back to Kobegun.

But Arjumand realized something that disturbed him as much as it grounded him. They were still partners. She was taking care of the business of Kobegun in the only way she knew; because he wasn't the right person to do it and she was. She still loved him. She was still his consort.

He looked up into the soaring beautiful heights of the Church, blessing and cursing this bittersweet insight. Her feelings hadn't changed. But his had. The glorious voices sang on and on, of birth, and hope for man, and the coming tragedy and triumph of sacrifice and resurrection. The air was heavy with incense, candle-smoke, sweat, and the perfume of roses.

*How can this be my life?*

\* \* \* \*

Friday, February 4, AD 1261

There was going to be a triple Appointing. Arjumand was aware of what it entailed. He just hadn't been prepared for all its vast quantities of preparation, or the costs, coming at a time where the finances of the House were dangerously strained by last autumn's relocations and the purchases of land for new farms in Provence, Castile, Granada, and North Africa.

The Appointing feast required food in massive amounts, with exotic ingredients, including the virgin lambs and poultry for the djinni's suppers. Was it really necessary to secure lark's blood? Christ preserve him! Invitations had been sent all over the Mediterranean, keeping in mind travel-times and distances and the vagaries of weather, governments, and pirates. Local lodgings must be secured for the overflow guests and their horses, if they were riding any. Permits must be obtained from and bribes given to the City officials. Harbor space for the ships. Bribes for the Harbor Masters. Decorations and special presents for the guests (many of them made of arcane materials which were, he was assured fervently, traditional for Appointings and therefore absolutely necessary.)

Not least of all were the things which *must* be provided for the djinni: three Divine Garments of Kingship to be woven out of the finest unbleached linen. Three at once! The House weavers were so excited about it. *But, Lord! Three at once! And two of them for women!* More flax of the highest grade went on the shopping list.

It did no good to clutch his head to stop its aching. He was ready to go on pilgrimage somewhere, anywhere, just to get

away from it all. Not that he had to do everything. Or plan anything. No, he just had to approve everything.

While Sharibet was busy wearing away Kobegun's rough edges, Arjumand became the sole source of arbitration for the extraordinary expenses of a Grand Appointing. He was the one to whom the combatants came when prices overmastered budgets, and they ran afoul of Philomena, who was in charge of disbursements.

Philomena (bless her wrinkled hide!) was a tightfisted, canny, stubborn old bird who had heard every purchasing excuse under the sun, moon and stars. But even she could be swayed by the soulful gazes of petitioners needing another few ounces of ochre pigment for the Appointing of three new Protectors.

Arjumand, hoping to frighten them all away, made everyone who wanted more money explain to him, in painful detail, exactly why they needed it, why they couldn't do without it, why they couldn't substitute something more mundane or locally produced, and how they were going to pay back the House's treasury for the extra expense. After a while, they stopped bothering him for all but real emergencies.

He was also trying desperately to keep abreast of the political repercussions from the murder of Kutuz after his victory over the Mongols, and the accession of his murderer, Baibars, to the sultanate of Egypt. There had been a second defeat of Mongols at Homs, lead by Baibars, who was known to be fanatically anti-Franj. At least Kutuz had been able to compromise in the face of a greater enemy. Now a different

set of slave soldier Mamluks ruled their former owners, and who knew what would happen to the Christian-held Kingdom of Jerusalem? Thank God, the properties of the House there had been mostly spared; and the party guests would, some of them, be returning to their old homes in Judaea and Syria after a season of adventure in the West.

Were the Mongols beaten forever? Kobegun seemed of the opinion they wouldn't persevere in their conquest attempts.

But here came another party delegation, this time asking him what the new Apkallu djinniah's preferences might be for flowers, or scents, or spices in her blood.

*Ah, Mathilde*, he mourned. *What spices would you like in your blood?* He startled himself no less than the petitioners by shouting for them all to get out and leave him alone! Alone! They scattered like rats before a terrier, and he was left in solemn splendor to contemplate, one more fruitless time, the changes time had wrought in his life. *Mathilde!* It was pain and sweetness together to anticipate her arrival.

As for her husband—consort—he had been assured that their union was only a temporary measure. The djinni did not, could not, remain bonded for eternal life. They consorted with whomever they must, in order to provide protection for the far-flung Houses. It might be for a season, a decade, or a century, but such a consortship was never permanent, and need not even be exclusive, even it was long-term.

He was tired of Sharibet trying to explain it to him. He understood it. He just didn't like it. Mathilde following the way of djinni? He didn't like that, either. Better to analyze whether the House really needed to buy new sheets for the guest

beds. He wished for some of Sharibet's time, alone, as it had been before all the lies and the complications had piled up. *Not possible. Not approved*, he told himself, and greeted the next petitioner.

He listened to them, and turned them down without prejudice, really. The House didn't need a new set of cookware, just for this Appointing. They could rent it, and send it back when they were done. *Next!*

\* \* \* \*

Nadira smoldered as she walked along the filthy Mese with her sister, Amina. She had been arbitrarily ordered out of the House to search for the Lost among the people of Constantinople. She knew better than anyone what a joke that command was. Of all the people she had ever seen, only five or six had ever had the distinctive aura flare of the House—and only two had been Apkallu.

Of course, that was more Apkallu than anyone else had found in hundreds of years.

Yet there was no reason to send her out now, to seek the Lost in the icy wind and rain, except Arjumand's continuing prejudice against her.

She ignored Amina's attempt to pacify her by pointing out a vendor's selection of beautiful brocades. They weren't allowed to spend any money! What good was it to look, if she couldn't buy? She stomped on, incensed by the noise and bustle of all the people speaking Greek—a language she still had not been taught!

"What ails you, Nadira?" Amina asked, sounding annoyed.



"You must call me 'Elder Sister,' Amina," Nadira replied with poisoned sweetness.

Amina turned red, then breathed hard, but said nothing. Nadira was simultaneously gratified and further enraged. She would have liked to fight someone, and Amina was closest. But even though she knew she could win against her sister, it was still not satisfying. Amina was only a mortal, not a djinniah. And Nadira was certain she would not win any kind of fight against any of the djinni.

It was no fair! Her aura was so small. She could barely move it, even now, and the drinking of life that she had tried to do was so slow. She didn't want to have to wait hundreds of years to have a larger aura, to have a larger part in the honors due to djinni. Searching for the Lost was no better than busywork, to keep her out of the House as everyone else prepared for the Appointing—at which she would be the least of the candidates, rather than the only one, as she had expected to be for so long.

She spared a particularly intense moment of hatred for Kobegun, who had usurped Sharibet's attention—not that she wanted it herself, to be sure, but for the principle of the thing. And that Franj Apkallu with the ugly name ... Arjumand went dewy-eyed every time someone mentioned her. Nadira ground her teeth, and wished for a shipwreck. *Oh, Destroyer, may it be so.*

"I'm never going to see any Lost," she grumbled to Amina.

"You certainly won't if you don't look, elder sister," Amina replied acidly.

Why should she look? No matter what she found, it would only increase the torment of her life.

\* \* \* \*

Thursday, March 3 AD 1261

To add to Arjumand's labors, Sharibet had decided that it was time to show Nadira and Kobegun how to Raise and Name. The new initiates would also be able to attend the Appointing, so he understood the necessity. But it added to his worries.

On this day, excited youths and maidens from the Houses within easy traveling distance of Constantinople, were gathered in the reception hall, bathed and dressed in their finest clothing. The parents of the candidates hovered nearby, in some cases anxiously holding their child's hand. The ritual of Raising and Naming was not without its perils.

Arjumand, huddling with the younger djinni in the robing room off the hall, looked over the assembled accoutrements of Raising and Naming: a bronze mirror; soft clay chips on which to note the person's new lifetimes-in-service number; the huge, leather-bound register of True Names; and cotton bandages to tie off the wounds the djinni would inflict. Those slight wounds would not kill, however. The release of memory tore the aura, and left a distinctive scar, a flare of energy above the forehead visible to Seer's eyes. Sometimes the candidates did not survive this violence.

One of today's candidates had an unmarked aura. Would he perish from that awful overload? Arjumand's worry shifted focus as Sharibet made her entrance into the great room,

mingling with the candidates and parents, congratulating everyone. When Arjumand was in sole charge, he tried to prevent any tragedies ahead of time. And hadn't his Raising and Namings in Judaea gone well? But Sharibet declared that the House had always performed Raisings and Namings in this manner. She didn't seem to care that the loss of one candidate would ruin the day for all who were left.

Arjumand wanted to grumble, but the spectacle had already begun. The candidates sorted themselves into some kind of order. Sharibet took the first maiden by the hand and led her into the private room, to stand alone in front of the djinni, where parents could not accompany her. The door closed, shutting out the rest of the world.

The girl, not a day over fourteen, trembled with fright and awe on the candidate's carpet, facing Arjumand and the witnessing djinni: Leila, Nadira, and Kobegun. The candidate clasped her hands together at her waist, and bowed stiffly in the formal obeisance of the people of the House toward their gods.

"Welcome, Aeola of Smyrna," said Sharibet, sounding more purposefully gracious than Arjumand was used to hearing her. "Why do you appear before us today?"

"Today I have come to be Raised and Named, if you please, Mother Sharibet," recited the girl.

"We may only Raise you with your consent, and Name you if your True Name is already known to the House. Do you consent to be tested?"

"Yes, Mother Sharibet. I wish to find out if my Name is known to the House."

"Is this truly your wish?"

"It is," Aeola quavered.

"You have been asked three times, and consented three times. We will Raise you up, Aeola, and discover if your True Name is known. Stand forward."

Aeola moved closer to the djinni by about four inches. Arjumand was impressed.

"Here is Lord Arjumand, whose True Name is Enlil. He will Raise you up, and find your True Name, if you have been given one."

Arjumand quickly scanned the girl. She had an aura flare, so she had been Raised and Named at some point in the past. How long ago or how often could not be told for certain. But it meant that the Raising and Naming would not be as difficult as it would be for a first-timer. He stepped close to the girl. "It is good to meet..." he said, mumbling the last word so he wouldn't have to say the 'again' part that he hated. "Aeola of Smryna. Give me your hand, that I may remember you."

She extended a trembling hand toward him. He took it, and raised it to his forehead in the gesture of respect. "If your Name is known, I will find it and restore it to you."

"You have my eternal thanks," she whispered.

He kept hold of the cold little fingers, and brought them to his mouth. He bit the ring finger, raising a small but definite trickle of blood. The taste of it exploded in his mouth, through his head, down to his belly. The images in her blood were gentle: growing up in the House, being loved, fed, taught, sheltered from the cruelty of life outside.

That was the easy part, he told himself. He drew deeper upon her blood, now that the connection had been made. Earlier: ... *he stares at the patterned ceiling, molded in multiple Solomon's Seals, and tries not to smell the stench of sickness, and age, and his coming dying. He has lived a full, adventurous life, and the next adventure, returning to the Underworld, comes too soon. Pray all the gods he finds his way home. "Great-Grandfather?" asks the boy next to his bed. He can't answer. His bones ache so. "Remember me," he pants as his heart flutters. Damn! He's not ready. My True Name is Dumu-Sal-Enlil! Remember me! The light dims, and he floats alone in the dark. Everything flies away from him...*

Arjumand gasped, letting go of the finger still in his mouth. The girl snatched it back, wide-eyed. "Your True Name is known," he said, not revealing it before she remembered it for herself. That was the next phase, the hard part. He hesitated.

Sharibet leaned forward.—Are you having some trouble?—

He knew exactly what he had to do, and how to do it. He just wished he didn't have to. But it was his duty, part of his endless duty to the House.

He took a breath, frowned at Sharibet, and spoke to the girl, wishing his words weren't so often mere formula. "I remember you. You are of the House of the Rose. I am the Opener of the Way. Will you let me in?"

"Yes, lord."

"Be not afraid," he said, trying to comfort her, but he received only a glare from Sharibet for this departure from

the ritual. He didn't care. He would say it again, if it helped Aeola be at ease.

She did relax, slightly, and he patted her thin arm to show that he was pleased with her. He took a better hold, and with his hand of air, reached into her aura, just as Sharibet had taught him, and tore away the seal that kept her from remembering her past. The spate of images drowned them both. *My name is Dumu-Sal-Enlil!*

Back to the first moment: *She stands in front of the barred door of the Jezreel perfumery and bows to Lord Zayoös. "I wish to join the house, Great Lord. I know perfumes, and the keeping of bees, and the weaving of wool. My brother also serves you, and he says you have need of another perfumer. I will be of service all the days of my life." "Will you keep the secrets of the House?" "I will." "Then let us seal your fate to the fate of the House," says the djinn, opening his hand before her, and leaving it open for her to place her hand in his. Once the fingers touch, he seizes them and brings them to his mouth, biting her finger, just as...*

Arjumand watched as Dumu-Sal-Enlil, bled and bonded, accepted her True Name from one of his previous incarnations. *"This oath and seal is witnessed in the year the Trojans fell to the men of Achaia," he says. "May it prosper the House."*

"May you always prosper the House, and the House prosper you, Dumu-Sal-Enlil," said Arjumand as the girl's eyelids fluttered. He supported her with his right hand, and Sharibet handed him the bronze mirror, slapping it smartly into his left palm. He held the mirror up. "Here is your new

face, you who are today called Aeola of Smyrna. I have Raised you, and I remember your True Name. Hail to you, Dumu-Sal-Enlil, and honor to your long service to the House."

She took a shaky breath. "Hail to you, Father Enlil, you who have kept my memory, and my life, in your keeping for so long." She seized his hand, and brought it to her forehead. "It is good to meet again."

"It is good to meet again," he said, remembering his past self in her memory. Tall, long dark hair, dark blue eyes, a face that looked lived-in. He glanced toward Sharibet.

She was smiling, tight-lipped. "Welcome, Dumu-Sal-Enlil," she said. "Elder Sister Leila will mark your life chip for you. It is good to meet again."

Arjumand sat down for a minute, watching Aeola leave a final drop of blood on the wet clay before Leila used a wedge-shaped reed to quickly mark the number of Dumu-Sal-Enlil's lives in service to the House. It was more than a hundred.

Nadira bound the tiny wound with a dab of honey and a cotton bandage tied with an elaborate bow. Sharibet kissed her on the forehead, murmured something private to her, and then the djinni, as one, bowed their respect to her.

Clasping her hands at her waist, Aeola bowed in return. Then, shaken, exhilarated, and still slightly reeling from the intensity of the experience, she opened the door and spoke to the assembled kin. "My True Name is Dumu-Sal-Enlil!"

They roared back, "It is good to meet again!"

"Next," said Sharibet.

\* \* \* \*

In the evening, the banquet was raucous, punctuated with 'Do you remember such-and-such?! I remember so-and-so!' as the newly Raised and Named confirmed and shared their memories.

Arjumand, relieved that all the candidates had survived, enjoyed the liveliness of the young people, who, to his alarm, were now recalling strikingly grown-up things they used to be able to do.—Aren't you worried the girls will get pregnant?—he asked Sharibet, sitting next to him at the high table and beaming at all her children.

—Not at all,—she replied, calmly.—They'll all get a dose of rue tea first thing tomorrow morning, with orders to repeat the dose for the next month. Any baby that survives that, we'll want. He'll be a tough one.—

Arjumand blinked. Sometimes Sharibet's responses still baffled him.

—So, just let me know when you want to say goodnight,—she suggested, a hint of musk perfuming her mind-to-mind communication.

—What about Kobegun?—What about him? He can take care of himself for one night. I've missed you.—

If she was done with Kobegun ... His body wanted her. Always wanted her.

—You did very well today,—she said condescendingly.—I was proud of you.—

*I give thanks, Great Lady,* he wanted to say sarcastically, but he realized that it was only his pride, barking like a puppy. She wasn't treating him any differently than she ever



had. He just felt different. He didn't need her approval to know that he'd done well.

He slipped his arm around her slender waist. She still felt good. Tiny, but solid. He remembered how ardent she was. He didn't want to think about Ko—So he turned off that thought. He slid her closer to him, so they touched, hip to hip.—I want to leave soon.—

She giggled. God help him.

\* \* \* \*

Kobegun sat and watched the people cavorting and consuming foods that he wouldn't want to find in his horse's shit. He was disgusted, frustrated, and if he admitted it to himself, frightened. He'd watched Gold-hair all day long drinking drops of blood from the youths of the House. Every time, they'd both just go into a trance. By now Kobegun was sure whatever they looked at, he wouldn't want to see.

This was the central magic of the House? This was what Nadira had promised him he would learn?

Nadira. He growled deep in his throat. The bitch had lied to him. Again. She'd said he would learn how to do this magic. Instead, he'd been forced all day to stand and watch, as if he were some Black-bone nobody. But he was a White-bone Noyan no matter what anybody said about his mother.

This drinking of human blood ... Gold-hair hadn't showed any difficulty with it all day. So why the big taboo?

Fuck. Was that Sharibet leaving with Gold-hair? Wasn't she supposed to be his? Falling heaven! He sat, fuming with embarrassment and rage.

He stood, intending to leave. One of the maidens, the first girl Gold-hair had bitten, stood up too, and bowed to him. She said something in the House's language that sounded like ducks quacking. Why hadn't they taught him their secret tongue? What were they hiding? He sneered back.

She was impervious. She said in recognizable Arabic, "After so long, lord, it is good to meet again!" Her cheeks turned bright pink, and her eyes, spooky yellow like all these people, sparkled up at him from under long-lashed lids.

Well, this was the most promising offer he'd had all night. He stopped scowling. She was a pretty thing, if a bit on the young side. He flicked his gaze toward the door.

She smiled a very knowing, eager smile.

Oh, she was quick-witted. But, what the hell. He'd take his chance. He sauntered out of the reception hall and didn't look back to see if she followed him. If she did, it was her own choice. He listened hard for light footsteps behind him. He slowed down and she caught up to him in just a few more steps. He glanced at her and admired the glossy fall of her black hair.

He wondered if she had remembered, in her Raising, some interesting positions requiring all the limberness of youth. What did she know how to do, in that virgin's body? What would that be like?

"Coming to my tent?" he asked, almost forgetting to curse city-people again, and their separate rooms. At least they didn't have separate beds for sleeping and having sex. There was only the one bed in his room. But it was big enough for two.

Broken Gods (House of the Rose, Book 3)  
*by Michaela August*

"You honor me, lord," she said, lowering her eerie gaze.  
He found himself walking swiftly toward his room. This  
might turn out to be a good night, after all.

