

QUEEN OF HEAVEN

HOUSE OF THE ROSE, BOOK FOUR



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by Michaela August

-Dedication-

Special thanks, as always, to Dave, for husbandly support above and beyond the call of everyday duty.

Dedicated to Matt Thraillkill, who helped Marian stay sane and get saner during this impossibly busy period; and Elke Welss Crabbe, best of all possible sisters.

Previously, in the House of the Rose Series:

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, who spends the next forty years healing his memories and powers.

When King Louis of France leads a Crusade to Egypt in 1259, Menelaos, now called 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 persuaded to transfer his allegiance to the House of the Rose, agreeing to become a Protector. In this role, 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. When Cecilia learns that Michel is alive, she sets out to see if she can successfully recruit him 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, who is also a reborn Protector. Cecilia becomes Mathilde's best friend, and arranges a marriage for young Blanche to remove her from contact with the others.

Dominic receives word of Michel's location and journeys in haste to Ypres. He kidnaps Michel, forcibly returning his past-life memories in an attempt to persuade Michel into consenting to become a vampire. In doing so, he discovers that Cecilia has been altering the memories that she returns to the other vampires, and is forced to transform Michel to save his life after inadvertently triggering the deadly spell that Cecilia set to safeguard discovery of her meddling.

Cecilia covers up her misdeeds, but only by further crippling Dominic's powers and injuring Michel's memories as well. Later, Dominic and Michel make an uneasy truce while working to transform Michel's ailing sister Mathilde into a vampire. Dominic is still deeply in love with the soul that once belonged to his beloved wife Honoria. Michel, his ability to recall the memories of his past lives damaged by Cecilia's meddling, finds himself struggling to maintain his identity—and his sanity. Honoria, the identity from his immediate past life, proves particularly troublesome. She wants her husband Dominic back, and doesn't find being male in this incarnation an obstacle. Michel, who has been a good Catholic for most of his life, shrinks from the idea of a same-sex relationship. His situation is further complicated by the news that Cecilia's maidservant Tirgit, who was assigned to Michel as his concubine in the last days of his fertility after becoming a vampire, is pregnant with Michel's child. Michel is determined to formalize his relationship with Tirgit, and persuades her to

accept the risky honor of becoming a vampire if their child proves to be another Apkallu reborn.

Mathilde takes on the duties of a Protector and accepts Dominic as her consort. Together, they travel to Constantinople for her formal appointing as a Protector, and so that Cecilia can return Mathilde's past-life memories. A disagreement between Mathilde and Cecilia over Cecilia's orders to cut off contact with Blanche ends with Cecilia placing a geas on Mathilde that inflicts blinding headaches whenever Mathilde thinks about her daughter.

Meanwhile, Roland, now known as Arjumand abd al-Warda, continues to serve as Protector of the House in Muslim lands. As the years pass, and he grows more confident and more mature, he begins to chafe against the many restrictions imposed by the kin of the House upon their Protectors. His dissatisfaction comes to climax when he is forced to transform the seeress Nadira into a vampire despite his deep reservations about her character. His fears prove well-founded when she suborns a newly-found Apkallu, a Mongol youth named Kobegun, and together, they injure and kill several of the kin before being captured and executed. Arjumand, his judgment vindicated, heads further towards open rebellion when he learns from his former lover Mathilde that he is Blanche's father, and that Blanche is the Cursed One. Unwilling now to unquestioningly believe the word of the kin, he vows to discover the truth about his daughter's banishment for himself.

Queen of Heaven begins just after the end of the events in *Broken Gods* and *House of Memory*.

Chapter One

Where you do not live but where my city is built, I myself am silenced (?). My city is ruined, my house is destroyed, my child has been taken captive.—"Enki and Ninma," c.1.1.2, (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Domo to Rhodon, Constantinople, Tuesday March 22, AD 1261:

"Farewell! Farewell!" called the people of the Constantinople House of the Rose to their departing guests. "May we meet again! Remember us!"