## Chapter Thirteen

*(They are) listeners of a lie, devourers of what is forbidden—Surah 5, "The Dinner Table," Verse 42, The Holy Qur'an*

Thursday, March 3, AD 1261

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

As the Raising and Naming festivities continued elsewhere in the House, Nadira was having a rather uncomfortable reunion with her eldest son, Abd ul Khalil ibn Jamal.

Khalil, a slender nine-year-old, was feeling neglected tonight, and expressed his resentment by tagging along behind her, doe-eyed and indefatigable. He knew how to annoy her to perfection, too, asking at intervals, "Would my lady mother like me to do anything for her?" or "What would my lady mother like me to fetch for her?" or "Would my lady mother care for anything?"

She couldn't swat him. To all appearances he was being helpful, a dutiful son. But she knew what he was really doing: basking in her reflected radiance. His mother was a djinniah, and he wanted to remind everyone that he was her son. It was only natural. She would have done it herself, had their positions been reversed, but it was still annoying.

To make things worse, Kobegun was nowhere to be found, and Arjumand and Sharibet had retired to Sharibet's chambers after making it clear that they did not wish to be disturbed. Leila was a bore to talk to. All she cared about was her absent Basil. *Basil this, Basil that.*

Khalil refused to go to bed with the other children. She tried to make him, but he wouldn't go, saying he was bound to serve his lady mother, and if she wasn't resting, he wouldn't rest. She couldn't just order him to go away, either. So she prowled through the house, ostensibly searching for a pair of misplaced earrings, but really just trying to keep from having to make polite conversation with people and djinni she didn't want to talk to. It was very odd, seeing all of her sisters and cousins bowing to her. It was good, and right, of course, that they should do so.

Most unexpectedly, their auras were sometimes shaded blue-green with pity instead of envy she expected. How dare they! She was a djinniah! She would live forever! Not in fits and starts, like they would. She would...

"Lady mother, would you like to sit in this fine chair?" Khalil broke into her thoughts, indicating one of Sharibet's carved backless chairs, which had come from Rome hundreds of years ago and were reserved for the use of the djinni. *Damn the boy.* She sat, because she was a djinniah and this chair was her due.

"My younger brothers send you their most respectful greetings," Khalil said.

Nadira did not reply. The chair was remarkably uncomfortable, and she wanted to stand up again, but Khalil had a clay jug of blood in his arms and held it out eagerly to her.

She stared at him with loathing. How could he want to watch her drink the awful stuff? She was still not accustomed

to drinking it herself. He waited expectantly, still holding the jug, which was almost bigger than he was.

The noise level in the House started to fall as the party downstairs in the banquet room began to succumb to sleep or the quieter preludes to sleep.

With a pang, Nadira remembered her own Raising and Naming party. Sharibet had sent her away to stay alone, guarded by one of the elders. Not for her the freedoms of the others. No, once she'd been recognized as a Seer, she was ordered to keep her body inviolate, except to breed at Sharibet's command. *Damn the old—*

A latent sense of self-preservation stopped her thoughts before she could finish them.

Khalil still stood, holding the jug. His little arms, strong though they were for his size, were starting to shake with the effort.

"All right, give it to me," she said, ungraciously.

He handed the jug over, then bowed carefully, just to make her feel worse.

She broke the seal, and struggled to swallow the over-spiced glutinous mess. Someone had forgotten to strain it properly, and the contrast of chewy bits with the slimy liquid made her want to wince at each deep gulp. When she looked up again, all she could see was Khalil, staring at her with some emotion she couldn't identify. Was he pleased? Awed? Frightened? Just now realizing the truth of her Transformation?

Whatever it was, it made her tired. She set the half-empty jug down onto the carpeted floor.

"Khalil," she said, not knowing what else she was going to say.

"Lady mother," he said, coming to attention.

"Come sit on my lap." What did she want? She didn't even know.

A glow of happiness suffused his face. He scrambled toward her, and found some purchase on the chair leg, one tentative hand on her shoulder, as he clambered onto her lap. He sat, straight and tense, awaiting her further orders.

"Khalil, beloved," she said, closing her arms around his skinny ribs. He shivered, and she found the taste of preserved lamb's blood in her mouth suddenly nauseating.

"Khalil," she said again, "you love your mother, don't you?"

"Of course!" he said promptly.

"That's a good boy," she murmured. "You'd do anything for your mother, wouldn't you?"

"Lady mother, I live to serve the House," he said, just as he'd been trained.

She hadn't seen that much of him, since his weaning. She hadn't seen much of any of her sons. She had only borne them because Mother Sharibet had commanded it.

Nadira remembered wanting Arjumand's child, a djinn's child. Yes. That would have been a wonderful advancement for her. But these ordinary mortal children? Bah! All they had brought her was embarrassment, pain, and mixed emotions. Had they paid for her entrance into the lofty circle of the djinni? No. After all her scheming it was a stroke of luck that led her to notice Sir Robert d'Agincourt, Utu-who-was, before

Sharibet or Arjumand did. She had earned her crown herself, with her very own Seer's eyes.

But was it worth it? After all these months, she still wasn't sure.

"Lady mother? What may I do for you?"

If Khalil or any of her sons inherited her Seer's gift when they reached manhood and were Raised and Named, they might displace her in the hierarchy of the djinni.

Oh, what should she tell him? What she really wanted, wasn't possible, was it? She wanted to be a true djinniah rather than only barely stronger than the mortal kin.

A terrible but perfect idea blossomed in her heart. Arjumand had showed her how to do it. In her rare spare time, she had worked hard to master the skill. She could drink the life of roses now, and marguerites, and lavender. They gave up their sweetness to her, and their life enriched her own.

It was an awful thought. It was shocking. But hadn't she always been taught that her mortal life, given in service to the House, was an honorable end? She was a Protector of the House, but still an inadequate one. What if she could accelerate that process, to nurture her aura until she was the equal of the Apkallu?

"My son," she said, and bit her lip. Would it work? Could she do it? Would it get her what she wanted? Unsettled, she stroked Khalil's arm. "My son, would you give your mother something?"

"Anything in my power," he replied. He was so careful.



"This is within your power," she said. "It would be a magnificent gift, a gift that no one else could give me; a gift far beyond the price of rubies, or the perfume of the rose." Inside her head, she laughed bitterly. She sounded just like Sharibet! Well, one learned what one was given to study.

"Lady mother, what kind of gift could be so precious?"

What a clever child she had birthed! She opened her Seer's eyes and looked at his aura. He had been Raised and Named in a past life; she could see the flare. *O happy child!*

He squirmed, obviously waiting for her to answer his question. As if he had a right to demand anything from her!

"My son," she said, softly. "You know the teachings of the House?"

"Not all," he said doubtfully. "I'm too young for some of them. I'll learn them when I'm ready."

"Tell me what you know."

"Never tell outsiders what goes on within the House," he recited. "Never tell outsiders about the djinni. Report anything that you see or hear that might affect the House. Report any intruders. Obey orders in emergencies. Be respectful to kin and to outsiders because you never know when an outsider may be invited into the House. Anyone who harms the House will be Forgotten."

That last rule worried her. Well, she could debate the definition of what constituted harm to the House later.

"Do you know what it means to be Forgotten?"

His mouth screwed up. Clearly he didn't understand the concept very well. "Doesn't it mean that you don't get to come back into the House after you've gone to the

Underworld? But Ama, our teacher, didn't exactly tell us what the Underworld is, or how you get there, or how you get back. So..." he trailed off and squirmed some more.

"Would you like to know all about it?" she asked, blood pounding in her ears. It was all coming together. Even his name took on special significance in the light of her intention. Abd ul Khalil. Servant of the Eternal. Yes. This was going to work.

"Yes, lady mother," he said. "If it serves the House." And with that, he sealed his fate.

She stood, lifting him in her arms. He was so light. "Come with me, my darling boy."

He didn't answer. He didn't have a choice now, anyway. Her room was near. Dark. Silent. With a door that could be locked.

She set Khalil down on her bed. She had to light the lamp with flint and steel. She still couldn't create a spark of fire with her rudimentary hand of air. But perhaps, after tonight...

The lamp wick caught, and a small pool of yellow light illuminated her pitiful status as a djinniah. No gold. No hangings. No chests full of silks and gorgeous brocades. Nothing but the same plain possessions as her sisters and cousins. Even her pearls were gone, looted by Mongols.

She sat down on the bed by the boy, who lay waiting patiently for her. He seemed to be basking in her presence, in being alone with her. Well, good for him. She was glad to make him happy. He looked like he wanted to speak. "Yes?" she asked, not unkindly.

"Lady mother, you're so beautiful!"

She preened, touching her carefully-braided hair. But while she was doing that, she was busy planning how to accomplish her purpose without wasting anything. How to be merciful. Reviewing all she knew, all she had been taught, she pulled Khalil onto her lap.

"By your wish to serve the House, my son, I send you to the Underworld. May your life increase the House."

Without giving him a chance to react to her words, she wrapped him tightly in her arms and bit down upon his neck. The rush of blood into her mouth was sweet, hot, delicious in every way that preserved animal blood was not.

Khalil was too shocked to struggle. The force of his memories overcame her in a rolling boil of exaltation. She knew his life, she thought, but the sights she saw rushing past her were unfamiliar: *A door closes, locking him out. His mother is on the other side of that door, but he isn't allowed in ... Struggling through the desert with sand blowing wildly, the voice of the wind a hateful shriek, thirst a claw inside his throat ... As lightning rages in the cloudless skies above Enlil's temple, a boom like the reverberation of a city-sized drum presses like a hand against his skull, and his ears ache. A giant arrow of sunlight falls through the sky, towards them, coming ever closer. Then the sky splits open. The ground shatters like a cup. A fiery wave smashes the temple, the city, the people, the sheep in the sheepfold. Birds are dashed from the air. Fish die in the rivers. The land is blasted. Death is a merciful release...*

Nadira drank and drank. The taste of Khalil's blood was even better than the blood of djinni, taken during sex. She had never tasted anything so good.

The sound of his heart faltered, and the push of his blood into her mouth lessened. She sucked as if she were a nursling, and Khalil's throat a mother's breast. The boy's limbs spasmed, thrashing weakly. She held him tight, drinking him in.

Another sensation pushed against her aura. There was a soundless thunderclap, an expansion of space, and self, and time, annihilating her boundaries, her petty concerns, and her last scraps of caution.

Her mind veils cracked as the other djinni of the House all reached climax in a crash as overpowering as fighting drums: Arjumand and Sharibet, wrapped in each other's bodies and auras; Leila, finding solace with one of the young men of the House; Kobegun, straddling a newly Raised and named girl. They merged in carnal communion, their blood bonds thrumming with the pleasure of drinking and taking and being taken.

Then she was alone again. She drunkenly reformed her veils. Shaken and fulfilled beyond all her past imaginings, she wanted nothing better than to fall down onto her pillows and savor the experience. But there was blood, and filth, and limp dead flesh all over her dress and bedding.

She recoiled with disgust, and remembered she had one more thing to do. The Drinking of Life. The life from the boy's blood fizzed and sparkled within her. But there was life left in the flesh, just like the flowers she cut in the garden. More life

to drink, more strength to absorb. She started with the little fingers.

Skin, and flesh, and bone were harder to dismantle than flowers. But she knew the trick of it, and the reward of strength to be gained. Patiently, she deconstructed the body of her son—finally of use to her—and drank the life each morsel yielded up.

Long before she was finished, she felt the changes. Her reach expanded. Her strength increased. Her brightness grew. She kept on, until she could no longer encompass the flesh that remained, despite her growing reach.

She came back to herself in a darkened room. The oil in the lamp had burned out, and there was a charnel smell in her room, worse than an overflowing latrine, thick with decay.

Impatiently, she opened her Seer's eyes, and looked down at herself: shining like the morning star, her aura increased by the size of one small boy.

She sighed with satisfaction, and stripped off her gown. She left everything in a pile on the floor. Dressed in a loose, clean robe, she went to the bathhouse to clean up.

Her hands full, the door yielded to her hand of air with hardly any effort. She smiled, and shut it quietly behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Kobegun woke into darkness. The girl breathing softly by his side rolled over, and he withheld the impulse to stroke down her side to tickle her. She had been everything a man dreamed of and seldom got in a virgin: hot, tight, and extremely enthusiastic.

He thought quite kindly of her, just at the moment. Earlier, she had disconcerted him with a matter-of-fact complaint of soreness and an assured expectation of his withdrawal. In his old life, he would have beaten her for insolence, but tonight, knowing the penalties for trying to take anything from an unwilling family member, he had started to leave her alone. But it turned out that she remembered a number of interesting alternatives to actual fucking, and they had fallen asleep together, tired and well-satisfied with one another.

—Kobegun,—Nadira's mind voice called.

—What?—he snarled back. What did the bitch want now, when he was finally content?

—Kobegun, I've found how to increase my powers.—

Was this really Nadira? She sounded so happy. He woke up fully, though his bedmate slept on.

—Kobegun! Didn't you hear me? I've found the way to increase as a djinn!—So what?—It's more magic,—she said enticingly.—It's ... mmmm ...—Her mind voice trailed off, leaving an impression of satiety, like the time he'd eaten ripe peaches in Persia.

Intrigued despite himself, he let his budding curiosity leak back through his link to her.

—Come and see,—she said.

Damn. He didn't want to get up.

—Come and see!—she repeated, more stridently.

—Leave me alone, woman,—he replied, and rolled over to face the sleeping girl at his side. He traced a fingertip over the silky curve of her exposed breast. *Maybe if I woke her up now, she'd be ready to...*

—Kobegun! You have to come see!—

Now Nadira was really angering him. Maybe she'd like him to show her something, like his fist? But her next sending startled him so much that he jumped up, pulling a robe over his nakedness.

She was whirling, dancing, propelling herself with the movement of her aura wings, which had indeed grown since his last sight of her.

Great Heaven! Now *that* was magic he wanted. He was tired of Gold-hair lording it over him just because his wings were bigger. Kobegun was in motion immediately, padding down the hall to Nadira's chamber.

She must have sensed his approach, for she opened her door before he even lifted a hand to knock, and let him in with the air of a conspirator. Once inside, he gagged on an after-battle smell that reminded him of the Jezreel Valley. The only element missing from the stink in this room was horse-shit.—What?—he asked, holding his breath.

But he forgot the smell as he looked at Nadira with his Seer's eyes, confirming her change, just as she had shown him mind-to-mind. He brought his aura-wing up to test the strength of her quick growth. It was real, though a bit spongy in contrast to the firm nothingness of the other auras he had encountered.

"How?" he demanded.

She opened up the floodgates of her mind and disclosed to him the means of her enlargement.

*Damn. Damn, that was sweet.* Immediately he wanted to do it. Oh, yes. He wanted to devour the people of the House,

with their snobbish ways and their "glad to meet you again" lies. Three or four potential victims came instantly to mind. And all you had to do was ask? *Sweet!*

He grinned and thought of the girl sleeping in his bed. She was so pert and bouncy. Did he want to keep her for sex, or eat her? Ah, it didn't really matter, did it? There were always more girls. He'd seen enough of them as war prizes or delivered as tribute to know that.

"Let me get—"

"Shhh!" she said, creeping toward her door, motioning him to silence.

"What?" Oh, there were people outside. He watched as Nadira clutched her robe, frozen until the laughter and whispers traveled down the corridor away from them. He wondered: had she really gotten permission for what she had done?

Before she moved, he captured her from behind, his left arm locked around her waist and his right hand holding her wrist in a grip of steel. "What have you done?" he growled into her ear. "What have you dragged me into?"

"Nothing!" she protested. "Nothing! He was willing. He was mine to ask, as well." She supplemented her words with another mental image.

"You ate your son?" He was amazed, disgusted, and yet felt a kernel of admiration. Now, that was an act even a Mongol mother would find hard to stomach. Not that he knew much about real Mongol mothers. *Enough of that.* He released his grip slightly. "Was he truly yours to eat? Won't Sharibet and Gold-hair get all testy about this?"



"I don't care about them," she huffed.

But he felt her heartbeat race. She was scared.

*Shit.* She'd pulled him right into this rat hole after her.

*What do I do now?* He could turn Nadira in, and let Gold-hair and Sharibet sort her out. That was a good idea, but as much as he disliked Nadira, betraying her would give Gold-hair too much satisfaction.

The other thing he could do was leave with her. He and she could set up their own House. They could be the gods of it, and the damned House of the damned Rose could grow their damned flowers and die of perfume poisoning.

Hmmm, in this particular plan, could he bring along the eager morsel currently sleeping in his bed? He grimaced.

*Probably not.*

The biggest drawback to the second plan was that he still didn't know how to Raise and Name a mortal. Neither of them did. They would need to, if they wanted to have a House like the House of the Rose. Otherwise, who would feed them and take care of them? The shamans he knew? *Shit, no.*

And what time was it? If they were going to go, they'd have to go soon. Before dawn broke. Quickly, he told Nadira what he wanted to do before they left. She scurried out to find what he needed.

He had to know the magic. It was their only chance. Nadira had to learn the magic, too, eventually, or he'd never get his own memories back. But if he knew how to Raise and Name, he would be able teach her at their leisure, once they established themselves somewhere else.

Great Blue Heaven, he resented having to take the bitch with him into exile! But she was what Heaven had thrown into his lap.

Nadira returned shortly, accompanied by one of the children of the Constantinople House who had been deemed too young to go through the Raising and Naming ceremony earlier that day. The girl was eleven or twelve, maybe. No breasts yet. She was sleepy, rubbing her eyes, but excited to be called to assist the djinni. "Yes, lord, I want to be Raised and Named," she said, in response to his question.

Now, how had that damned ceremony gone? Did it matter? Hell, no. He just needed to perform the essential actions, and prove that he could. So, what first?

Open his Seer's eyes. Yes, she had the flare rising above her forehead from between her eyes. They were light green, with edges of blue, and very pretty, not like the yellow cat's-eyes of her kinswomen.

"So, you consent to be Raised and Named? I'm, uh, the Opener of the Way. Yes?" He reached for and seized her hand, and forced one of her little fingers into his mouth. He bit down, ignoring her frantic 'ow!'.

Ahhhh ... He exploded into a climax at his first drop of human blood in less time than it took him to gasp. The blood, the blood ... He'd gotten glimpses of what it must be like, when Gold Hair had tasted the Raising and Naming candidates. But this ... He wanted it all. He wanted more.

Then the pictures hit him.

*Playing dress-up in the late afternoon heat. Everybody away at some important grown-up event, leaving her sisters*

*and herself alone to play, free of chores for once ... Smoke fills the air of the steep, hot city street. The djinni surround them, but Lord Menelaos is already down, being carried in a makeshift stretcher, a cruel crossbow bolt jammed through his forehead. Other bolts go wide, deflected by the invisible wings of the remaining djinni. They run. There's the church! They hide in it ... but the invaders break down the doors through the bodies of the Protectors. There's no hope. There are too many. Their swords are too sharp. Their armor is too strong. They slay, and slay. The scent of blood is overwhelming. Now it is her old flesh's turn to fall into the path of a sword edge. Remember me! I am Solange! My True Name is Sha-lah-su. Shepherd, save me! ... The sky is dark with smoke that hides the sun. The land mourns. The goddess, the bright goddess, Inanna is dead. In her stead reigns Dumuzi, the Shepherd-god. He reigns, he decrees, he grieves not. On the third day, Inanna, having drunk the water of life, having eaten the food of life, returns from the Underworld. The sky weeps tears of rejoicing. The land burgeons. The people cry out for gladness. Dumuzi weeps, his reign done. He flees, pursued by Galla demons. He returns not to Eanna, the House of Heaven. Sha-la-su, his shepherdess, weeps...*

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* Even caught up in the staggering sensations of the blood, and the memories, Kobegun could not ignore the chill crawling down his spine. This child knew him. She had once worshipped him.

Had he really been deposed by a goddess resurrected from the dead? *Damn.* He still wanted her, and his kingship, too.

Denied them both, he would take what he could get. He felt the patterns of the girl's mind. He saw where the flare of her former Raising rose from her skull. He'd watched Gold-hair carefully. There was some kind of ripping. He reached for the flare with his hand of air. He could feel it! There was a barrier, or maybe an attachment. He couldn't quite tell. Oh, well. He would try it and see what happened. He tore the girl's aura, right at the joining point.

She screamed. He slapped his hand across her mouth, getting bitten for his pains. Her cries continued, and in another moment he understood why. The patterns of her memories fell apart. The memories of the past jumbled with the memories of yesterday. Yesterday, a hundred years ago, three thousand years ago—were all the same. All today. All now. All chaotic.

She screamed again, writhing with manic strength. He had to stop her before half the House heard her and came to investigate. But couldn't kill her, not without her permission. But what did that matter?

He was already in for a lamb. Why not in for a sheep? Carefully, precisely, he broke the girl's neck. Not enough to kill her. Just enough to silence her, and to stop her frantic struggles. She was still weeping, but her voice was now a soundless gurgle.

"What are you doing?" Nadira whispered fiercely. "Just kill her!"

"Get your things. We're going now," he said curtly. He wasn't going to waste time arguing with the bitch. They had better be far away from here, before dawn. Hell. It had been

such a good night, before Nadira summoned him. He didn't look at the girl, Sha-lah-su, again. He closed his mind link to her and gathered his own essentials with a nomad's efficiency. He shut the door and walked quickly down the hall and up the stairs to the roof, where he carried Nadira into the air with some difficulty. He flew away as fast as he could.

But one image haunted him for miles: the lost, despairing look in light green eyes. He had left the lamp lit for her, and she had watched him go, uncomprehending. Had she even seen him, in the whirl of past and present? Why had he left the lamp lit for her? He didn't know.

The air in his face was fresh. He headed southeast. Back home.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.—Proverbs 16:18*

Friday, March 4, AD 1261

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

Arjumand woke from a profound and satisfying sleep to the awful sound of wailing. He'd shared the best lovemaking in his life with Sharibet last night, even for a moment experiencing climaxes with all the other djinni in the House. It was exhilarating, if embarrassing to recall in the gray light of dawn.

There were more sounds, frantic scratchings at Sharibet's door. "Lord Arjumand!" came the hysterical whisper. "Mother Sharibet! You must come!"

He slipped from beside Sharibet, who was coming awake looking worried and old. He threw on a shirt and a tunic, and belted his sword on before opening the door to Theodoros, the Master of the House in Constantinople. The man held an oil lamp, the wavering flame illuminating an expression as upset and heartbroken as Arjumand had ever seen on one of the normally-impassive kin, tears in his eyes, his mouth twitching.

"What?" He did not restrain his harshness. No doubt the man knew Arjumand's emotion was not directed at him, but at whatever had brought him to this state.

"Lord, you must see—" Theodoros's voice broke.

*God, give me strength,* Arjumand prayed, with a chill of apprehension. What could be so bad? Soon enough he would see, he would know. And it would be bad. When he knew, he would deal with it.

The Master scurried down the hallway toward the other wing of the house, where the lesser djinni's chambers were. They arrived at the place Arjumand feared: Nadira's room. Holding emotions tight-leashed, he opened his link to Sharibet. She would share this revelation with him as it happened. Not for her a filtered version, leached of shock.

—*Mon coeur?*— She said no more. She saw where he stood.

Theodoros opened the door to Nadira's room.

The smell hit Arjumand first. Next, he saw a cluster of kin, the ones with the best medical skills. They surrounded a small, still body.

No. Not a body. A victim, barely breathing. Her head lay at an unnatural angle.

Sharibet's reaction lanced through him. She recognized that face.—Melonomia. Her True Name is Sha-lah-su. Her neck's broken.—Her mental voice was crisp, but the background to her communication was a furious tempest.

Arjumand stood over the pack of physicians, his aura wings extended, ready to strike, or smash.

One of the kneeling attendants turned her face up to him, and lifted the victim's left hand to show the fourth finger, marred by a deep bite mark.

Arjumand grunted. He opened his Seer's eyes and saw the girl's aura flare, disordered by a hideous scar so that it no

longer shone, but sparked fitfully, vitality leaking visibly from it like blood from a wound.

Sharibet shrieked. She had dressed haphazardly, as he had, and run down the corridor behind him. She knelt down with the attendants, her hands caressing the young face, and her aura wings moving through the girl's aura scar. Her right hand, palm up, imperiously demanded the girl's hand be put into it. This accomplished, she brought the poor torn finger to her mouth and tasted the girl's blood. As she did so, she groaned, bowing her head in pain.

The attendants watched anxiously.

As she started speaking, Arjumand turned toward the source of the horrible smell that filled these quarters like a festering sore.

"Her aura has been damaged by a bungled Raising and Naming," Sharibet announced. "She wanders through her memories without an anchor to the here-and-now."

"Can you help her, Mother Sharibet?"

"I cannot," said Sharibet, speaking firmly to her children. "The damage is too great. She must be sent to the Underworld. May we meet again."

A ragged chorus of lamentation greeted that pronouncement. Arjumand wanted to join them. He had finally seen what the smell was coming from.

Wrapped in a stained woman's garment was what remained of the head and torso of a child. The bloodless face was intact, and matched Nadira's oldest son. Horrified, Arjumand recognized the drift of dust that coated the silk.



Oh, God. He had taught her that skill, the Drinking of Life. He had unloosed her to do this foul deed. In his lust for Sharibet, and his overweening pride in his foolish accomplishments, he had forgotten Nadira.

In her utter selfishness, she had done this.

His skin went cold. His flesh, lit by his aura, burned with freezing rage: at Nadira, at himself, for being such a fool as to consider himself some kind of hero, and at the House that made this God-damned magic possible. He had failed to protect the House; had failed to protect two of its most innocent members.

He had *failed*. But the fault was not only his. "I *told* you," he said to Sharibet, his voice a deep growl. "I told you Nadira was not fit."

"Indeed," Sharibet replied with asperity. "We are lucky she did no more harm than this. In fact, it was Kobegun who ruined this poor child."

He did not turn to look at her. "They shall be Forgotten." His pronouncement found so low a note in his throat that he wasn't sure if anyone heard him. In this case, he didn't really care. "They shall die, and trouble the House no more."

Now Sharibet started up from her kneeling position on the floor. He could hear the rustle of her gown as she moved quickly. "Arjumand! You mustn't—" She came up behind him, and gasped as she saw the remains of Nadira's son.

He looked down at his consort's bowed head, at her long, loose, wiry hair. "Do not forbid me this, Sharibet," he warned. "Lest I count these deaths at your door for insisting we take Nadira into our midst. I will accept the blame for failing to

keep watch on her, and for Transforming that bastard Kobegun, but from you, I have heard enough of 'must' and 'must not.'"

Her glance up at him now was wide-eyed, a mixture of anger and fear. Her aura expanded too, in response to his threat; but it was insignificant in comparison to his. She could not make him do anything.

"Now I will tell you what I am going to do," he continued, damming up wrath in order to speak levelly. "I am going to kill them for bringing harm to the House. They shall be Forgotten, their names erased from your Book of Life."

"For how long shall the names be stricken?" asked one of the attendants. "Lord Dumuzi has been absent from the House for so long. Even the Cursed One was only banished for a thousand years for her first crime."

"Silence!" he thundered, surprising himself as much as the roomful of kin. "From this moment, their Names are Forgotten. Forever."

"But to be banished forever..." someone whispered rebelliously. He ignored them.

Soon he was issuing orders. "Send for my valet and have him lay out my flight clothes. Send pigeons to all the Houses with the news. Place this House and the Houses in Kobegun's flight range on Emergency status, lest the oath-breakers try to do more harm. Bring the Ax of Judgment to the rooftop within the hour. I'm taking it with me."

Sharibet rose from the body on the floor. Angry tears glittered on her dark eyelashes. "I will remember Sha-lah-su. May we meet again."

The girl's mother gathered the corpse into her arms, and rocked back and forth, wailing.

Arjumand stormed out of that room of death, down the corridor. Back in his own suite, he stripped and bathed hurriedly, pouring water from the pitcher onto a cloth. He didn't want to bring the scent of Sharibet's lovemaking with him. He didn't want to bring the memory of Sharibet with him, either, but that was impossible to delete. He was so angry he was shaking, and still so cold he wondered that the water on his washcloth didn't freeze.

*Damn them. Damn her.* He had warned her.

*We are lucky she did no more harm than this.* How could Sharibet call this lucky?

But no anger focused outward could match the ire he felt at his own errors. Damn his own failures, his own blindness! He knew he should have kept watch. He had let Sharibet overrule his judgment for the last time.

His valet entered his suite at a run, half-dressed and pale. "Lord," he said, hoarsely. "Forgive me. I wish Nadira hadn't survived her Raising and Naming. I wish she had never been cursed with Seer's Eyes!"

"I am sorry for the death of your grandson," said Arjumand, as Abdulaziz helped him into indigo-dyed clothing made especially for winter flying: warm loose silk and woolen trousers banded at the ankle; a fuzzy-napped tunic padded to take the weight of a flying harness. A cashmere cap with earflaps, matching mittens, and soft slippers completed the costume. "May we meet again."

"May we meet again," Abdulaziz repeated, tears falling unheeded from his eyes..

Once dressed, Arjumand left his room and took the stairs to the roof three and four at once. No time to waste! The Man of the Ax was waiting for him by the dovecote, as he had ordered. Sharibet was there, too. Not that he'd expected her. Or hoped for her presence.

The ax had a hard leather cover that would keep him from cutting his own head or arms off while flying or on bad landings. He accepted the implement and hefted it prudently before strapping it to his back. It was heavy, but a lot lighter than carrying Nadira.

"Is it sharp?" he asked the Man of the Ax, who was Theodoros's brother.

"Yes, lord. Always," he replied, with a fierce expression.

Arjumand wondered: what had the man seen in his own face? "Good."

He didn't want to look at Sharibet and remember what they'd done instead of being vigilant. "I pray you, give Mathilde and the others my apologies for not being here, if they should arrive before I return," he said to the air above her head.

Sharibet nodded.

The Man of the Ax said quickly, "My brother bids me tell you that your orders have been obeyed, lord. The pigeons fly ahead of you. Remember us. May we meet again."

"May we meet again," Arjumand replied. He launched himself into the dawning sky, not caring if outsiders saw him.

The city dropped away below, the squares and rectangles of houses interlaced by straight old streets, the churches hunkered like sleeping dogs among children's toys, the hippodrome a scooped-out wine barrel. He sought the upper air, up and up, higher into realms of cold rivers of wind. When he reached a height that made the land below and the great seas to the east and west look like a wrinkled silk bed sheet, he changed his flight angle to a glide.

Now he began to seek those who had fled. He lowered his mind shields carefully, knowing he couldn't risk Nadira or Kobegun sensing him searching for them. He was glad he'd hurried. The perception he had of the two of them was already hazy and faint. Kobegun was making all speed east, and south. Toward the Mongols in Konia, probably.

Arjumand remembered the route. He remembered the effort it had taken him to arrive there, towing Basil and Leila, carrying Nadira. Today he was all alone, bearing only the weight of his conscience and battling only the contrary winds. He feared only one thing today: not catching the two djinni he meant to slay.

\* \* \* \*

The wan winter sun had traversed three quarters of the southerly sky when Arjumand saw Konia on the horizon. By daylight, the flat dryness of the plain to the east with its intermittent mountain teeth was even more of a contrast to the city's vibrant gardens.

He didn't waste any time sightseeing. He just cursed his luck, and bad timing. It was all very well to lift off from a high

roof in the middle of a great metropolis just before dawn—but landing on a flat roof in the middle of the afternoon?

There were some rough hills to the west of the town. He touched down in the shadow of a canyon and started the long walk. After a mile or so, he was able to buy a used Turkish robe from a traveling merchant. Wearing that, he didn't look quite so outlandish. Fortunately, Abdulaziz had remembered to put money in his wallet.

As it was, he was questioned about his cap and earflaps by sentries wearing Mongol badges. Thank God he had learned Turkish via a blood-bond several years ago, and was able to talk his way through the gates. Once within the walls, he made the best speed possible through crowded streets. At sunset, he reached the House.

"Lord Arjumand!" said Nikomedes, the doorkeeper. "We were expecting you. Please come in. It is good to meet again," he added, once the door was closed.

Arjumand remembered him from his previous visit. "Did you get the message?"

"Lord, yes. The pigeons arrived at noon."

"Have you heard word of—" He stopped talking as he entered the courtyard. There, bound and obviously drugged, lay Kobegun and Nadira. He rounded on Nikomedes. "How long?"

"Lord," said the old man. "These two arrived some hours after the pigeons. She demanded drink, and we, being prepared, provided it to them."

Arjumand didn't want to inquire what had been in the blood. He stood over the two djinni, and watched them as their eyelids twitched, but didn't open. Could they hear?

Arshya, the Master of the House, now entered the courtyard, his second in command following closely, bearing this household's own Ax of Judgment.

"Lord Arjumand," Arshya said quickly, breathing fast as if he had come down the stairs at a run. "It is good to meet again. We are grateful you are here as a witness."

*Witness?* Arjumand thought, but he kept his tongue between his teeth.

The rest of the household filed grimly into the yard, forming ranks according to some arcane hierarchy. There were no children present, only the Raised and Named. Dusk gathered in the corners of the courtyard.

Some signal was passed from the watcher on the roof to those gathered below, for everyone stood straighter.

"Attend!" cried the Master of the House, in the House's private language. No one moved: every eye was already on him. "Tonight we pass judgment upon djinni who have trespassed against the laws of the House."

Cold chills ran down Arjumand's spine. He thought he had been angry this morning! The faces of the kin were stony, unforgiving.

"Sons and daughters of Sharibet, will you hear the charges against these djinni?"

"We will," the kin said as one.

"The unappointed Crown of Service djinniah Nadira bint Abdulaziz is charged with consuming the life of her son, Abd

ul Khalil ibn Jamal, whose True Name had not yet been spoken, against the laws of Sharibet our Mother, and every instinct of motherhood and family loyalty. She has drunk blood we have not willingly given to her."

Every mortal present spat onto the ground at their feet.

The Master went on. "The unappointed Apkallu, called Kobegun son of Abaqa son of Hulegu, whose True Name is said to be Dumuzi, is charged with aiding and abetting the evil deeds of the djinniah Nadira, and with Raising and Naming without training, or care, resulting in the return to the Underworld of our sister Melonomia, whose True Name is Sha-lah-su."

There was a wordless murmur from the assembled kin. Then Arshya continued. "Let those who are accused of these evil deeds speak for themselves. Let them refute the charges, or confess, and repent of the harm they have caused to the House."

The silence that followed this pronouncement was pregnant with dread. Everyone turned to Arjumand.

"Lord," said Arshya, as the silence dragged on. "The potion we administered to these djinni will not let them speak in their own behalf. You must speak their pleas for them."

Arjumand stared, dumbfounded. He must speak for them? He would have to let down his shields to hear them...

"Lord?" prompted Arshya.

Arjumand braced himself and opened his shields.

—Don't let them do this to me!—Nadira screamed.—I took nothing unwilling! Look at my memory! He gave me permission! You can't let them do this to me!—



Sickened to his core, Arjumand looked at the memory she offered him: *"Would you like to know all about it?" she asks, blood pounding in her ears. "Yes, lady Mother. If it serves the House."*

"She received the child's permission," he said, not looking at the massed kin.

"A child's permission is not sufficient," the Master replied instantly. "Only one who has been Raised and Named may grant such, as was decided in the year of the Upheaval of the Black Land. She has harmed the House, and must be Forgotten."

"Let her be Forgotten," came the muted chorus.

Kobegun stared up at Arjumand with a combination of hatred and loathing, but he said nothing mind-to-mind.

"Kobegun is silent," Arjumand reported to the Master.

"Let it be remembered: he refused to speak in his own defense, or to repent of the harm he caused the House. Let him be Forgotten."

"Let him be Forgotten!"

The echoes were allowed to die in the courtyard of stone.

"Let their blood wash away our sorrow," intoned the Master. "Let them return to the Underworld, and be Forgotten for seven generations—"

"Seven generations?" Arjumand interrupted. "I have decreed that they should be Forgotten forever!"

The Master bowed. "Lord Arjumand, you have not the final say in this matter. The House has need of all djinni for its protection. These two have proven weak and unsuitable in their present incarnations, but the experience of more mortal

lives may teach them compassion, and heal them of their wickedness. We pray it will be so, and in time, we will give them another opportunity to serve the House."

Resentful, Arjumand said nothing more. What was he supposed to do, if they would not obey him?

The Man of the Ax stepped forward. "I return you to the Underworld, Nadira bint Abdullaziz, whose True Name is Nadira. May you find the wisdom not to harm the House again." While the other men of the House held her still, he raised the shining ax high, and severed her slender neck, biting into a slab of wood positioned underneath to keep the blade from shattering on the pavement. Blood fountained, and each of the kin spat again, into the spreading crimson pool.