Arjumand was heartily glad to see the last of his fellow Apkallu: Mathilde, his cousin and former lover, marked by her mortal suffering; Dominic, who had won Mathilde's affection though he nurtured a hopeless passion for Michael, Mathilde's brother; and Cecilia, the lying bitch, who had almost killed him and now calmly gazed upon him with no visible sign of enmity. Arjumand watched the procession of horses, mules, baggage and handlers, trundle down the stone-faced street until they turned out of sight. *If I'm lucky, I won't see them again for centuries.*

If only his daughter Blanche had centuries to spare. Would he ever see her in person? He had only the briefest of glimpses from Mathilde's memories: *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 ...* It was not even Mathilde's memory, but Cecilia's, who had damned his

daughter's soul for millennia, claiming that Inanna had committed terrible crimes against the House. How true those claims were, Arjumand had begun to doubt. But how could he disprove them? He was tied to Sharibet and to the House's traditions. Well, he would find a way, somehow.

Sharibet stopped holding his right hand the minute the guests vanished, and turned without a word to re-enter the house. Neither of them had spoken of where she'd spent the night before Mathilde's Appointing as a Protector of the House—in Cecilia's bed. *It doesn't matter. It is the way of djinni.*

Cecilia, damn her lying eyes, had decided to become the Protector of the Malaga House in the Moorish kingdom of Granada, all the way across the Middle Sea. Let her expend her spite against Castilian King Alfonso with his ambitions to conquer Granada. Let her conceal her eternally girlish features from behind a veil! Let her escape from the interest of the Templars, who had watched her in hopes she would lead them to their missing Knight-Brother Michael. For all these good reasons, the House would fabricate a tale of Cecilia le Byzantine's fatal illness on her journey back to Venice. Would that it were true, and not a convenient lie!

* * * *

Two hours later, Sharibet called a meeting of the council of elders in the Red Solar, to discuss a report that had come in by pigeon. She was smiling. "Basil confirms the Mongols have indeed established a court in Persia."

As the elders exclaimed over this new opportunity, Arjumand yawned.

Sharibet's eyes narrowed as she mind-whispered to him.
*A court means nobles. Nobles means *perfume*. We can go back.*

I'm sure Leila wants to go, he replied, referring to Basil's long-time consort.

Discussion amongst the elders was brisk, but soon decided. Theodoros, Master of the House in Constantinople, announced: "Elder Sister Leila is needed here to help reopen the houses that were closed during the Mongol invasion. Lord Arjumand can best help Elder Brother Basil to ensure the arrangements with the Mongols go well."

He did not want to travel to Persia, but in peacetime the elders ruled, and the djinni obeyed. When danger threatened, the djinni ruled. It was the way of the House. "When do I leave?"

"Next week will be soon enough," Theodoros replied.

Sharibet rose, smiling, and said to the assembled council.
"To your tasks. We'll meet again tomorrow."

After murmurs of farewell, the room emptied. Sharibet lingered at the door as if about to speak, but he gave her no encouragement, and she departed, silently.

He wandered around the house, not-quite-accidentally finding himself in the workroom of Philomena, the Master's mother—and the official record-keeper. She was reading, sorting, and filing basketsful of reports.

He winked at her and she simpered, enjoying their flirtation, though she was old enough to be his great-grandmother. "Any news today?"

"Nothing of import, Lord," she said in a normal tone of voice, even as she casually unrolled a short scroll for him to read in a glance.

He skimmed the closely-written page, heart thudding. The only word which registered was *consummation*.

Oh, God. She's only eleven years old. God save her.

He closed his eyes, opened them. Shook his head. Bent to kiss Philomena's wrinkled cheek, told her how pretty she was, and wandered out again. He wound up in his own chamber without memory of how he got there. The letter occupied all his thoughts, all his emotions.

It began with a spatter of ink across the expensive paper.

To my right worshipful mother Lady Mathilde,

Most entirely beloved mother, in the most loving manner I recommend me unto your good motherhood, beseeching you daily and nightly of your maternal blessing, evermore desiring to hear of your welfare and prosperity, which I pray God to continue and increase to your heart's desire.