—Arjumand!—cried Nadira, badly startling him. Wasn't she dead?—You promised me I would live forever!—Her mental voice was fading, like the auras of dying roses in a vase.—Why did you hate me so?—

A frenzied scream exploded as her death rolled shocks of energy through him. His aura wings unfolded, as if he poised to take flight, the energy of a djinni's death filled him, agonizing and uplifting at the same time. The people of the House waited patiently for him, more familiar with this ritual and its attendant drama than he was. Finally, he fell back down to ordinary consciousness. Except he did not feel ordinary. He felt strangely satisfied, as if he'd drunk the communion cup of his Appointing once again.

"Kobegun, son of Abaqa son of Hulegu," said the Man of the Ax. "whose True Name is said to be Dumuzi, I return you

to the Underworld. May you find the wisdom not to harm the House when you return. May we meet again, lord, when you are not Forgotten."

He raised the ax, and brought it down again. The blade bit true, and Kobegun's head rolled away.

—Gold-hair!—came Kobegun's frantic mental voice.—Damn you!—But with the darkness beginning to claim him, his next statement was almost contrite.—I didn't mean to hurt the girl. At least you killed that damned woman first ...—

His spite faded in the rush of images that spilled from him:  
*... he strides by, thirteen years old and full of his own importance; the others laugh at him, and ask him how his mother is. "Has she gotten warm yet?" In his mother's tent, she screams at him for letting in the fresh steppe air, because she can't browbeat his father, Abaqa, son of Hulegu who conquered her father's city and took her as a war-prize. Kobegun flops down crosslegged beside her, and doesn't listen to her rant in Arabic. He has his own litany of complaints. Why couldn't he have had a Mongol mother? Why does she have to drink so much? She drinks like a Mongol woman, but can't hold it, vomiting and choking on the fermented mare's milk ... She clutches his fur-lined vest, vomiting up blood now. Has she been poisoned? Too soon, she lies still, staring blankly out of blue-gray eyes. "Ama!" he cries, not knowing why he does so. He's better off without her constant reminder that he's only half-Mongol. He's better off ... In the heat of the afternoon, under the shade of a dilmun tree, Dumuzi, the King, sits in judgment. The people bow down to him. Wearing his bull-crown, his lapis-lazuli pectoral,*

*he accepts the worship of the people. Inanna, the Queen, is dead. From the Underworld, she will not return. But she does return. Inanna lives again. Ninshubur, her right hand, her Vizier, drives Galla demons before her to assail the King. His sister, Geshtinanna, Maiden of the Vines, protects him. But the Galla demons find him. To the Underworld he goes...*

Brightness exploded. If Nadira's death had reminded him of his first taste of human blood at his Appointing, then Kobegun's death surpassed any experience he had ever had. He lost himself in the rush of pure power that buoyed him, carrying him, soaring, to god-like heights.

When the aftershocks finally faded, he found himself still standing in the courtyard. Blinking, he flexed his aura wings. Were they bigger now? Nadira and Kobegun were dead. They deserved to die for their crimes. He had decreed their deaths himself. He just hadn't expected to ... enjoy them so intimately.

"Lord?"

*What now?* He opened his eyes fully. A slightly blurred vision of the Master of the House stood before him.

"Lord, we appreciate your witness," said Arshya. "However, we must ask you this. 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 slurred, automatically. Thank God he remembered the proper response!

"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?"

"I swear it," Arjumand said, in no mood to promise tender fatherhood tonight, not with the awful vitality surging through his aura.

"It is well," said the Master. "As you have promised by your blood, so we bind you 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. As you open our memories, so shall we remember you."

From out of nowhere, it seemed, a brush filled with ocher, tasting like rust and dirt, passed across his lips.

"I will remember you," Arjumand swore, wishing he could fall down and sleep like the dead. He heard various scuffling steps in the darkening courtyard, dragging the two bodies away. No doubt the remains would fertilize the rosebushes that stood, thorny leafless skeletons, in pots on the far side of the courtyard. Hadn't Dominic threatened him with the same fate, once?

Sickened, energized, and woeful all at once, he hoped the ceremony was finished.

"We thank you lord, for your promise, which you have kept steadfastly. If you will join us now, we will feed you willingly, and give you rest."

The murderers were dead. Long live the murderers, for they would be permitted to return to the House in seven generations' time, no matter what the Protector of the House decreed.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Did I fear a great multitude, or did the contempt of families terrify me, that I kept silence, [and] went not out of the door?—The Book of Job 31:35*

Saturday, 1st of the Moon Rabi II, 659 AH

Gul'un Evi, Konia

Arjumand awoke in the dark before dawn. The same pretty young girl he remembered from his last visit had slipped onto the divan with him. What was her name? Too-cheh? She was another year older. The curve of her pale brown shoulder looked smooth. "Are you willing?" he asked her, carefully. He felt so full of energy. He had to spill some somewhere

"Yes, lord," she whispered into the pillow, and a ripe blush stained her neck and cheek before she gave him a bold kiss.

He let her assuage his guilt, and his sorrow, and his renewed hungers with her enthusiasm, her uncomplicated memories, and her sweet pure blood. When their brief time together came to a close, he promised he would remember her.

She put her hand on his face, tracing his features. "I will always remember you, Lord Enlil. I always have." Then she crept away, no doubt to tell her sisters and her cousins all of his shortcomings.

He contemplated the return journey he would have to make to Constantinople. Had Mathilde and the others arrived yet? What would she think of what he had just done? Exhausted again, he rolled over and slept the day away.

\* \* \* \*

Saturday, March 5, AD 1261

Constantinople

It seemed to Mathilde that spring, mild and breezy, had arrived in Constantinople before she had. It was a huge arrowhead of a city, pointed east, girded by massive walls and surrounded by a moving forest of ships. After Jocelyn de la Rose carefully negotiated the crowded approach to the northern of two harbors, and completed the necessary formalities with the city officials, they disembarked with all their baggage and the passengers they had picked up at Aegean ports along the way. Nervously, Mathilde checked her own baggage to ensure she had a full clay jar. She didn't need it now, but it helped to know it was nearby.

Amazingly, there were kin to meet them beyond the harbor gate, with mules to carry their things and gleaming horses with gorgeous tack for the Apkallu. Together in a colorful procession, they entered the city proper and headed for the House of the Rose—*Domo to Rhodon*, as it was known here.

Mathilde felt like a country bumpkin as she rode, though she had crossed the face of Europe and sailed the length of the Middle Sea by now. The enormity of this city, however fallen from its height of glory according to Cecilia, was amazing in size and scale. The entirety of Ypres, or even London, could have fit easily into a single quarter. Like all cities, its streets were slippery with dung from horses, mules, cattle, pigs, and dogs. The air reeked with decomposing fish



and rotting vegetables cast aside by vendors. But in-between the filth, she saw marvels: tile-roofed multi-story houses, fountains with statues, gardens, orchards, and awning-covered markets.

As her palfrey plodded through the throngs jostling them from every side, she gawked, drinking in impressions to transcribe in her next letter to Blanche. She missed her daughter so much. Blanche would have had so many questions about the people here. There were so many of them! And they were so varied in appearance: pink and nut-brown, ivory and sand, and occasionally the rich brown color of a mink pelt.

She hoped Blanche was doing well. After the first few notes, saying that she had successfully arrived and settled in to her new home with her young husband-to-be and his family, she had not replied to any of Mathilde's letters. Perhaps they had gone astray when Mathilde moved to London. Or was Blanche disappointed in her mother's remarriage? Or perhaps the Sieur and Lady de Bressoux wanted to remove as much of the merchant taint from their new daughter-in-law as possible. No matter the reason, Mathilde had spent many of her private moments silently grieving for the loss of contact. Perhaps, after her Appointing, she might go visit. If she survived—

With an effort, Mathilde sought to divert her thoughts. Michel would like Constantinople, too, she was certain. How much of it he would remember from his lifetime as Honoria was another matter, seeing how badly his Raising and Naming had gone...

She shook herself. Cecilia had tried to reassure her by contrasting Mathilde's circumstances with her brother's. Michel had been Raised and Named in extremity, by a djinn unaccustomed to the delicate touch required for an Apkallu. Mathilde would be properly prepared, and the event would be conducted without haste and with due solemnity. Mathilde would wear the white robe, and gaze into the bronze mirror, and remember.

That was all well and good, but Cecilia had not been able to calm Mathilde's fears about the ceremony that would come next. "Drink enough blood beforehand," did not address the deeper issues Mathilde faced. And was Cecilia the best mentor? Over the course of the last half-year, she had observed much about the Eldest that made her uneasy. Was she truly Mathilde's friend? After concealing Michel's disappearance, and forbidding disclosure of Mathilde's nature? After treating Michel like a wayward youth, and dragging Dominic across half of Asia for a decade to kill slaves for her carnal pleasure?

She glanced at Dominic, riding half-a-length ahead. Through the link they shared, she felt him concentrating, examining every angle of approach, by rooftop, street, alley, and sewer that attackers might take to overcome their party. Dominic looked back at her, and reined his palfrey in until she caught up. "Have you caught a chill, my dear?" he asked solicitously, for the benefit of witnesses. Mind-to-mind, he said:—You're worried. It's casting your entire aura into shadow.—

They were on a narrow street between rows of tall houses, the sky reduced to a narrow strip of pale blue overhead. "Just a bit," she replied.

Mind-to-mind, so that Cecilia, riding up ahead with Captain Jocelyn de la Rose, could not overhear, he reminded her:—You can always refuse the Raising and Naming.—We've discussed this, and my intention remains unchanged,—she replied. That was true enough. It was a risk she had to take, if she were ever to find a way to heal her husband. And to keep him. *If* she kept him.

—I'll stand by you, whatever you decide.—"The past is over and done," he said. "It cannot hurt you unless you give it the power to do so."

She murmured an acknowledgment, clasping his hand for a moment in gratitude. His guarded pleasure in the gesture came clearly through their link, but she was not comforted. The past was never more than a breath away for Apkallu.

And wasn't Roland an Apkallu, too? She felt a guilty thrill at their impending reunion. What kind of man had he become? Cecilia was incensed at his foolishness at refusing Raising and Naming, but it gave Mathilde hope that he had not changed too much from the cousin she remembered. *Will he remember me?* Would he find her attractive still? She knew her fancies were ill-advised, and inconstant. But sometimes wondered what would it be like to make love fully with another djinn. She glanced sideways at Dominic, her husband as far as the world was concerned. Just not in his own heart, or body.

She owed one duty to Roland that she could not put aside, but after that ... She could not imagine.

\* \* \* \*

It was a full mile from the harbor to the House of the Rose in Constantinople, which was a sprawling collection of four three-story brick buildings, each clustered around its own central courtyard. The foul odors and clamor from the street were miraculously muted as soon as the gates were swung shut behind them, leaving only the sweet scent of roses, together with a bit of smoke and the distant rushing sound of the city, like waves breaking against a rocky shore.

Mathilde slid from her saddle and stood as people dressed in brilliantly-colored clothing poured out of several doors. Geoffrey and Joan de la Rose, who had accompanied Mathilde from London, dismounted and exchanged embraces with the various kin clustered around them, while Mathilde scanned the paved courtyard in search of Roland's tall, golden-haired form. *He's called Arjumand now*, she reminded herself. But he did not appear.

Young men gathered the horses and mules, leading them to the ground-floor stables. Then several of the elders of the House emerged to greet the Apkallu with bows and many repetitions of "It is good to meet again!" Mathilde understood the Greek they spoke, although her replies weren't nearly as fluent as Dominic's or Cecilia's. During the weeks at sea, Dominic had used their blood bond to teach her Greek, Arabic, Italian, and Spanish (and hadn't that been an *interesting* tour through his memories!).

After a short welcoming speech by Theodoros, the Master of this House, their hosts solemnly led the travelers into a large, columned reception hall. Then the Master approached Cecilia, wearing an anxious expression. He spoke too softly for Mathilde to hear what he said, but Cecilia's aura dimmed visibly, and her benevolent smile vanished.

—Bad news,—Dominic reported.—The new djinni are dead.—

Dead? Both of them? Hadn't one of them been Apkallu? Weren't they supposed to be immortal? What about Roland? But Dominic offered no further comment.

The far side of the hall was dominated by a fantastic carved chair—*no, a throne*, thought Mathilde—placed on a low dais. It was occupied by a tiny, brown-skinned woman, apparently young but crowned with the blazing aura-wings of a djinniah. As they entered, she rose, straightening her long sleeves nervously, and ceded her seat with a deep bow to Cecilia, who accepted this as her due and offered her cheek for a kiss.

"Sharibet, it is good to meet again." Mind-to-mind, she spoke.—Good-sister, come. Join me in receiving the greetings of the House.—

Conscious of her travel-stained clothing and the layer of salt on her skin, Mathilde allowed Sharibet to kiss her cheek. Formalities exchanged, Mathilde took her place, Dominic at her side, flanking Cecilia, facing the hall, which was rapidly filling with dark-haired men and women, all dressed in their embroidered and brocaded best.

A chorus rose of "Great Lady! Lord Dominic! It is good to meet again!" Despite the shouts, the overwhelming mood was of mourning.

Mathilde wondered again what kind of disaster could claim not one but two djinni, and had to suppress a shiver.

"It is good to meet again," Cecilia said gravely. The room quieted. "Sharibet, I rejoice to present to you, and to your children, Ninharsag, called Mathilde le Pelletier in this life."

"It is good to meet again, Lady Mathilde," Sharibet said, bowing.

As Mathilde bowed, Cecilia spoke again, "People of the House, Lady Mathilde has passed her probation, mastered her djinn powers, and proved herself a worthy Protector of the House on our journey here. With her consent, I shall Raise and Name her so that she may remember who she was." She paused for the gathered onlookers to murmur, "May she remember us," before continuing. "I remember you, Lost One. You are now Found," she said directly to Mathilde. "You are Ninharsag, Lady of the Mountains, and my dear sister. I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?"

"Yes, I will let you in," Mathilde replied, loudly enough for her reply to be heard by all.

Sharibet raised her arms, dozens of glittering gold bangles chiming. "Let the House rejoice! Another Apkallu has been found!" The assembly's approval, though whole-hearted, was muted.

—What's going on?—Mathilde asked Cecilia.—Dominic said the other djinni died!—

Cecilia replied, her vexation evident.—Kobegun and Nadira killed two of the kin and fled. Arjumand pursued them to Konia, where they were executed for their crimes.—

Mathilde tried to summon a suitable response to this awful news. All that came to mind was: *That means I will be the only one undergoing the Appointing.*

Her mind whirling with shock, she endured the next half-hour with Dominic's support at her elbow, as Theodoros formally offered the hospitality of his House to the newly-arrived travelers. Finally, Mathilde, Dominic, and Cecilia were escorted upstairs, where clean clothing and jars of blood waited in the djinni's apartments.

*I'll wash my hands and face in just a moment,* Mathilde thought, drinking deeply of the jars left for her. She set the last one down, and let herself sink onto the soft bed in the chamber that she and Dominic had been given. *I'll go bathe ...* She tumbled down into the dark sea of sleep before she could even disrobe.

\* \* \* \*

*...She flew, and sang, and her voice made the forests and the hillsides greener. Her song brought fish leaping to the surface of the rivers. Her music brought people to dance together, male and female, in the timeless union of creation. She sang, and laughed, and saw that it was good...*

Mathilde awoke reluctantly from her dream, burning with ravenous hunger. Still half-asleep, she groped for the table beside the bed.

Holy Mother be thanked! Someone had indeed left additional jars of blood for her. She disentangled herself from the sheets that twined around her limbs like winding-cloths, disappointed to sense that Dominic was not in the bed with her. She cradled the first jar to her breast, and drank eagerly, feeling her hunger subside.

A short time later, Cecilia knocked and entered, seating herself in a large chair beside the bed, as she had done all those times when Mathilde had been ill. Her sweet, deceptively young face was set in grave lines, and she looked fatigued. "Good evening, dear sister," Cecilia said with solemn formality. Then she fell silent.

Alarmed, Mathilde set the empty jar back onto the table. Had some new disaster befallen the House while she napped?

Cecilia sighed. "Tomorrow is the day you shall be Raised and Named. Are you still willing?"

"Of course I am. What's wrong?" asked Mathilde.

Cecilia gave a slight shake of her head "Nothing. Arjumand hasn't returned yet from his errand, and I wondered if you wanted to wait for him."

"Yes, please," Mathilde said, with more confidence than she felt. "I know he refused Raising and Naming, and I want to ask him about it. I want to remember who I've been, and what I used to know. Why doesn't he?"

Cecilia shrugged, and smoothed her sable hair, which had been parted and pinned into two heavy coils over her ears. "I've never understood, myself. If you can persuade him..." She stood gracefully. "Let's meet after you have finished your



bath. I'll show you the House, and introduce you to the kin." She moved toward the door.

"Wait!" Mathilde called. "Where shall I go to bathe?"

Pausing with her hand on the latch, Cecilia said, "Someone will come and show you the way." Then she was gone.

Only then did Mathilde notice that Dominic had joined her at some point this afternoon. The other side of the bed bore distinct signs of having been slept on, and someone had removed her gown and tucked her in.

On impulse, she opened her mental link to him.—Fresh warm blood filled his mouth, and his mind was filled with: *the scent of rosewater and incense, while golden mosaics glitter on the domed walls, and a voice whispers the names and positions of the court officials attending Mass at the Hagia Sophia ... then a much smaller room, its walls painted red. Bright sunshine enters through arched windows and someone is saying, "The eparch of our district is named Psellos. He is a corrupt man who regularly demands we pay fines for taking on foreign apprentices in our perfumery. Father Constantine is currently priest of the Church of the Holy Apostles ... "*—

The flow of memories and images halted abruptly as Dominic noticed her presence.—Mathilde! What are you doing?—Eavesdropping, unfortunately,—she admitted.—What were you doing?—Getting an update on the current situation in the city from Theodoros.—She heard Dominic say to Master, "You have done well. I thank you for your excellent information."

"May your wisdom protect the House."

—I just hope it does,—Dominic said to her.—So what did you want?—The tender tone of his thought robbed his question of harshness, but she still felt intrusive as she said,—Cecilia woke me and you weren't here.—You found me at an awkward moment. All is well now, I hope?—Yes,—she said doubtfully.—But I'd like a bath soon.—

She felt his smile.—Would you like company?—he asked.

—If you please, my lord. I don't know how to find the bath-house. Cecilia said someone would come to find me.—Well,—He sent an impression of a wicked smile.—I'm someone.—I'll be waiting.—

She closed the link, feeling guilty about requesting his company when he was surely busy with other matters, and wondered again what dislocations her reunion with Roland would bring.

\* \* \* \*

Flying at night. Arjumand was growing accustomed to it. The moon shone brightly, transforming the occasional lakes and rivers below into pools of quicksilver. He might have enjoyed having the leisure to fly at his own pace tonight, if he weren't so filled with dread at facing Mathilde and Dominic.

Mathilde. He remembered her more clearly than the agreeable young woman he'd bedded yesterday. Mathilde, her hair yellow as seasoned hay, her blue eyes closed with ecstasy, her breasts rosy with his kisses ... He'd locked these memories away so firmly that he'd almost eliminated them.  
*Almost.*

Now there was no reason for him to deny himself the bittersweet pleasure of remembrance. She had probably arrived in Constantinople by now.

He caught himself increasing his pace, and deliberately slowed down. He didn't want to be anywhere near any other djinni just at the moment, not with the life energies of Nadira and Kobegun still swirling through his aura, infusing a heady sense of power that both exhilarated and sickened him.

But he wanted to see Mathilde! His own dear, sweet lady—

He squelched that thought. *Never mine. Never mine alone.* Even now, she was married—the very thought made him ill—to Dominic. The only thing that kept his gut from dissolving, surprising the hell out of whoever might find his bloody puke fallen from heaven on the morrow, was the faint hope that she had married Dominic in name only.

That was about as likely as his puke coming up roses. Shit! He didn't want to picture them together. He didn't want anything to do with the djinni, or the damned Apkallu, or...

He concentrated on breathing, on calming the hum of energy that flowed through him like moonlight and fire, and on flying though the mild spring air.

\* \* \* \*

Sunday, March 6 AD 1261

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

Mathilde rose very early, having slept badly, although Dominic had done his best to relax her. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't complete the act of djinni lovemaking. She stood

beside his sleeping form, and brushed a lock of his heavy dark hair off his forehead. It was her fault. Her ignorance.

Sudden dizziness receded with another jar of blood. She dressed carefully in the beautiful clothing that had been laid out for her. She had a difficult interview to survive. Roland was due back from Konia before dawn and she wanted to talk to him before anybody else. They had matters to discuss that need not be aired at full volume in front of the House.

She climbed the stairs to the roof, and left her message with the watcher. Then she settled herself in the private room called the Red Solar. There, she waited, planning what she would say to Roland when he came. Hoping he would come soon, before she lost her nerve. Hoping he would be reasonable when he heard her news. Hoping that he was still the handsome youth of her memories, though she felt ancient, and worn.

She thought briefly of Dominic, sleeping in their bedchamber. But she put his image firmly aside, and concentrated on what she was going to say to Roland—*Arjumand, now*, she reminded herself. It was time to put the past to rest, and to start building the future.

\* \* \* \*

Arjumand crossed the Bosphorus well before dawn. The moon had set hours ago, but the dark walls embracing the city were illuminated by torches in various places, and the great domes of the Hagia Sophia reflected the starlight. The neighborhood's miasma, a pungent reek mixed with the floral and musky scents from the perfumer's shops near the

imperial palace, hit him well before he landed on the roof of the House of the Rose.

The pigeons woke and cooed nervously as he touched down. Thus alerted, the watcher scrambled from his drowsing seat against the dovecote, and bowed deeply. "Lord Arjumand! It is good to meet again!"

Arjumand recognized the rooftop guard as one of the recently Raised and Named young men. "I remember you, Niketas—who-was-Eusebios. It is good to meet again." He waited a polite moment before asking: "Have they arrived?"

"The Lady Cecilia arrived safely with Lord Dominic and Lady Mathilde and their escorts yesterday," Niketas replied. "Mother Sharibet said to tell you, from her, 'Thank you.' She said you would know why."

"Thank you for the message," Arjumand said, wanting to shake Sharibet by the throat. "Where can I find her?"

"She is attending Lady Cecilia in the djinni's apartments. Oh—I have another message for you!"

Pausing with his foot on the first rung of the ladder, Arjumand said curtly, "What?"

Niketas swallowed nervously. "It's the Lady Mathilde. She says that she waits to greet you in the Red Solar."

*Oh, hell.* He groaned silently. Not now, not when he felt so ... unclean ... with the vitality of Nadira and Kobegun's death-energy still rippling through his aura like waves of intoxication from a foul liquor. "Thank you again."

He trod the familiar maze of the house until a soft flutter of candlelight drew him to the open door. He stopped there, hoping to catch a glimpse of her face, her dearly-remembered

features, before she noticed him. But in her quiet reading she had heard his footsteps. She looked up before he could feast his eyes, and smiled tentatively.

"Mathilde," he said, before she could speak. "You're here." His voice broke, as it had when he was seventeen.

She set down her book, stood, and curtseyed to him, as if they were strangers, and said in the *langue d'oïl* of his youth, "Roland. It is good to meet again." She was changed, almost beyond recognition, but with her smile, all the pieces suddenly fell into place.

"I never dreamed that we would see each other again, especially not like this," he said when he knew his voice wouldn't fail him. His native tongue felt strange in his mouth, after speaking Arabic, Turkish, and Greek for so long. "But it *is* good to see you."

She laughed. "And you still look exactly as I remember you!" She held her hands out to him, and for a moment, she was once again the beautiful young cousin he had loved.

"So do you," he lied gallantly. Taking the slender fingers she proffered, he pulled her close for a hearty kiss. Her mouth was as soft and hot as he remembered, and he felt her arms come around his shoulders. She pressed against him, and returned his kiss with hungry intensity. She was here, *really* here, and in his arms! His senses filled with the smell and taste and feel of her: soft skin and softer hair; the scratch of the gold-thread embroidery and hard, round pearls on her sleeves; her lips and tongue working against his and—oh God!—her *teeth* as her mouth left his and traveled to his

jaw, and then his throat, nipping lightly but not breaking the skin.

Oh, God, what was he doing? Hadn't he just yielded to his despair and taken advantage of that girl in Konia? And now, he was ready to do the same to Mathilde!

Reluctantly, he broke the kiss though not the embrace, and stood trying to catch his breath, his cheek resting against the top of her head, where the sapphire-and-pearl pins fastening her veil dug into his cheek. He had to control himself. If he let this go any further, she would know everything ... everything he had done, and felt, and experienced.... *Blood fountains, and each of the kin spit again, into the spreading crimson pool...*

No, he couldn't! And he didn't want to be forced to see what her life had been like, married first to a common furrier and then to Dominic. With a gasp, he stepped away from her, and instantly missed her warmth, her softness.

She looked puzzled, and hurt, by his withdrawal, and reached up to trace his cheekbone and jaw, her fingertips scented with the familiar oil of roses. "What's wrong?"

Upon her face he saw the marks of years of illness. She was far too thin, with lines of pain and the fear of death finely-etched around her mouth and in the corners of her eyes. But to him, she was beautiful still, especially with her lips slightly swollen and her cheeks flushed from their kiss.

"It's just—you're married! To Dominic!"

"But I want—I was looking forward to—what about the way of the djinni? Don't you want—? Or am I too old, too changed?" She looked ready to cry.

"What?" She wanted what? God's Nails—no! Though he couldn't believe he was rejecting her! "No. No! You're still one of the most beautiful—"

"Then why not?" Tears swam in those flax-flower eyes, and he was suddenly transported to a time, years ago, when she had sat by his bedside, and begged him to become her lover. Back then, he had been young and heedless enough not to care about the consequences. But now ... *I don't want to burden you with Nadira and Kobegun. Bad enough that one of us had to live through it.*

"I cannot."

"Just once," she whispered. "Please, Roland. Before I'm Raised and Named and Appointed, I want to know what it feels like to truly join with another djinn. Dominic has been very kind to me, but ... his injuries..." She stopped, and began to turn away.

He caught her and raised her hand to his lips, spitefully glad to hear of Dominic's impotence. "I'm sorry, Mathilde," he said, and he meant it.

She bit her lower lip, and looked down at her feet. An awkward silence followed.

In a poor attempt to change the subject, he asked the thing that had troubled him since he first received news: "I'm overjoyed to see you, but why did you consent to Transformation? I received your letter. You wrote me you were dying! Why would you agree to take such a risk? Did—did anyone—" *Dominic*, "—compel you?"

"No one compelled me. I was given hope, a chance, and I took it. After all, I had very little to lose," she said with a



practicality that was foreign to Arjumand's memory of her.  
"And now I am here, alive and ... well."

"And Dominic?" Oh, how he hated to bring him into the conversation, yet the other djinn's presence cast a long shadow over this reunion.

"Has been nothing but kind to me, and a good husband." Her gaze fell again, and Arjumand knew that she was keeping something from him. And he thought he knew what it was.

He pressed on. "Doesn't it disgust you that he's obsessed with Michel? That he wants to bugger him?"

Her mouth tightened at his vulgarity, but he didn't care. Had she expected him to kiss her cheek and wish her well in her new life? *No, by God's Nails.* He had received more ill news this week than anyone had the right to expect in ten lifetimes, and he needed to make sure that he could at least protect *someone*.

"I married Dominic according to the way of the world, and I consort with him in the way of djinni to repair the harm that was done to him." She continued: "Our union was approved by the House. I will—" She stopped speaking for a long moment, studying him with palpable sadness. "I will not make any decisions about our consortship until after my Appointing."

A shadow passed over her aura, and he knew what she was afraid of.... *While the other men of the House hold her still, he raises the shining ax high, and severs her slender neck, biting into a slab of wood positioned underneath to keep the blade from shattering on the pavement.*

"Of course." Stepping back, he wrapped his arms around his own waist, to keep from reaching for her. *Damn tradition!* If only there were something he could do about it.

"What I feel for him has nothing to do with you. Or my brother," she said, with just a hint of defensiveness.

*Ha!* Dominic's predilections did disturb her. Well, that was probably the only piece of welcome news about the other djinn that he was going to get. And she had just touched on the other thing that troubled him greatly: "Speaking of Michel, why would he forsake his vows to the Templars? That doesn't seem like him. What part did Dominic play?"

"I—I don't know," she admitted. "But Michel seems well enough, he and Tirgit. He's the one who bade me to join the House. His relationship with Dominic has been ... troubled at times, but I believe he finds his life as a Protector satisfying."

"Troubled?" Arjumand stared at her. "In what way?"

"There were some problems with his Raising and Naming," Mathilde said. "Dominic did it, and made a mistake. He's very sorry about it," she added quickly, as Arjumand's hands curled into fists, "And I think there were compelling reasons not to wait for Cecilia, and in any case Michel has forgiven Dominic and you should not involve yourself in this matter," she finished, breathlessly.

She put her hand on his arm, looking fearful, and Arjumand wondered what she saw in his face, or his aura, at her news. So Dominic *had* been involved, and Michel had been injured because of it! He would—

"Please," said Mathilde, in a pleading tone, and he was suddenly angry at her, too, for taking Dominic's side.

"As long as Michel is satisfied and well-content," Arjumand forced himself to say, but he wanted to gather the lightning as he'd learned how to do, and watch Dominic shrivel for his sins. "And what of your—*our*—daughter?"

"You knew!" She shrank away from him.

"I had to guess, when the news arrived," he said, surprised how much it still hurt that she hadn't told him.

"You were long-gone by then, and the news was too dangerous to commit to parchment," she shot back.

"I wanted to stay," he defended himself. "But your husband—"

"Fool!" she said, sounding so like Sharibet that he grimaced. "You left on Crusade, but I could have been burned as an adulteress for what we did!"

"And we were both young, and mortal," he finished. "It's too late for anything but regrets. But if I had to do it again, Mathilde, I would stay and fight for you."

She bowed her head. "Thank you." She swallowed. "Blanche is a quick-witted child, but good and obedient. She's to be married, to a boy from a noble family. And he's even of an age with her, so I haven't sent her to an old man's bed..."

*Not like you, married to a man in his forties before you reached your fifteenth year.* "I know," he said, taking her hand again. "Have you heard from her? Is she well?"

"I received two letters after she departed for the Bressoux estate, but nothing since last spring," Mathilde said. "Perhaps it's because I moved to London, though Josef de la Rose has been prompt in forwarding me other correspondence. Or perhaps the Lord and Lady de Bressoux want Blanche to

forget that she's a furrier's daughter. In that case, perhaps it's for the best..."

But she looked miserable at the prospect, and Arjumand agreed with her. God's Nails, in a few years, he might even have grandchildren, and wouldn't that be an amazing thing! If it happened, he wanted to know about it.

"You could always ask Matthias at the Liege House to call upon her," Arjumand suggested. "Perhaps with a gift of ink and paper, to remind her that she owes her mother some correspondence."

This made Mathilde smile, finally. "I don't want to interfere in her new life, but it would ease my heart to know that she is well, and happy," she said wistfully.

"Well, then, consider it done," he said, with a bow, and his heart lightened to hear her chuckle.

They sat, side by side, on the cushioned bench, and Arjumand poured them both a goblet from the jug left thoughtfully on a tray. After the flight from Konia, he was hungry, and it felt good to sit with Mathilde—*his* Mathilde, here at last—in comfortable silence.

The serenity was short-lived, however. After several goblets (with Mathilde matching him, gulp for gulp), she said, "Cecilia told me that you chose not to be Raised and Named. Isn't it difficult to serve as Protector without all of your memories? Why don't you—?"

"Did she send you here to try to change my mind? Well, it won't work," he snapped, and stopped abruptly at the shock and hurt on her face. Useless to try and explain it—she wouldn't understand, not when there weren't words to

express the bone-deep revulsion he felt at the idea of carrying still more memories of mistakes he'd made and people he'd failed.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "It's just—I wonder what it feels like, to remember everything."

"I don't *want* to remember everything," Arjumand blurted. "It's hard enough, just carrying the memories of *this* lifetime. I don't want the burden of a hundred, no, a thousand other lifetimes. Sometimes I think that's what's wrong with the House—they all remember too damned much, and it keeps them from seeing clearly!"

From the wide-eyed shock on her face, he knew he had just spoken blasphemy. "But what of the things you knew that could help the ones you love?" she asked.

*None of Enlil's memories could have kept you out of the House's clutches.* "Mathilde," he said, finally, when the silence had grown thick between them. "You must do as you see fit. If you want to be Raised and Named, then do it. Lady Cecilia and the others will be pleased."

She remained silent, worrying the pearl centers of the gold-embroidered flowers on her sleeves.

He sighed and dragged himself to his feet. "Mathilde, it is good to meet again, truly."

He wished he'd had a chance to start over with her, but each of them knew too much, had done too much. What a fool he had been, to think that their reunion could be anything but bittersweet! Their pasts had opened an unbridgable gulf between them.

His own chambers were quiet and dark behind closed shutters. In the world outside, dawn was breaking, ghostly fingers of light wiping away the eastern stars. On the table by his bed sat three sealed jugs. He cracked them, one by one, and drank them all.

\* \* \* \*

Dominic didn't say anything as Mathilde entered their suite. He was reading a tattered scroll, and looked as if he had woken a short time ago. The sky outside was growing steadily lighter, and she smelled the first hint of smoke from the ovens on the far side of the courtyard. Silently, he helped her remove all her finery, then removed his own tunic. Clad only in his long linen shirt, he lay down beside her in the big, soft bed.

She rested the back of her hand on her forehead. She wasn't sure what she felt, in the aftermath of her conversation with Roland. Anger? Disappointment? Sadness that he was a stranger to her now?

Emptiness? Definitely emptiness, after looking forward to their reunion for such a long time. Why had he refused her? He'd wanted her, if that kiss they had shared was any indication ... and his excuse about her marriage to Dominic had seemed just an excuse.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Dominic murmured, after some time had passed.

"No. Not yet," she said, grateful that he asked.

He stretched out, and she could feel his gaze through her skin. He lay quietly, as if he waited without much hope for the delivery of bad tidings.

She reached out to take his hand. "I just needed to talk to Ro—Arjumand about Michel. And Blanche."

"Blanche, your daughter?"

Of course he'd never met her. Cecilia had made sure Blanche was betrothed and sent away to live with her new in-laws before he arrived in Ypres. "Yes. He wanted to know whether Blanche was—"

"—his daughter, too?" Dominic completed her sentence. He chuckled at her shocked reaction. "Michel suspects it. I saw it in his blood."

"There are no secrets between djinni, are there?" she murmured.

"I am well-acquainted with that feeling," he said, rolling to face her. He offered her a brief touch, mind-to-mind, just enough to prove that his were not empty words.

She forced herself to give him a seductive smile, though she did not feel anything but weary at this moment. But she did not want to dwell on what had just happened—or not-happened—between her and Roland.

He returned her smile, placing a hand on her hip, adjusting to the shift in her mood with a kiss. Despite her fatigue, she deepened the kiss. *You are my consort, and my husband. I should give you what happiness I can.*

So with lips, and hands, and all the generative power she knew how to apply, she strove to make him happy for an hour, and to forget that she had wanted Roland in her bed

this morning. They fell asleep in each other's arms just as the House began to stir at the beginning of another day.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, clad in a heavy silk gown they called a dalmatica, Mathilde left the djinni's apartments, ready to face her Raising and Naming.

Dominic took her arm as they descended the stairs and she smiled, shakily.—Don't worry,—he assured her.—You've done this many times before.—

That was one of the things she feared. How could Mathilde le Pelletier, noblewoman, adulteress, and furrier's widow, compare to her former selves? How would she feel, remembering herself as a goddess?

Dominic squeezed her elbow.—Be grateful it won't take you forty years to get your memories back.—

She choked on a scandalized giggle. Dominic's shared memories of his extended recuperation from the massacre at Beziers had both horrified and fascinated her. How could he have endured the daily pain of Sharibet feeding him seven thousand years of memories, moment by moment? Somehow he had endured. She could do no less for the space of a single hour.

—All will be well,—he repeated comfortingly.

They reached the splendid reception hall where they had been received by Sharibet yesterday. Mathilde regretted that she hadn't been able to exchange more than four words with the matriarch of the House; she had wanted to get to know Sharibet better before she remembered too much about her.



Dominic and Mathilde entered through tall cypress-wood doors, to find the frescoed hall crowded with the dark-haired, amber-eyed people of the House. The similarity of their features brought to mind the weddings and funerals of her own kin, also uniform in a blond and blue-eyed mold. She put aside the thoughts of her parents, her aunts, uncles, and cousins with regret. From now on, this family would be her family, to watch over, and to protect with her life, if necessary.