My right worshipful husband Evrard is in good health and does prosper, and we are now properly wed. This past spring I began my woman's courses, which we had not expected until I should have reached the age of fourteen or fifteen years, but my right worshipful mother-in-law, Madame, advised us that the time was right to consummate the marriage.

The next letter strokes were a different color, as if the ink had dried.

Evrard assured me he was hale, afterward, but he made a great noise that sounded as if he suffered mortal pain. I also suffered greatly, though Madame assured me that this was only to be expected from my virgin state. Wherefore I beseech you of your motherly pity regarding my future marital duties, for I know not what to expect. Should there have been such a great pain? Am I condemned to suffer this every time, until I should get with child? Can you perhaps, out of your wisdom and healing arts, prescribe a cure for your suffering daughter? I have heard of a remedy compounded from sweet butter or goose grease, and if you know of this remedy, I humbly beg that you will send me the recipe, for the love you bear me.

A large ink blot marred the following section, where the handwriting changed from an awkward scrawl to carefully-lettered script:

Of the affairs of this estate I have some small news. The mares are all in foal, though my father-in-law, the right worshipful Sieur de Bressoux, resents mightily the stud fees paid to Grandpere Gerard. Madame has promised to teach me how to take the honeycomb from the beehives in my garden, though I have discovered that doing so destroys the entire hive, and this act must therefore be conducted prudently and only in the waning of summer. I wonder whether it would be possible to take only a portion of the comb without said destruction.

(The ink changed color again.) *I beg you for the favor of a reply, and I pray that God keep you and your right worshipful husband Sir Dominic, and that your marriage brings you much of joy.*

Please remember all the love I bear for you, my lady mother, and I pray you will keep me in your prayers for you are constantly in mine, with devout love and thanks to God for all your love and care for me. Written on the Monday before Candlemas by your daughter, Blanche.

How could he get her the services of a skilled midwife? It was clear that her husband's family was not taking the best care of her. Perhaps if he wrote to Matthias, the Master of the Liege House, and requested that they find someone for her...

They wouldn't help her. *Whosoever aids the Cursed One shall share the same damnation. Let her be forgotten.*

Oh, God. He was powerless to help her.

He shut his distress away in a disused cupboard of his mind, locking the door tight. Deliberately he forgot his care, lest Sharibet find out through their bond of blood. Went about his duties, planning for his journey to Persia.

He'd never been to Persia. It would be ... interesting.

* * * *

House of the Rose, London, Tuesday, March 22, AD 1261:

"Oh, thou art greedy, my little Sun-child," Tirgit said, stroking her son's silken cheek. Robert was nearly done nursing, his sucking growing slower as his eyes drooped and his body began to relax. Soon his mouth slipped away from her breast, and he fell soundly asleep.

Tirgit cherished the silence. Only a month old, her son already had a will—and a voice—of his own. Her son, the Apkallu.

It was great honor to become a djinn's concubine. Heaped up honor, to bear Lord Michael a living child. Honors beyond what she had ever imagined—or wanted—to earn a Crown of Service. Agony beyond bearing to imagine what her life would be from now until forever. Endless service to the House. Sacrifice. Death. If she even survived her Transformation, her soul laid utterly bare in a blood bond with her lord.

Lord Michael had been so happy, after the wrenching hours of her travail had passed. He had come to her, kissing her tenderly on the brow. "Oh, mine own sweetheart, you should see how he shines, like an angel, or the evening star! He is Utu, lately my cousin Robert, returned to us. Thank you for this precious gift." Joy radiated from him. "And now you, too, will be young forever, and immortal."

She had forced herself to smile at him, despite her sick apprehension. She had been born outside the House, and knew the brutality of such a life. She had seen for herself the dire shortage of Protectors, and was so grateful for the safety that he and the other djinni provided the House. She could refuse him nothing, no matter how much she feared the risks of Transformation.

And she *was* afraid, racked with terror to her marrow. Afraid to die, and leave her son motherless. Afraid of being reborn into a miserable existence far from her true family. Afraid to endure innumerable lifetimes before she was Found again.

But her worst fear was of Michael's reaction if he learned the secrets that she kept hidden. What if he turned his face from her? She could never return to the easy camaraderie of the House, either.