She blinked away the sting of tears. Her decision had already been made, months ago. Truly, she wouldn't be parted from all of her former family. She still had Michel and Roland, who was already in attendance, looking uncomfortable, and absurdly young. The room erupted into cheers as she and Dominic proceeded toward the dais. It all felt so strange, and yet so familiar. They came to the space before the throne. Cecilia sat there like an empress, her expression calm and serene, but a brief glimpse through Seer's eyes showed Mathilde that Cecilia's aura was fully extended. She was flanked by two djinniah, Sharibet and another petite, dark-haired kinswoman that Mathilde did not recall meeting.—Leila,—supplied Dominic.

Mathilde felt like a giantess as she faced Sharibet and Cecilia—and like a maid in terms of her youth compared to them. How old were they in combination? Some absurd number of millennia, according to Dominic. The idea of it staggered her. Mathilde's hand sought Dominic's. She needn't fear, she told herself, for the hundredth time. Cecilia knew what to do. Mathilde would not end up with her memories in

disarray, not like poor Michel. With regret, she felt Dominic release her hand as she stepped forward, alone, to stand at the foot of the dais. She swallowed dryly. It was almost time.

The hall fell silent as Cecilia spoke. "I remember you, Ninharsag, my sister, known as Mathilde le Pelletier in this life. I will be the Opener of the Way for you. For the second time, I ask you: will you let me in?"

"Yes, my sister," Mathilde replied, grateful her voice didn't shake.

Cecilia stood, clad in deep blue silk, the panels embroidered with silver thread and pearls. "When you return to face these, our family, you will remember them."

"May you remember us!" came the chorus from the assembled crowd.

They cheered again as Cecilia left the dais and led Mathilde into a parlor that opened from the hall. It was lit with dozens of candles, hung with tapestries, and furnished with a couple of thickly-cushioned chairs. Cecilia shut the door behind her and then they were alone.

"Do sit down. Relax, dear sister," said Cecilia.

Mathilde forced herself to smile. "No more ritual?"

Cecilia inclined her head. "You and I have no need of it."

The chair was as comfortable as it looked. Mathilde leaned back into its soft embrace as Cecilia came to stand slightly behind and beside her. She gently stripped away the gossamer veil covering Mathilde's hair and cast it onto a nearby table, where it floated down like a cobweb. With skilled fingers, she began to undo the tight braiding pulling at

Mathilde's scalp. She pulled out pins, loosened her hair, and brushed it until it glowed.

Mathilde sighed blissfully, feeling her nervous tension unwind. Cecilia's gentle touch made her feel safe, warm, loved.

"Are you willing for me to open to door of your memory, my sister?" Cecilia murmured, close to her ear.

"Mmmm," Mathilde said. Not a firm yes, but an assent nonetheless.

Cecilia placed a strong, slender forearm across Mathilde's upper bosom, holding Mathilde's right shoulder with her left hand. Precisely, firmly, she tilted Mathilde's head. "Three times you have been asked, and three times you have assented."

The pain in the side of her throat, so different from the feel of Dominic's teeth, startled Mathilde, but she was held fast to the chair. Enormous wings wrapped around her, immobilizing her, focusing her senses. Then she saw a dagger fashioned of silver light coming straight at her eyes. Panicked, Mathilde tried to stop it with a hand of air, but found she could not. She was bound. Helpless. She tried to scream, but the sound was trapped in her chest. She tried to escape, but she could no longer move. She was frightened now, really frightened, and about to beg Cecilia to stop.

Cecilia's voice rang in her mind.—I remember you, my sister. Do you wish to remember, also?—Yes!—*Please let it go quickly...*

—Then, remember.—

## Chapter Sixteen

*The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot.—Proverbs, 10:7*

Sunday, March 6, AD 1261

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople

The reception hall, stuffy with the press of kin, remained silent even after the door had closed behind Mathilde and Cecilia. Only shuffling and the occasional cough broke the expectant hush.

As the minutes ticked by, Arjumand fought to ignore Dominic's saturnine presence on the dais, and to keep his attention on the door, waiting for Cecilia and Mathilde to reappear. What was happening in there? Would he still recognize Mathilde when she re-emerged? Or would the clamor of all her lifetimes drown out the voice that was uniquely hers in this lifetime?

But try as he might, he could not banish the image of Mathilde clinging to Dominic's hand. By all that was fair, she should have turned to Arjumand for comfort! How could she share his bed, knowing what she did about the murdered children in Venice, and his foul desire for her brother?

What was Cecilia doing in there? Why was it taking so long?

He stole a glance at Dominic. The other djinn wore an appropriately somber expression ... until he saw Arjumand looking at him. Then his mouth curled up in that familiar,

hateful smirk. His smile declared, *I won. I took the woman you loved, and she shares my bed now, not yours.*

It was the last straw. "You bastard!" howled Arjumand, and to his own astonishment, saw his fist fly out and connect with Dominic's jaw. There was a satisfying crack, and an even more gratifying expression of complete astonishment on Dominic's face as he stumbled backwards.

"What—what have I done?" Dominic asked, looking genuinely bewildered as he ducked Arjumand's next blow.

The reception hall erupted in gasps, and shouts of, "Lord, lord, stop it! Lord, please!"

"Everything I loved, you've polluted!" Arjumand shouted. He was flailing wildly now, trying to land another blow on that hated visage, but Dominic was evading him with maddeningly fluid movements. "Stand still and fight me, you coward! You owe me for what you did to Michel! What you're doing to Mathilde! You think I don't know that you're just using her to get to—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Dominic was suddenly behind him, wrenching Arjumand's right arm around high on his back, forcing him up on tiptoes—and off-balance. A forearm locked around his throat. "What business is it of yours, why I consort with Mathilde, and she with me?"

"Gk." Arjumand could barely breathe, much less reply to that low voice in his ear.

"And as for Michel, I owe you nothing. I have made my peace with him."

Arjumand waited for Dominic to taunt him, but the other djinn said nothing more. The strangling hold eased gradually,

and Arjumand was able to draw a full breath again. With the flow of air, came the realization that he had just made a fool of himself in front of the assembled kin ... and that Dominic had won the fight without a single blow.

"Lord, lord," Theodoros was wringing his hands. "This is terrible! Why do you fight with our guest?"

*Because I hate him, for having abetted in bringing Michel and Mathilde into this damned House.* The heavy thwack of the decapitations he had witnessed echoed in his ears, and the shadow of the ax touched Arjumand's soul. If the kin thought he had gone mad, he might not live to see Mathilde's Appointing.

But, in the end, he said only, "Lord Dominic, I apologize and beg your forgiveness. It has been a difficult week," each word dragging splinters of glass on its way out of his throat, until he felt raw and bleeding with necessity to humble himself before this djinn, and the kin.

"I understand," Dominic said, solemnly, and kissed Arjumand on the cheek to signal his acceptance of the apology.

But it was tradition that all the Apkallu treat each other as family, and so Arjumand must grit his teeth and bow to tradition, yet again. *Damn!*

\* \* \* \*

The insubstantial dagger plunged into Mathilde's head and—oh, God—cut something loose. The pain was fierce but quickly vanished. Memories came in a rush: *The wedding guests carry Raymond-Soleil, hoisted onto their shoulders,*

*into the bridal chamber to the accompaniment of whistles and lewd advice. "Have you drunk enough? You'll need your strength! If you're pale and white in the morning, we'll know she wore you out!"*

Earlier:

*He sits in a tavern, listening to a blind singer weave a tale of a thousand ships, ten thousand Achaeans arrayed before the walls of Troy. He remembers a different story: the gods working futilely to avert war, to coerce or frighten the warriors into going home. Now the Hellenes sail everywhere, have colonies in all the lands around the Middle Sea, and only the Phoenicians challenge them...*

And earlier:

*The tiled floor of the hall, held up by great, lotus-crowned columns, is slick with fresh blood. The dying no longer shout with rebellion, refusing to till the lands they have been given, or threatening to pull down the gods with their puny sharpened sticks. On his jeweled throne, Lord Ra presides over the deaths of the defiant. It was he who requested the aid of his powerful sister, known in her gentle aspect as Hathor. But she has another face, that of Sekhmet, the vengeful. As Lord Ra frowns in terrible judgment, she smites the ungrateful evildoers gathered in his temple. She goes forth to rend their kindred's flesh like a lioness. Let her gifts to men return to the earth. Let their blood make the soil of the fields fertile. Sekhmet quarters the nome, rooting out rebellion and slaying all who dare oppose the gods, until she finds a field full of an unlikely crop: jars of clay. Opening one jar, she samples its contents: beer brewed from her gift of*

*barley; lamb's blood; and mandrake root, which substitutes for man in rituals of magic. Her ire fades. The sons of man are assuring her that her gifts of grain and fruit are cherished once again. She falls to her knees, weeping for the destruction she has caused.*

And earlier:

*She is flying. Below her, a step-sided temple rises from the plain, caught in a shining net of canals. The midday sun shines hot across her back. The farmers in the fields below, harvesting grain, look up as her slender shadow falls on them. Their voices cry out, "Great Lady of the Mountains! Give our fields life!" She raises her hands in blessing, her heart filled with worry for them.*

And earlier:

*In her carefully cultivated garden, she checks her newly Transformed seedlings with anxious Seer's eyes. Have the minute differences she wrought in their basic substance resulted in the changes she intended? Will their fruits ripen into food that will better feed her people? She stares, disbelieving, at the stripped and gutted remnants of her plantings.—Who did this?—she cries in fury.—Damgalnunna,—Ea replies, using his cherish-name for her. He alights in the garden, his mouth stained with juice, his alchemical apron splotched with green plant blood. He bends, as if to kiss her with the taint of his betrayal painting his lips.—I needed these for my—She slaps him with her hand of air, hard.—Never take what is mine!—she tells him, the memory of their fiery nights of passion burning cold with resentment. Her work, so painstakingly wrought, so difficult!*



*She takes up the remnants of her handiwork, eight plants that might have fed her children, and with her hands of air, twists them again, into Ea's body. His mouth blisters, his throat swells up, his eyes film, the skin of his arms crusts over, his hands weep blood, his genitals shrivel, his knees lock.—For your perfidy I curse you,—she pronounces.—Let the signs of your need for my gifts remain until you appreciate what they could do for others, if not for you.—He gasps with his sudden illness, and cannot speak. Just as well. She does not wish to hear his lies. Turning her back on him, she kneels near her ruined plants. Softly, softly, she strokes their ravaged stems and leaves with gentle hands of air. Let your life depart not, let life and healing come. Behind her, Ea, her brother, her lover, groans. Let him weep!*

*Oh, my God, Mathilde thought. Michel ... Ea. Ea and I—* She felt her whole body blush. *No wonder he didn't want to be here!*

*An underground room, brightly-tiled in blue and mother-of-pearl. A jury's worth of djinni stand facing a djinniah bound with chains: beautiful, with a narrow face that conveys a searching intelligence. How can she have betrayed us? Mathilde—no, Ninharsag—wonders. "Inanna, you have been charged with bestowing divinity upon men, of sharing our sacred fire. What say you?" cries Utu, his aura tinged blood-red with rage. Inanna, the chained one, frowns. "Were we not mere mortals, once? Why should we not raise up those beloved to us?" "You admit your guilt!" Utu shouts. "You shall be Forgotten, your forbidden knowledge cleansed, and your city destroyed!" Enli, Ea, and Ninshubur rise to protest. The*

*walls begin to shake, dust smoking from multiplying cracks. "No. No!" shouts Inanna. "Don't kill my people!" She raises her mighty aura-wings, and a boom in the distance sounds like the back of the world, breaking. The earth shakes, the walls heave, and bricks rain down.*

Mathilde realized she understood the language they were speaking. She knew where she herself had stood. She remembered how, in the dust-clogged darkness of this underground judgment hall, time had disjointed. *A strange and horrible sound roars above them, and the dust turns to mud, turns to foaming water, turns to death, as the chamber collapses upon them. There is no way out through the weight of water and mud pressing down—even their mighty auras cannot avail them. Then there is no more air, only darkness and the shared anguish of their last bond-speech,—Inanna! Traitor! Let her be Forgotten!—Inanna's despairing reply,—But I didn't—*

*Fire burns within Ninharsag's mind. Pain wrenches her away from the final words of Inanna before the Flood. The taste of death, mud and salt upon her tongue, brings the pain deep into her belly. Is she giving birth again? What is happening to her? Aren't these memories of life before the Flood? What has happened—?*

Pain speaks. It says: *forgetfulness. It says: pain blocks your memories. Look anywhere else but Here. There's too much pain to remember. 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. When I speak my True Name to you, the bond of life will break.*

She hears Ereshkigal's True Name, and forgets it again almost immediately. She listens to the pain. It is easier to look anywhere else.

*She remembers: lying in the great curtained bed in her house in Ypres, biting into a leather strap to keep from screaming out Roland's name as the author of the pain she suffers between her legs, deep within her belly, sawing through her. She pushes and pushes. There has to be an end to pain! And there is. A great rushing slipperiness, and pain flees like a mob turning the corner of a street, leaving only a raggle-taggle of debris behind. A warm weight is placed upon her breast. Tufts of hair, still wet and dark, frame a wizened face. The blue eyes open, don't quite focus, but still see her, somehow. She knows me! Her newborn daughter sighs, relaxes, and falls deeply asleep.*

Mathilde became aware of the room. It was no different than when she had walked in—how long ago? But she had been unbearably changed. She sorted through accumulated memories. All her deeds, her failures, her triumphs. All of her past selves, wise and foolish, male and female. *Who am I?*

She had once thought she knew herself. Now, was she less or more herself than before? What was identity? Would the memories change her? She compared her kitchen garden in Ypres with her original garden of magical plants. She was the same gardener. She was the same. Her choices were her own. She could not undo what had already been done, but she could make new things, cause new events.

Her body sighed deeply, as if waking up. She opened her Seer's eyes, and saw Cecilia's aura, surrounding the room, protecting her from any intrusive thoughts.

—My sister,—she said, in the djinni's oldest tongue, even older than the House's dialect.

—My sister,—Ereshkigal replied, a hint of tears in her mental voice.

—I remember you,—Mathilde said, and for the first time in this life, the words were more than empty courtesy.

"May the djinni rejoice," Cecilia said aloud.

*May we all rejoice,* Mathilde thought, as Cecilia embraced her, and led her back out into the reception hall. She was whole again.

\* \* \* \*

The people gathered in the hall stood silent as Cecilia and Mathilde stepped up on the dais, hand-in-hand. Cecilia drew a small bronze mirror from her sleeve, and raised it high in the final step of the Raising and Naming ceremony. "This is your face now, Mathilde," she said, angling the mirror to show her face. "But we remember who you were in every lifetime."

Mathilde looked into the mirror, seeing blue eyes and waves of long blonde hair. For a moment, remembering other faces reflected in other bronze mirrors at other Raisings and Namings, these features seemed strange to her. Then, she blinked, and the world righted itself, her memories falling into proper place. She was herself, whatever face she wore. Wonderingly, she touched the mirror, letting her fingers brush Cecilia's in gratitude. "I remember also. Thank you."

Cecilia lowered the mirror as the hall erupted in cheers and shouts of: "Remember us, great lady! Remember us, Ninharsag! Lady of the Mountains!" This went on for some time. At last, the cheering died down. Cecilia raised her arms. "Will you accept her as your Protector and accept her oaths at the Appointing?"

"We will!" came the reply from dozens of throats.

But the two men she was most looking for were not there. Where had Arjumand and Dominic gone? Why weren't they here to congratulate her? When she asked about it, faces turned red.

Old Philomena, the matriarch of this house, bustled over and explained with mingled amusement and embarrassment. "They fought, and tore their clothes. No, no harm done. Just boys being boys."

Neither djinn was a boy! Mathilde thought indignantly, but as Cecilia decided to take the side of amusement, she felt obliged to gloss over the unpleasantness.

After accepting congratulations from the assembled crowd, she and Cecilia withdrew, returning to the small parlor adjoining the hall.

There Cecilia sat, solemn-faced, as Mathilde poured herself a goblet of blood and regained her composure. A deep draught did more to restore her than she had been expecting. "That went well, didn't it?" Mathilde asked after another sip or two. She switched to the House's language, forcing her lips and tongue to form the sounds she heard so clearly in her mind. "I understand now, though, why Michel was reluctant to

attend. And a good thing, too, with Roland determined to get into a fight."

Cecilia smiled tightly. Her silvery aura was folded around her protectively.

Almost herself again, Mathilde asked: "Ereshkigal, sister, what is the matter?"

"We must speak," Cecilia replied with brittle serenity.

Mathilde took the remaining seat and waited. But Cecilia's silence stretched to an uncomfortable length, until Mathilde could not stand it any more. "What is it?" she demanded. "Are you angry with Arjumand? Or do you think I am angry with you for your choice not to try to Transform me? I've told you before, that was a reasonable decision. I don't hold it against you."

Cecilia remained silent, tension visible in the taut angle of her great aura-wings.

Mathilde felt too wrung out to question her further. Instead, she drank down the remaining contents of her goblet. "I don't remember a Raising as difficult as this."

A worried frown appeared between Cecilia's perfect brows. "That was one of my concerns for you," she said softly.

A stab of anxiety jolted Mathilde. What was Cecilia hiding? Were her worst fears come true? Rapidly, she reviewed her own memories of Appointments. She found fewer catastrophes than she'd feared, but there were enough to keep worry boiling. She said, fishing for information, "I haven't felt this shaky since Blanche's birth."

Cecilia's tension increased. "You must not see your daughter again," she said, in a voice cold as the midnight stars.

"Why not?" Mathilde felt her stomach drop, as if she stood at the pinnacle of some dangerous height. What had Blanche to do with anything?

"What you could not know, until now; what you would not have believed before this moment: Blanche is the Cursed One."

If Cecilia had thrust a dagger into her heart, it would not have hurt so much. *Blanche? My sweet, clever Blanche?*

Cecilia opened her own link to Mathilde, and offered up her memory of the moment she had first seen Blanche with Seer's eyes, in Ypres. *The little face is fair and rosy-cheeked, blonde hair escaping from beneath her linen cap. Her blue gaze holds Cecilia captive, and the bright rose-colored aura flares as if in acknowledgment...*

*Oh, God.* That aura was unmistakable, dovetailing with all of Mathilde's newly-unveiled memories. Blanche was the Cursed One, Inanna, their sister, who had allowed her curiosity, her misplaced compassion, and her arrogance to twice destroy the world.

*No wonder we recognized each other.* "How ironic that so many of us were reborn into the same family," she said, feeling as shaken as a knight battered in a tourney.

Cecilia's face swam into view, compassion softening its severe lines. "I'm so sorry."