Not that she was entirely welcomed now. She didn't mean to cause conflict among the kin—indeed, she was always on her best behavior when she visited the London House, but Joan de la Rose had only infrequently had contact with djinni, and treated them with awed reverence. Tirgit's easy familiarity—gained from her upbringing in intimate contact with Lady Cecilia and Lord Dominic, Cecilia's consort—grated on the Mistress of the House. And Joan wasn't the only cousin who felt that way.

Joan and others suspected her of worming her way into the companionship of the Apkallu for ambition's sake. But it wasn't true. She loved them. Cecilia, whose cool beauty concealed vast loneliness; Michael, her lover and the father of her child, still suffering from agonizing nightmares; and Dominic, kind-hearted and irrevocably crippled from the terrible events that had occurred in Beziers over half a century ago...

Ah, she was damned already: one foot in each world and her heart fixed in neither. Tirgit rocked her Apkallu child in her arms, and wept a little.

She had just put Robert down in his cradle when she heard the chime of the dovecote bell. A messenger pigeon had arrived. She drew the coverlet over her son and hurried to the parlor, where the rest of the members of the House gathered to hear the news.

Tirgit hoped it was a green message, informing the London House that its members had arrived safely in Constantinople for Lady Mathilde's Raising and Naming. But the bit of parchment in Edmund's fingers was edged with a vermillion stripe like a streak of fresh blood. Fear pierced her heart like a crossbow bolt. *Did the ship go down?*

Good news *never* arrived in scarlet-marked packets.

The young pigeon-keeper's hands shook as he held the tiny document up to catch the light. His voice was clear as he read the message aloud. "Dated 2 Rabi' II, AH 659 (6th March, AD 1261) From Arshya, True Name Mul-Ban, Master of the Konia House, to all his kin: Elder Sister Nadira (True Name Nadira) and Lord Kobegun (True Name Dumuzi), condemned and executed yesterday for crimes against the House. They shall be Forgotten until the eighth generation. Details follow in a letter."

Everyone around her erupted in a shocked buzz of frustrated speculation. At the far end of the world from Konia, the letters might take weeks or months to arrive at their ultimate destinations, being handed off between captains of ships and leaders of caravans.

Tirgit was too relieved to join in the guessing game. Her loved ones were safe! Then the enormity of what had happened began to sink in. Nadira, a daughter of the House who had been Transformed—as Tirgit would be Transformed—had trespassed against the House. She wondered, just as her kin did: had Nadira's newly-acquired power overwhelmed her? Had Dumuzi suborned her? Why would she have harmed the kin?

Tirgit swallowed hard, fighting nausea. Stumbling, she made her way back to her room, seeking the comfort of her son's presence, her thoughts whirling in a maelstrom of anxiety. She had known that her Transformation would be risky. Mortal flesh frequently could not survive the stress of being remolded into divinity. But now she had another worry. Sharibet's seeress had served the House faithfully for many years ... and yet, she had not survived her probation period. What if Tirgit followed in Nadira's footsteps?

She rushed over to the cradle. Robert was asleep, one corner of the coverlet clutched tight in his tiny pink fist. She stared down at her son, until the room's door was flung open and banged against the wall.

Robert winced in his sleep, but then stretched and relaxed again. Michael rushed in, his cloak sodden and boots spattered with mud. He must have come straight from Westminster when word reached him of a red message. "Tirgit? Are you ill?"

She tried to reply, but the words choked her. Instead, she opened her arms, and let him embrace her, feeling his steady warmth even through the layers of wet clothing that separated them. She hid her face in the damp folds of his cloak.

Wisely, he did not press her. Instead, he simply held her, stroking her back, until she was ready to speak.

"I'm afraid. What if I'm not strong enough to be a Protector?"

Michael reached down and stroked Robert's cheek with his fingertip, his expression affectionate as he gazed upon his

son. "I have faith in you, Tirgit. I think you are strong enough to become a djinniah, and to be a good Protector. But do you truly wish to?" He gave her one of his rare, sweet smiles, and bent to brush her forehead with a kiss.