Mathilde clung to her, and wept briefly, tumultuously. Cecilia's arms and wings embraced her, the elusive, feather-

soft brush of her aura offering comfort. When her grief subsided, Mathilde sniffed and wiped tears away. "Does she know?" She realized the foolishness of her question as soon as it left her lips, but Cecilia did not berate her.

"Perhaps she dreams sometimes, like you did when you were still mortal."

"So she doesn't remember what she did," Mathilde said, slowly.

"That's what it is to be Forgotten," Cecilia reminded her. "To spend ages wandering the earth, never knowing who you really are, or what you can do." Her wings drooped. "It is our greatest fear, and our greatest punishment."

Mathilde remembered the utter silence that had followed Inanna's pulling down the fist of heaven. Everything paused for a heartbeat, before the fiery wave rolled outward from the point of impact, immolating everything in its path, shattering the cities like clay vessels. She heard herself say, "If she knows nothing, she is an innocent." *My own sweet daughter, my dear-heart, my Blanche.*

"She is dangerous," Cecilia said forcefully. "She must be watched. Isolated."

"And if I want to visit her? What about my grandchildren, when they are born?"

Cecilia shook her head, her expression sorrowful but implacable.

"She won't understand if I'm not there to help her in her travail," Mathilde said, desperately. Her memories warred with one another: *Inanna in chains, smiling defiantly at the*



*assembled Apkallu tribunal. Blanche, taking her first, unsteady steps, a wooden doll clutched in one chubby fist.*

"No contact," Cecilia said. "She is the Cursed One. We—I—have ensured that we know where she is, and what she does, but this is her punishment."

"Am I also to be punished? Cecilia," Mathilde said, raggedly. "She's my daughter! Let me write to her, and tell her something. That I am indisposed. That I cannot travel."

"No. I am sorry, dearest sister, but you know the Law as well as I do. Inanna is Forgotten, and must remain so."

Sudden clarity illuminated the reason why she had received no word from Blanche since ... *since my Transformation!* Suspicion blossomed anew. "Has the House been intercepting my correspondence?"

Cecilia's sympathetic expression was a mask that gave nothing away.

"They have!" Mathilde stepped back. All the letters she had written. All the replies she had never received. Her poor daughter, thrust into a strange household, without the comfort of an occasional missive from her mother! Anger choked her voice. "You had no right, not before I was Raised and Named!" Was this another instance of Cecilia's highhandedness? Or was it a sign of something more sinister? She could hardly think for the pounding of her heart.

"It doesn't matter," Cecilia's voice was a monotone now. "She is Forgotten."

"One letter," Mathilde said. It was not a request. "I won't reveal our secrets. But she deserves to know that her mother still loves her." Fury gave her strength, but she was

powerless to resist as Cecilia's aura swept down and surrounded her, holding her captive.

"You have agreed to abide by our Law, sister. So you must obey."

A great silver pinion touched Mathilde's forehead, colder than anything Mathilde had ever felt, ice invading her head, blurring her vision. Distantly, she heard Cecilia command: "Do not contact Blanche. She is dead to you. Should you forget this, let pain remind you." The ice coalesced into a thousand shards in Mathilde's skull. She screamed...

...and came back to awareness, sitting in one of the parlor's cushioned chairs, Cecilia leaning over her. "Here, drink this."

Mathilde felt the cool weight of a goblet pressed into her hand, and took it. "What—?" She felt that something very important had just happened, but could not remember what it might be. There was a dull throbbing behind her forehead.

"We were talking, and you fainted," Cecilia said, cool fingers resting briefly against Mathilde's brow. Mathilde flinched, then felt foolish. Cecilia was her friend. Cecilia would never hurt her. "I fear that the Raising and Naming overtaxed you."

"And the news about Blanche," Mathilde murmured dully. She remembered collapsing into Cecilia's arms, and weeping. Her poor daughter! Then ... The throb became a lance of pain through her temples, and she winced.

*The Cursed One. Nothing to be done about it now,* she thought, grimly, and the pain subsided. Nothing to be done about it, forever. Inanna had made her own bed. The House

and Apkallu had forgiven the first, but not the second, of the devastating cataclysms she had wrought.

Mathilde was a Protector of the House now. As much as she missed her daughter, and wished with all her heart that things had turned out otherwise, she could not afford to yield to the weaknesses of her mortal life. She took the linen handkerchief that Cecilia offered her, and wiped her eyes, just as Dominic's tentative contact opened.—Mathilde? Where are you?—In the parlor, with Cecilia,—she reassured him.—How are you? I heard that Roland did.—I'm fine. I won.—His unspoken message was relief at finding her still sane. But Cecilia had done her job well. *I am restored, if not to my former glory, at least to full remembrance.*

Now, she longed only for some quiet meditation to absorb everything that had happened. Meditation, and the comfort of some hot milk spiced with nutmeg and honey. She straightened, shook back her hair. How strange to wear it down, like a maiden, not a wife and moth...

*Mother no longer.* She would not think of it again, and torture herself.

\* \* \* \*

Arjumand was still disgruntled about allowing himself to be goaded into a fight with Dominic—and worse yet, *losing* so ignominiously—when Sharibet came to his bedchamber that night, her beautiful face ravaged by tears. He rose to greet her, and she rushed into his arms. He sat down and tucked her into his lap, cradling her against his chest as if she were a child. She vibrated with grief, rattling her tiny knuckles

against his breastbone until he felt battered, inside and out. But he didn't try to stop her, or calm her storm. He had never seen her weep during their years together. He'd thought she had forgotten how. But now, he felt protective. She needed him for something more than inexhaustible sex, or even his magic-given strength. Delayed as it was, in the wake of her losses, she needed his tenderness. *My poor little Sharibet*. It was a dizzying change of viewpoint, and he wasn't sure it fit, yet. But he was strangely content, until she began speaking.

"Arjumand, she wants you," she said, gasping. "I can't talk her out of it. Michel told her he'd take Tirgit as his consort, and she doesn't want Dominic again, and Basil's out of reach, even if she would stoop to consort with a mere Crown of Service djinn."

What? No mention of Nadira, or Kobegun, or the children they had killed? He stifled the impulse to shove her off his lap.

"You're saying Cecilia wants me for her consort?" He felt like he'd just aged centuries.

She clutched at him violently. "I don't want her to take you away from me, but I don't have the power to—"

"And I do?" She was plastered so tightly against him, he could feel his voice vibrating through her bird-light bones.

"Well..." She looked up at him through her thick eyelashes—a trick he'd seen most of her daughters employ at one time or another. And some of her sons.

"You think I can say 'no' to the Eldest?" he asked with just the right tinge of skepticism.

Her lashes fluttered. "You have before. You can."

"If I want to," he said. "Do I want to?"

She froze in his arms, and he could feel her panic seeping through their bond. Ruthlessly glad he could make her uncertain, after all the years he'd spent under her skillful thumb, he gave her what she wanted. "What, and give you up? Sharibet!" He raised her chin with a finger, and kissed her with all the passion he'd restrained from the sweet young thing he'd bedded in Konia, and from Mathilde just this morning. She returned his kiss with fire, and they didn't make it onto the bed.

His passion turned hollow when he tasted Sharibet's blood and saw the most recent image: *The rosy tip of an alabaster breast puckers as her fingertips caress the velvet skin of Cecilia's inner thigh up to—*

—Oh! Arjumand! We were just—

He slammed shut the connection before Sharibet could offer any excuse. He stood, shaking with rage, as she huddled on the carpet, bright blood staining her throat.

He wanted to lash out, to call the lightning and see this house burn. But before he did anything, he needed to *think*. Cecilia had probably commanded Sharibet to her bed. And Sharibet, the dutiful servant, had obeyed. Had she gone willingly into the arms of the Eldest, or did she do it out of fear? Not that it mattered.

He knew where he stood now. All alone.

\* \* \* \*

Monday March 7, AD 1261

Tradition held that an Appointing ought to be held on the first full moon after a solstice or equinox. But the timing was flexible—this year, Lent was late, and Easter wasn't until April, so they had decided to fit their celebration in with Carnevale. Sharibet was pleased by the timing, and said it was good to offer the House an occasion of joy amidst the mourning that accompanied Nadira and Kobegun's crimes. Mathilde had made no protest, but the shadow of fear had dimmed her aura even further.

The day before the Appointing found Arjumand in the House's underground hall, holding up a heavy tapestry with a hand of air as two visiting youths struggled to attach the rings at the top to the thick iron hooks embedded high on the stone walls. Watching them struggle with the stiff folds, he suppressed the desire to set the damned thing alight with his powers, and gain the petty satisfaction of watching the gold and silver thread woven into the priceless silk fabric blacken and shrivel.

But what purpose would it serve? Like everything else he did in this House, his impulse would be treated as a mere inconvenience, and swiftly rectified with some grumbling and disappointed expressions.

He remembered his callow astonishment, all those years ago, that he would be raised to the position of a lord over these people. It had not taken him long to realize that, despite their elaborate courtesies and deferential mien, he was no more than a chained god kept in their yards like a once-fierce watchdog.

Even Cecilia, his supposed peer, had not bothered to consult him on whether he wished to be her consort or not. That decision had been made without him, and he had only Sharibet's protests to thank that he knew about the plan in advance. What, did they expect him to simply smile, and bow, and pack up his trunks when Mathilde's Appointing was over?

Of course they did. It was *tradition*, that damned enslaving tradition. Just as it appeared to be tradition that whatever Cecilia desired, Cecilia received. The brief flash of Cecilia and Sharibet together returned to him, blowing fresh air on the barely-banked coals of his anger. How dared she? Sharibet had not been there willingly, no matter how she spoke in the aftermath of 'the way of djinni.'

Just then, the youths, visitors from the Marseilles House, finished hanging the vast length of the tapestry. "Thank you, lord!" came the twin chorus as the boys waved from their perches on rickety wooden ladders.

*Good boy! Good djinn!* Arjumand inclined his head, and turned away to address Philomena regarding his next task. If nothing else, the work here kept him occupied—and out of Cecilia's way. Idle hands might be tempted to strangle her, he thought sourly, as he next used his hand of air to hang long garlands of sweetly scented herbs.

Done at last, he turned and strode toward the stairs leading up to the everyday world, wanting only to hide in his chambers, and forget the chains of fate and magic that bound him to these damned people.

\* \* \* \*

On the writing table in his chamber, Arjumand found the packet of paper, pens, and ink powder that he had requested from Philomena. The oilcloth-wrapped package to Blanche lacked only a cover letter and an address.

He sipped a goblet of blood as he stared at the humble offering. After all his failures, at last he could send Blanche—his daughter—a gift! He wished he could provide more for her, even if she never knew it came from him. He wished he could see her, without putting her in danger of becoming ensnared by the House. He wished...

It was an incalculable pleasure, to be able to send this. And more, in the future.

Time to bring the gift to Mathilde. She would write the letter to her daughter, and he would ensure it arrived at its destination.

Mathilde wasn't in her suite. Thank God, Dominic wasn't either. Arjumand wandered through the busy maze of the house, asking for Mathilde as he went. She wasn't in the bath. She wasn't in the women's quarters. She wasn't in the library. She wasn't in the stables. She hadn't gone out. Many people had seen her, but no one knew where she was, just at the moment.

Finally, passing along the loggia from the northeast building to the southeast building, he glanced down and saw her in the garden, pulling weeds.

"Mathilde!" he called from forty feet up. He leaped over the railing and glided down. The sun was warm on his back and on his aura-wings. He landed right in front of her, clutching Blanche's package to his chest.



"Oh!" She straightened up with a startled expression.

He held out the package. "I've arranged for this to be sent to the Liege House as soon as the *Rose of Chios* departs from Constantinople after your Appointing," he said. "Captain Jocelyn says it may even arrive at Bressoux before Easter. You'll have plenty of time to write her a letter—I've included cover sheets—and—"

Mathilde's face was suddenly pinched, and white. "That won't be necessary," she said, tonelessly, her hand rising to her temple.

"I know it's not necessary," he replied, puzzled by her odd demeanor. "But I want to send it."

"I—that is—" Mathilde looked down. "Please don't trample the gentians. They're over forty years old and the roots are delicate."

Arjumand looked down. He was standing on a row of low green plants with clustered wide leaves like bristling spear-points. He stepped sideways, wincing a little at the sight of crushed greenery. "Sorry! But didn't you want—"

She knelt, passing her hand over the broken leaves, whispering. Was she talking to the plant? Was it healing as she touched it?

"Mathilde..."

"Wait a moment." She didn't look at him.

He stood there, feeling foolish and thwarted. Wait? He'd been waiting for more than a decade. "I thought you wanted to write to her! You were so worried—"

"It doesn't matter anymore." Mathilde still didn't look up.

His emotions boiled over. "Damn you, Ninharsag! Just because you're Raised and Named now—"

She rose up, eyes blazing, her hand of air slapping his face hard enough to snap his head to one side. "You *oaf*. You know nothing. You choose to know *nothing*. How dare you curse me? It's probably all your fault that she's—"

Panic ambushed him. "What? She's what? Have you received news? Is Blanche ill? Dea—?" He couldn't go on.

Mathilde covered her face with her hand. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I've had no word. But, Roland..."

"I'm called Arjumand, now," he said flatly. "Tell me what you've heard."

She flinched. "She's the Cursed One."

This hollow statement rocked him worse than her blow. His knees failed and he collapsed onto the stiff greenery in a gangly heap. There he spent a minute trying to catch his breath. *Not Blanche, too!* Even before he had ever heard of the damned House of the Rose, he had been deeply enmeshed in this chain of rebirth. *Damn. Damn.* All for nothing ... his secrets, his lies, his patient waiting. Every feeling he'd denied, and manacled like prisoners in the deepest dungeon of his mind. All for God-damned *nothing*.

*No. No!* He wouldn't believe it. He couldn't. "How do you know?"

She held out her hand. "Taste my blood, and I'll show you."

He bit her finger, restraining savagery. Warm, salty blood, a hint of lavender, and the images exploded ... *The little face is fair and rosy-cheeked, blonde hair escaping from beneath*

*her linen cap. Her blue gaze holds Cecilia captive with puzzled intensity, and the bright rose-colored aura flares as if in acknowledgment ... Upon a mud-brick tower, she stands before a tribunal of her sisters and brothers, who condemn her again. She screams in frustration, and her huge, bloody aura reaches out to touch the sky. "It's coming!" The heartbeat of the world falters, then fire from heaven smashes down and the earth is broken like a cup...*

The auras were the same. The person was the same. Blanche, his little girl—oh, to see her face, at last!—his daughter, was the Cursed One. He spat out Mathilde's finger as the poison of her knowledge sped through his body to his heart. "How can this be?" he groaned.

"When souls are reborn," Mathilde said, kneeling near him, "love ... has some attractive force, so the souls of those beloved to us return to us. Sometimes. Not always."

"So, the Cursed One *loves* us?"

Mathilde replied, but he wasn't listening. His daughter. Their daughter ... *The little face is fair and rosy-cheeked, blonde hair escaping from beneath her linen cap ... She looks like Mathilde. She looks like me ... Oh, God. Why?*

The echo of pain flared in his head.—She has been Forgotten,—Mathilde said to him, mind-to-mind.—And you must—Who are you to tell me you *must*—? Who are you to tell me our daughter is the Cursed One?—Hot tears rolled down his cheeks.—Where did my Mathilde go?—I'm still here, sweet cousin.—

"You lie," he said, needing to hear the sound of his voice. "You must be lying." He didn't want to weep in front of her. But he couldn't stop...

He stumbled away, his feet tangling in green spears. He wandered into a corridor. Some of the kin tried to talk to him. He ignored them. He needed a quiet place to sit down. He needed a drink.

His feet took him to a quiet room. There were jars of drink on a table. He sat. He drank. He wept.

\* \* \* \*

Carnevale, Feast of St. Felix, Tuesday March 8, AD 1261

The preparations for the Appointing were complete. As the day dawned, Arjumand observed that the sacks of foodstuffs that had crowded every square foot of the House not occupied by the pallets and luggage of the visitors were turned by industrious hands and ovens into a feast fit for gods. The barrels of wine and cider were rolled into the banquet room and sampled by a very cheerful team for quality. Others were busily finalizing a frenzy of cleaning that left even door tops and shadowed corners gleaming. Only the djinni's apartments remained undisturbed. Arjumand and Sharibet retained the right to her bedchamber, for which he was thankful. What if he'd been forced to share quarters with Mathilde and Dominic? Or Cecilia?

As it was, he had not touched Sharibet again, though she wept prettily, and offered apologies and excuses and her best attempts at seduction. He could not bring himself to yield to her while he yet mourned for the past.

The day wore on, and he walked weary rounds of the complex of buildings, searching for intruders and spies. All the vendors bringing rented cookware, sheets, prepared foods and spices, had to be accounted for and evicted. No one could be allowed to watch the Appointing who was not of the House. All the children had to be supervised, as well, lest they get into mischief. At intervals, he passed Dominic, performing the same duty in the opposite direction as the djinnia attended Mathilde, preparing for the dangerous ceremony tonight. They nodded at each other, warily, and kept on walking.

His one pleasure in a day of tedious chaos was passing through the kitchen's abattoir and snatching a cup of warm blood fresh from the lamb, or chicken, before it was adulterated with herbs. The House's butchers were busy, knives flashing, but they stopped for him, and let him drink. The blood eased the numb pain of existence, so that when the bells of the rooftop dovecote pealed in the late afternoon, he was almost ready for the announcement.

Everybody came running to the reception hall, breathless with excitement. Sick dread hovered in the back of Arjumand's mind, but the specter was tired, drained of urgency. What more could go wrong?

Cecilia, her hair half-dressed, wearing a loose gown, appeared on the dais. In her hand the message was a thin, gilded streamer. "People of the House! Rejoice!" her voice rang out. "Another Apkallu has been Found!" When the cheers died down, she read: *"From Ea, Enki, in London, greetings. Beloved concubine Tirgit al Warda, True Name Lal-Hamun,*

*safely delivered of a son, Utu, called Robert FitzMichael. By my hand this 15th day of February, AD 1261."*

As Cecilia disappeared again amidst the echoing cheers, cold gruel prickled Arjumand's skin. *Utu*. Who once had been his older brother Robert. *God's Nails!* Robert, returned as Michel's son and sucked back into this sorcery-tangled mess. *God*. There was no help for it. There was no escape.

\* \* \* \*

As the sun went down to the kin's hum of excitement, Mathilde's Appointing began as just like his had, a decade ago. Her oaths were the same as the ones he had sworn anew to the Konia House. The ochre painted across his mouth still tasted like rust and olive oil.