Held captive by the weight of his expectations, she nodded. Oh, he would never force her, but he would be so *disappointed* if she backed down now...

May he never find out about the depths of my deceit.

* * * *

Venice, Thursday, July 7, 1261:

Mathilde saw Venice for the first time this life from the deck of the *Rose of Famagusta*. It had rained earlier, and now, toward the end of a golden afternoon, the Doge's palace, the Cathedral of Saint Mark, and the fine houses blurred against streamers of clouds connecting sea and sky. A hundred galleys like their own approached and departed, jockeying for favorable positions.

"It's beautiful," she told Dominic, her husband. Her consort.

His lips quirked with a small smile. "So are you."

She knew he was just flattering her. He was the handsome one. She loved his lips; the shape and fullness of them just perfect in her eyes, and framed so elegantly in the black spade of a beard; his black hair, with its dramatic band of white; his clever fingers; his wit...

She was a woman past her prime, with lines upon her face and a figure not much plumper than when she had been deathly ill as a mortal. She would never have first call upon

his love, only upon his loyalty, and his desperation. He counted on her promise to heal him from the crippling injuries to his aura that gave him agonizing pain whenever he tried to join with another djinni in the act of love, and that left him less than fully competent in his duties as a Protector of the House. That had caused him, in the past, to commit dreadful acts to mitigate his pain.

She had every intention of fulfilling her promise, but she worried that she would not have the skill. Even intensive consultations with Cecilia had not given her the confidence she needed. Her treatment plan was to infuse his aura with the life force from her aura. Yet her cravings for blood had not lessened with time. What if she couldn't heal him fully because she didn't have the strength? The only other remedy for mishaps to the aura was death; a return to the Underworld, and rebirth. And rebirth was always a gamble. If she could not heal him...

She would mourn.

As would her brother, Michael, and his pretty young mistress. Tirgit's feelings for Dominic were simple: she loved him like a father. Michael's feelings ... were more complicated. The tangle of birth and rebirth had left two soul-bound lovers both as men. Dominic, a Hellene born in Pergamon and grown to manhood in the army of Alexander the Great, found no impediment to their union. Michael, born a Flemish Christian and grown to manhood in the celibate brotherhood of the Templar knights, did.

And if she discovered how to fully heal her consort? He would cleave to Michael, not to her.

Leaning her forehead on his shoulder, she thought, *You know I will do the best I can for you, Ninshubur-who-was. For your sake, and my brother's.* In healing him, she might find her own self-forgiveness.

If only she had acted more swiftly, during the chaos of their evacuation from Beziers. If only she had realized how badly he would be scarred by the deaths of the djinni he was irrevocably linked with, she wouldn't have screamed faint-heartedly at the sight of the crossbow bolt punching through his forehead. She would have helped him...

The past was done and gone. That life was over, but she was alive again, with the opportunity of righting one large wrong.

She forced herself out of her fruitless regrets. "Is that the doge's boat?" She admired the deep red gondola, as gilded as a bishop's chair, covered with glittering sea-horses.

"No, that's the House's, come to greet us."

The captain of the *Famagusta* stepped up to the rail beside them. "Lord Dominic. Lady Mathilde," he said, respectfully. "The *Rose of Venice* is signaling that we should stand to for boarding."

"I look forward to the meeting," she said to the captain, noticing that Dominic's eyebrow flared. With surprise? Distaste? He faced the other ship, his posture very upright, legs widespread, one arm akimbo, fist planted on his hip, the other gripping the rail for balance. Or battle?

The two vessels glided together gracefully. A man of the kin climbed over the railings to stand on the owner's deck of

the *Rose of Famagusta*, a shorter, similar man at his back. This second man bore a covered ax.

"Lady Mathilde," the first man said, bowing, hands clasped at his waist. "I am Simon dalle Rose, called Simon Minor, True Name Hathor-hotep, Master of the Venice House. Remember me! It is good to meet again." He did not introduce the Man of the Ax.

She searched her memory for his earlier incarnations. His name meant 'Hathor is pleased' so she should have known him. *An officious priest brings her a papyrus scroll to sign, a receipt for an offering of ten bushels of beans. She waves him away—she is healing a young mother who hopes to bear twins to term—but he insists. She shouts at him, but regrets it when she feels one twin die in the womb ...* "Simon Minor, I do remember you. It is good to meet again," she said with a forced smile. "I'm so happy to be here in Venice." Which was true. "I look forward to disembarking and meeting the rest of the people of your House."

"Well, as to that," he said, not looking at Dominic. "There is a matter I must make clear to you."

"And have you no greeting for your Protector, Lord Dominic?" she asked, new annoyance building.

"We have not yet accepted his return as Protector, Lady Mathilde. These are the conditions under which we will provisionally accept him: the House enjoins him to refrain from the buying and selling of slave children under the age of twelve years within the city for the duration of his stay within the Most Serene Republic of Venice. Any other commercial

actions may be engaged upon, but this buying or selling, he shall not do."

Dominic bristled under her restraining hand.

Mathilde kept her voice calm. "May I buy or sell children, should I require domestic or kitchen slaves, or desire to dispose of them?"

"Lady Mathilde, no such prohibition applies to you, unless you desire to put such children to the same use he did," Simon Minor said, looking down his nose at her—a fair feat. In his fine shoes and velvet gown, he was still a head shorter than she was.

"What if I require human blood to complete his healing, as I have pledged to do?"

Simon Minor gulped. "Then you must go elsewhere to obtain it. We of the Venice house are not willing that you—either of you—should drink human blood while you reside here."

"Your action may leave crippled the Protector upon whom you rely," she said frankly. "On your head be this decision." To Dominic she said, "Does Genoa need a pair of Protectors?"

He shook his head, his mouth in a grim line. "We're posted here, my dear, until we're directed otherwise." His glance swept the Man of the Ax, and the frowning captain of the *Famagusta*.

Mathilde bared her teeth at all of them. "What a happy meeting this has been. When can we disembark?"

"When you have given your word you will abide by this, our covenant," said Simon Minor.

"I will abide," Mathilde said.

"I will abide," Dominic agreed. "Though I cannot promise I will have the strength to serve you fully."

"The strength you have is more than we need. So heard. So witnessed." As he finished this statement, he breathed deeply, relaxing from his stiff posture. "This is my brother, Marco, True Name Marcellinus."

Marco bowed, and said, "It is good to meet again. Remember me! And, er, welcome to Venice." He put the ax down behind his leg.

Simon Minor was giving the captain a brief instruction. He said to them, "We'll see you again at the House." He and his brother jumped back onto the gondola.

"Well, that was instructive," Mathilde said as the gaudy boat pulled away, oars flashing in unison.

"Yes. And deserved, I must admit," Dominic said, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. His eyes followed the retreating gondola, except for one moment when they flicked to gauge her expression. "Did you think your welcome to Venice would be friendly?" His mouth tightened. "Just wait until we arrive at the House."

Chapter Two

To the most noble lady Mathilde at the House of the Rose in London:

Right worshipful and most loving and kind mother, I recommend me to you and beseech you of your blessing. Please it you to know that I have received no letters that come from you in over a year, and if I have by any means given you offense I beg your pardon most heartily and sincerely and desire most fervently to receive news of you once more. I pray that this humble missive finds you in good health and cheer, and that the affairs of your right worshipful husband do prosper also.

As I did write in my last letter, Lady de Bressoux, my good-mother whom I called Madame, succumbed to a fever and passed into God's keeping just after the Feast of St. Anne this past July. May our Lord have and keep her soul. She always took a most kind and tender care of me, and taught me much about the duties of a chatelaine, duties which have now fallen to me. As for my husband's younger brothers, they fell ill also but God be thanked, they are well-mended from their fevers, and now are thriving again.

Of my lord de Bressoux, who is my right worshipful father-in-law, I have grave tidings. He is much altered in mien since the passing of his good lady wife, and broods unrelentingly upon his losses, finding solace not in prayer but in wine or beer only, may God assoil and comfort him. Of late, he is over-critical of my good husband, accusing Evrard of being a

bitter disappointment. I will avow that my husband has never had the temperament nor the bodily strength to become a knight, having suffered much from various childhood ailments which weakened his flesh, but I believe that it is grief that fuels my lord's words, and I advise my right worshipful husband to pay little heed, and rather to forgive his father's harshness with good Christian charity.