What differed was Mathilde's panic, rippling through their link, as the moment drew closer when she would be tested. Standing on the dais with the other Appointed Apkallu, all of them wearing their Divine Garments of Kingship, Arjumand glanced over at Dominic, and saw that his attention was also focused on Mathilde, those normally-sardonic gray eyes narrowed now with concern.

And then it was time. Arjumand's valet, Abdulaziz, had been chosen for the honor; no doubt Sharibet's way of showing that he had not lost her favor, though his daughter had failed her chance to serve the House. He approached the dais, the great chalice balanced on the palms of his hands, and the kin made their ritual contribution of drops of blood to seal the covenant. All the while, increasing panic welled through his link to Mathilde. He sent back all the comfort and

reassurance he could while she waited for the ceremony of the blood donations to finish.

Finally, Abdulaziz approached Mathilde. "Lady, my True Name is Urda-gigi. Remember me!"

"I—I will remember you." Her voice sounded high, and breathless, as she took his hand and touched his knuckles to her forehead. Then she put lips to his finger, and tasted living, human blood for the first time.

The great hall fell silent as Mathilde convulsed in ecstasy. After a long moment, Abdulaziz tried to step back and extricate himself, but she clung to his wrist, keeping his finger in her mouth.

Arjumand saw the silver gleam of the ceremonial blade as the Man of the Ax hefted his weapon. An icy draught traveled down the length of his spine. He would never forget the dull clunk of the executioner's blade as it separated Nadira's head from her body.

—Mathilde! Let go of him! *Now!*— Arjumand opened his link to her as Dominic, who was standing behind her, put his arms around her and attempted to pull her away.

But Mathilde's mind was consumed by pleasure ... and blind hunger.

—Mathilde! No!—Arjumand would protect her, defy damned tradition, if she needed time to collect herself. He was not ready to see her die.

—Come back to us,—urged another voice—*Dominic's, damn him*—echoing through the link he shared with Mathilde.—Mathilde, dear one, you must come back to us now.—

The Man of the Ax lifted his weapon, and a collective murmur of dismay ran through the onlookers.—MATHILDE!—Arjumand shouted with all of his strength, at the same moment that Dominic did likewise.

Mathilde flinched as if she'd been slapped, and flung away Abdulaziz's arm as if it burned her. She turned into Dominic's chest, clinging to him for reassurance, and Arjumand felt jealousy like a hot spear through his chest. *She loves that bastard.*

She stood, shaking, in Dominic's embrace, her eyes squeezed shut, for what seemed an endless time. Finally, she collected herself enough to face the patiently-waiting Abdulaziz again: "I w-will always r-remember you!" She accepted the filled chalice from him, and drank the mingled blood of the kin in a single long gulp. "I will remember all of you," she said, her voice steadier now.

Arjumand let out the breath he'd been holding, his heart pounding as hard as if he had been the one tested. She had passed. She had survived. The hall erupted in cheers.

Dominic was smiling, and for once, there wasn't a single trace of a smirk.

Arjumand felt dazed with relief through the ceremony of the Crowns that followed, with Sharibet's ritual recitation of Innana's downfall: "...and when the Apkallu at last gathered in Eanna to condemn her, she shattered the mountains, flooded the cities, murdered the gods and stole their memories. The sea swept away the people of the plain and scattered their souls over the earth. This was the first destruction of our world."



Standing on the dais, the immensely ancient, heavy crown of bull's horns and ivory pressing down on his head, Arjumand had a heretical thought: *Was that what really happened?*

How much of the story was true, and how much of it was simply accepted as truth by people who couldn't see beyond the traditions they were trapped in, life after life?

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

Pain, heavy as iron chains, bound him with millennia-old curses. *That's my daughter! You're cursing my daughter!*

*And she isn't forgotten, not really,* he realized, as the cries of "May she be eternally Forgotten!" came from the assembled witnesses. *She is remembered—and feared—at every Appointing.*

How, exactly, had Cecilia managed to survive that cataclysm? Why was it that she, among all the Apkallu, had not seen her powers diminish or vanish altogether? And why had it been so easy for Arjumand, no friend to magic, to reclaim two of those supposedly-lost powers, when generations of Raised Apkallu had failed to do so?

He chewed over these troublesome questions as he stood in his awkward garb and endured the rest of the ceremony.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the Appointing banquet had a frenetic quality to it. The people of the House were happy to have another Apkallu to watch over them, but everyone also seemed slightly unnerved by how narrowly Mathilde had passed the test.

Arjumand overheard snatches of conversation as he drifted through it all, Sharibet clinging to him, and made the courtesies expected of him. The kin were gossiping about Michel's absence at his sister's Appointing, and of his Apkallu child (should the babe survive until the age of consent). Many covert glances flew in Dominic's direction from the Venetian delegation, and talk turned to the hostility between Michel and Dominic, who had been inseparable as Honoria and Menelaos.

Conversations featuring the word "consort" stilled when Arjumand approached. He knew that at least half of the kin had gold riding on whether he would end the banquet as Cecilia's consort, or whether Mathilde would win. Hardly anyone thought he might remain at Sharibet's side.

To tell the truth, he didn't know himself, and in the numbness of spirit that had followed all of the turmoil of the past three days, he found he didn't much care.

No one spoke of Nadira, or Kobegun, but their absences weighed heavily on what should have been undiluted celebration.

Mathilde sat next to Dominic, her aura-wings encircling him with a warm glow. Michel had his concubine and a son in London. What did Arjumand have? He had Sharibet, who had

cuckolded him—twice; the bitter knowledge that he was no more than a slave to the House; and a daughter he could never acknowledge.

It was almost a relief when Cecilia approached him. "We need to speak privately," she murmured.

He bowed politely and followed her through the crowded hall, weaving around the low tables set up for the banqueters, feeling the weight of avid stares in their wake. Everyone knew what she wanted. But what did *he* want? Could he bear to be Cecilia's consort, to share his bed and his blood with her? The thought of such intimacy prickled his skin with revulsion. Did it even matter what he wanted?

She sat on one of the cushioned chairs like a queen on her throne, and Arjumand began rehearsing his polite speech of refusal. But she took him by surprise, once they found themselves in the same small parlor where Mathilde had been Raised and Named. "I wish to speak of you regarding Nadira and Kobegun," she said, bluntly. "Sharibet tells me that you refused to train Nadira, and that your methods with Kobegun were ... ungentle."

"Nadira? But—she wasn't fit—" He gaped, caught off-guard, and she continued relentlessly.

"In your judgment, perhaps, but it seems that you also did everything possible to ensure her failure." Cecilia steepled her fingers under her pointed chin, and pinned Arjumand with an assessing stare. "You made her feel unwanted, did you not? You told others in the House of her unfitness, creating hostility toward her. You spoke to her—and of her—with contempt. You refused to train her, leaving that burden to

Basil and Leila." Cecilia paused, as if waiting for Arjumand to reply. But his mind had gone blank in the shock of this unexpected attack. She continued, acidly: "And then you taught her a very dangerous art, one that has been lost for centuries, giving her the means by which to harm the House. Taking all this in consideration, it would have been a miracle if she *had* passed her probation."

"Don't try to blame me for her failure," Arjumand said, belatedly. "I did the best I could. And it wasn't just my opinion. Basil, too, thought she simply wasn't suited to the role of a Protector—her soul held nothing but wounded pride and selfish vanity. God, if you'd been forced to share her thoughts, you wouldn't have Transformed her, either!"

"The best you could?" Cecilia repeated, softly, leaning forward. "The best you could do while crippled, you mean. And what of Kobegun? You might have been able to capture his loyalty if you remembered Dumuzi. In fact, I should think that recent events might give you cause to reconsider your objections to being Raised and Named."

*So that's her game, is it?* Anger rose in him, clearing his head of shock and sorrow. "I admit to my error in teaching Nadira the drinking of life, but if I had been allowed to use my own judgment, I would have never made her a djinniah in the first place, tradition or not. I would have judged her unfit whether my memory consisted of thirty years or thirty lifetimes."

Cecilia looked unconvinced, so he continued: "And if memory could have saved her, why didn't anybody tell us about the dangers? I taught her the Drinking of Life because

her aura was too small to harm anything beyond flowers. No one told me how djinni can increase the size of their auras. All those flowers gave her just enough strength to devour her son, and afterwards ... *God.*" He felt nauseous, just thinking about it.

Cecilia's great wings darkened, and unfurled, and her mouth thinned. "If you had been Raised and Named, you wouldn't have needed to rely on others to tell you what you should already know! And you would have known better that to perform these dangerous experiments with powers better left forgotten!"

She sighed, and with visible effort gentled her tone. "Arjumand—Enlil, my brother—because you cannot remember, you repeated the mistakes of the past. Tradition binds us, but it also saves us."

"Tradition forced me to Transform Nadira," he replied, stubbornly.

"And are you so certain that you couldn't have found a way to salvage her, if you'd been able to draw on all your memories?"

"I may have made errors." Arjumand hated yielding any ground to Cecilia. "But what of Sharibet's reluctance to act sensibly, because it was counter to tradition? Or—" he said, as a horrific thought occurred to him. "Were Nadira and Kobegun sacrificed to prove your point? To force me to consent to a Raising and Naming?" She flinched, minutely, and he was suddenly certain of it. "That would be a coup for you and Sharibet, wouldn't it? Two Protectors lost before they

could be Appointed, but the House rejoices because, in balance, two Apkallu are Raised and Named?"

She said nothing for a long moment, her pale fingers gripping the carved arm of her chair, and Arjumand knew he was right. However, instead of defending herself, she said, "So, I cannot convince you that being Raised and Named would be in the House's best interests? In *your* best interest?"

He had opened his Seer's Eyes at the beginning of the conversation, so he saw the moment when her aura changed shape, becoming a great sword formed of silver light, darting toward him. Reacting quickly, he raised his wings to block her, but she was strong. Incredibly strong, and blue fire sparked along the edge of his aura as he flew backwards, landing on his back, the impact muffled and cushioned by thick carpet.

Quick as a pouncing leopard, she was on him, and it was all he could do to keep that sword—now shrunk to the size of a dagger—from plunging into his forehead. To his eyes, the room blazed with her silver and his blue-violet, but to an outsider it would have looked like a tryst, both of them on the floor in a near-embrace, disheveled and panting.

"Is this your precious tradition?" he growled. "What of my consent! Or are *your* desires above the laws that bind us?"

She smiled down at him, a fierce baring of teeth. "I'm only trying to help you." And she forced the dagger down, closer to his forehead, and he strained with all of the unholy strength gifted to him by Kobegun and Nadira's deaths to keep her from touching him with that weapon.

"Is this how you *helped* Michel to consent to his Transformation?" he said, frantically rolling his hips, trying to dislodge her while still blocking that dagger with his wings.

She resisted his bucking, and her small hands locked around his wrists like manacles, immobilizing his upper body. "I saved them both, Dominic and Michel. Or would you have preferred them dead?"

"Better dead," he panted, "Than enslaved, like me."

"Is that how you see it? I pity you, Arjumand. Blind *and* crippled." To his horror, she increased her efforts.

*God's Nails, just how strong is she?* He couldn't hold her off much longer. Her dagger of light dipped closer to his forehead. Desperately, he said: "Cecilia, do you want to break the law before the eyes of the House? I will open my links to Sharibet and Leila. Sharibet may be your faithful tool, but Leila represents the House itself."

He felt her stiffen, and the dagger halted its descent a hairsbreadth from his skin. "The House wouldn't exist without me, and they will excuse the deed," she said, but her tone was less confident than before. "Especially since it's for the good of the House."

"What about Mathilde and Dominic? Will they excuse it?"

Open disbelief showed on her face, and he was able to push back the dagger a little. "You don't *have* a blood bond with them. It's been a decade since Dominic was your teacher. His link to you has already faded."

The dagger pushed down once more, and Arjumand tried with all his strength to push it back ... futilely. "True, but I

bonded with Mathilde yesterday. And she will open the link to Dominic if I ask it."

A bitter smile touched Cecilia's lips as she hovered over him. The dagger was nearly touching now—he could feel the stinging of her power between his brows. "If you open your links, you won't have the strength to keep me out."

*I don't have the strength now.* "But everybody will witness what you've done. What you're doing."

"Why won't you let me do what's best for the House?" she asked, squeezing his wrists until the bones creaked and his fingers prickled with numbness.

"Why won't you let *me*?" Arjumand countered, desperately. "That's all I'm trying to do, Cecilia." His aura was dissipating steadily around the glow of the dagger, lightening from violet to gentian-blue where it mingled with hers. "Our methods differ, but our goal is the same! Let me serve as Protector in my way, without interference, and we can both walk away, with no one the wiser."

"What do you mean, your way?" She sounded skeptical, but—*praise God!*—the pressure of the dagger's power against his skin lessened.

He gulped for air, thick with candle smoke and the aroma of roasted meat, before replying. "I want the freedom to do what needs to be done without regard to *tradition*." He saw refusal coming in the pursing of her lips, and added: "No more—nor less—than you feel free to do, *sister*."

"Then you understand nothing." Her eyes, normally dark as sapphires, were nearly black now as she bore down with the dagger.



He was helpless, his body pinned, and his aura concentrated on his failing efforts to hold her back. She was going to win—to kill him. Or worse, to geld his will, and truly enslave him.

Even though he knew it was useless, he tried once more to throw her off. She remained firmly seated ... but hope appeared in the slide of his costly garments against the pile of the woolen rug beneath him. *Drops of water*, he thought, hysterical laughter bubbling up like the little bits of power he summoned.

The spark leaped between his forehead and her dagger. In the instant of her recoil, he gathered more power, seizing it from the air and the tapestries of the room. "Don't make me smite you, sister."

Her grip on his wrists loosened. "You can't. You'll die, too."

"I don't care," he said, with utter sincerity. "Better dead than a slave to your traditions."

He released a little of the power he had gathered, and watch it spark against the neck of her gown, scorching it, and reddening the smooth white skin.

He saw flash of genuine fear. "Very well," she said, finally, and the dagger withdrew. "I will respect the strength of your conviction, as long as you promise never to tell anyone about this ... *conversation* ... and to never use the Drinking of Life again, nor teach it to anyone else."

She was going to let him live? He shuddered with relief, and exhaustion. "I agree, and gladly. It's an—an immoral power." Strange to use that word now, when he himself was a

blood-drinking demon! "And in return, if you ever try to coerce me again, I *will* kill you."

He felt Cecilia's weight lift off his hips, and dared to sit up. She was already on her feet, her hand raised to her neck, touching the burned skin. "I shall know if you break your promise."

He pulled himself up. "Don't even bother to ask me to be your consort," he said frankly, his knees shaky. "Leave me to make my peace with Sharibet."

"And what of Mathilde?" Cecilia raised her brows, unable to resist one last taunt to remind him of his losses now that he'd finally won a victory.

The breath caught in his throat. "Mathilde has made her choice," he said, quietly, remembering how she had turned to Dominic, earlier. "As I have made mine."

\* \* \* \*

He felt strangely calm as they returned to the Appointing banquet. The hall fell silent as they re-entered, as if the kin were awaiting an announcement from them. Arjumand saw Sharibet's stricken look, and smiled reassurance at her.—I'm not going anywhere,—he said, and received a wordless blaze of relieved affection in return.

At her brilliant smile, a ripple of disappointed sighs, mingled with a few triumphant chuckles, moved through the hall, and Arjumand saw coins covertly change hands.

Several goblets of blood later, he felt capable of making polite conversation again. Cecilia had withdrawn to the far

end of the hall, where she was engaged in a serious conversation with Jaleel, the Master of the Malaga House.

Arjumand studied her, realization of his victory slowly sinking in. He had won his exemption from the hobbles of tradition! He thought of the packet of paper, pens, and ink, still in his room. He would send it after all. *I will use my own judgment, from now on.*

On the other side of the hall, his friend Philomena sat, her wrinkled cheeks almost smooth under the heavy coat of orris-root powder and rouge she had applied for this special occasion. "Lord Arjumand!" she caroled, as he made his way toward her. "Come, sit by me."

*Oh, yes.* He put on his most charming smile, which created exactly the effect he hoped for. Philomena patted her breast and simpered, revealing perfect teeth. She batted her eyelids at him, looking up through thin eyelashes. "Lord, you honor me."

"Never as much as you deserve." He seated himself next to her, his thigh touching hers. "Have I told you how much help you've been to me? I rely on you utterly."

She beamed, and placed her blue-veined, parchment-skinned hand over his. Her fingers were hot from the wine that flushed her painted cheeks. "It's easy to help a beautiful man who listens to an old woman!" She giggled.

They traded more and more extravagant compliments until Philomena paused and said loudly, "Lord, remember me when I am young again!" In a whisper, she went on, "What is it you want?"

"Philomena." He spoke as quietly as she did. "As the eldest of the kin here and Theodoros's mother, is it true that you receive and file, or destroy, all the reports sent by the other Houses?"

"Indeed," she confided. "I know everything that's happening—everywhere."

"Even the reports on the Cursed One?" He held his breath. Was his relationship to Blanche common knowledge? Would Philomena know?

"Especially her!" Philomena frowned. "She's dangerous, even stripped of her memories and forced to live among outsiders."

"I knew I could come to you!" he said aloud, capturing the hand that still lay over his, and bringing it to his lips, noting those in the crowd who watched him playing at gallantry. Whispering again, he said, "I need to see those reports. Would you pass them along to me whenever you get one?"

"Of course, lord. You have only to ask." Her courtesy was interrupted by a loud hiccup. "I like you best of all the Protectors we've had so far," she confided at high volume. Leaning close, she breathed in his ear, "What do you want them for?"

"Because nobody listens to me!" he whispered fiercely, seamlessly blending truth and lie. Because, until this night, he had had no real power, no real autonomy. Because he had obeyed the traditions and rules of the House for over a decade, all for God-damned nothing.

And now he was free.

"I see, lord," said Philomena. She squeezed his fingers, conspiratorially, and giggled again, for show. "Father Enlil, we sing your praises," she sang the refrain from the presentation of the Crowns.

Some of the kin picked up the tune. "Father Enlil, we sing your praises."

*Good dog, good djinn*, thought Arjumand, but without bitterness. He would let them think what they wanted. He kissed Philomena's cheek, eliciting another set of giggles, real ones this time.

*Damn tradition!*

~The End~

The next volume of The House of the Rose series, *Queen of Heaven*, will be available in spring of 2008. Historical information, snippets from the cutting room floor, photos of locations, and an extensive glossary and bibliography can be found at [www.michaela-august.com](http://www.michaela-august.com)

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