After much debate upon the matter, my lord has agreed to continue payment for Evrard to complete his schooling in Paris, though not without recrimination. Though I believe that his learning there will stand the affairs of our estate in good stead in all matters.

All of my lord de Bressoux's hopes of knightly accomplishments now rest upon Evrard's brother Henri, the second-oldest son, who is presently a squire in the household of the Sieur de Cheneux. My lord de Bressoux has expressed hopes of arranging a match between brother Henri and Genevieve de Micheroux, who is a gently-born maiden of a noble family in this district, and heiress to her father's estate. Genevieve is a pleasant and accomplished maiden, near unto an age with me, and I hope that we will become friends as well as sisters-in-law.

Of other tidings, I have discovered that I am with child. I pray you, most loving mother, to give your help in this, for I confess myself afraid. I know well that it is my duty to provide my well-beloved husband with children of his body, but I fear the great travail that lies ahead, the pain and blood of Mother Eve's great sin. I had hoped all sins forgiven by the intercession of our most merciful Lord, even those sins not

committed by us but rather by our ancestress, but I will strive for humility and to submit to God's will though I understand it not. Nevertheless, I pray for your good comfort and hope that you will send me any advice as you feel right and worthy. Without the presence of Madame, may God keep her soul, I find myself dependent on the consideration and advice of the serving women, who mean well and offer advice on whether the sex of the babe can be determined from the shape of mine eyes, but no other helpful things.

Most worshipful mother, above all things, I desire your presence and your company to comfort me, and I beg you with all humbleness of spirit to come to me before my travail begins, which I expect shall be some time in December, before Christmastide.

My right worshipful husband and esteemed father-in-law send you their greetings and hearty welcome, and I pray that the Holy Trinity have you in governance, and recommend me to your husband the right worshipful Sir Dominic.

By your humble daughter Blanche, written on the Feast of St. Dionysios (Sunday, October 9, AD 1261)

* * * *

Ca' dalle Rose, Venice, Monday, March 13, AD 1262:

Mathilde, snug in her sunny solar overlooking the busy Grand Canal with its passing galleys and gondolas, picked up the next letter in a neat stack, sorted by date, that the Mistress of the House had left for her.

She slit open the oilcloth covering using a penknife, once again feeling her inadequacy as a djinniah. Dominic used his

hand of air to perform such routine tasks, but she found the use of her powers difficult.

The world stood still as she read the cover note: *Dearest Mathilde, I send you greetings from the court of the Mongols at Tabriz in Persia and regret the delay in forwarding this well-traveled letter to you. Matthias de la Rose in Liege reports that Blanche survived and is presently in good health. Her son, unfortunately, was stillborn. I regret to pass along ill news, but I thought you would want to know. By my hand on Christmas Eve AD 1261, Arjumand abd al-Warda, once known to you as your cousin Roland D'Agincourt.*

Blanche was alive. *Alive.* The pain in her heart was as sharp as if she had used her knife to cut it out. Her pity for her daughter's sorrow was more grievous. Would she have been able to save her grandson's life if she had been there even though Blanche was the Cursed One?

Mathilde bent her head as pain bloomed above her right eye. In a moment, it had engulfed her, and she sat rigid, gingerly supporting a head like a ringing anvil in her quivering hands. Her head!

Mathilde!

Dominic's mental shout only added to her agony.

Damn. I'm halfway across the city! I'll be there soon.

She wanted to tell him no, to let him finish his important tasks wherever he was bound. But it hurt too much. And then she was comforted to know that he was coming to her. In the meantime she applied the universal remedy for ills suffered by djinni: a jar of blood. It held the pain at bay. She nursed another jar until the liquid within grew too solid to

drink. Feeling almost as nauseated by the smell as by the torture within her skull, she endured somehow until Dominic came at last, bursting through the door, concern writ large upon his handsome features.

"My dear, what is wrong?"

She took his hand and placed its back against her forehead. Its coolness eased the burning. "Hurts," was all she could say aloud. Even sharing thoughts with him was too much effort.

"Hold your aura back," he warned.

She struggled to comply with his command, knowing from bitter experience what would occur if her aura mingled with his while their thoughts were linked.

His hand of air passed through her forehead, feeling for the source of her trouble. "I can find nothing physical. No knot, nor clot of blood, nor bruising. There may be bleeding, but I cannot tell how much, if any. I'm sorry. I can see nothing wrong."

But her head *hurt*. There was one thing he could do for her. "Speak to me the Word of Sleep," she whispered. "Rouse me in six or eight hours, and let us see how I feel."

He kissed her cheek, his lips hot as fire against her skin, echoing the fire burning within. She heard his voice, and felt his aura—the undamaged sector—pass through her again. The pain fell away into the darkness with her.

* * * *

She woke with sorrow for a nameless grandson who never breathed. She remembered how hard it was to breathe, when

she had suffered from consumption. She had feared to die, but never that she would be cut off from ... acid tears leaked from under tight-closed eyelids.

After a long time of not-thinking, she gathered her courage and sat up, in her own bed. Dominic must have moved her. Her head had almost stopped hurting. She fished with a tenuous hand of air for her bronze mirror, from the shelf above the bed, and almost dropped it. It seemed so heavy. When she could hold it in her actual hand, she examined her reflection. There was no apparent change, nothing but an accentuation of the lines she had earned by years of life.

She passed a diagnostic hand of air through her head. Just as Dominic had reported, she found nothing damaged there.

Where had that pain come from? The last thing she'd been thinking about ... the bloom of pain was so intense that she dropped the mirror and fell face-first into her pillows, clutching her forehead and whimpering.

An eternity later, the sound of running feet thundered through the broken shards of her consciousness. *Mathilde!* whispered Dominic, as concerned as a husband whose wife was giving birth.

Birth was painful. Was she giving birth from her forehead, like Zeus in the tales men had told—and gotten wrong—about her siblings? Would a new Athena burst forth, a stillborn goddess, never breathing? She pleaded for the baby to come forth, or die. This cross-wise state might kill both child and mother together. She might welcome such a death, if this pain did not end soon.

"Whatever you did, you did it again," said Dominic.
"...same remedy." The fine-grained nothingness of his aura passed through her again, and then she was nothing herself.

* * * *

This time, when she awoke, she deliberately thought of Venice in this day and age, and of its changes in the sweep of time. The city was lively, filled with beautiful houses and colorful boats! She loved her fireplace and chimney, when the weather grew chilly. Venice was warmer than Ypres, but the winter was damp and cold. And there were marvels in the cathedral of San Marco, stolen treasures from looted Constantinople.

Heartened by the ease of pain, she dared to rise again.

Dominic sat sleeping in a hard wooden chair alongside her bed, his brow furrowed even at rest. He had learned the skills of a physician, as the whole of the House did, but it was not his specialty. He was best at making sure all elements worked in harmony to accomplish the plans another decided.

She missed her brother, Ea, fiercely. He had the same limitless curiosity as ... she elided the name of the one who had been Forgotten, and concentrated on Michael himself, his skills and eccentricities in this life and those before. He was a father now, and she wondered whether he was an indulgent parent or a strict one. Had becoming a Protector allowed him to at last pursue his interests, his vast curiosities, or was his time occupied fully by the requirements of the kin? How tame he seemed now, in this violent and ignorant age!

But then, most ages were violent and ignorant. And families strove ever to survive them, and produce more family.

She lay back, panting, on her pillow. She was fine, fine, as long as she did not try to think of ... *someone*.

Rage simmered, but she couldn't touch it.

There was a trick she knew, of not-thinking. Of closing a thought away so that, while not forgotten, it was not actually available, either. She performed this trick, and performed it again, putting walls of not-thinking between herself and the thought which caused her so much pain. Presently, she was able to breathe again, and to think everyday thoughts without running into ... into something that hurt.

She didn't want to sleep. She had too much to think about ... soft veils of impenetrable silk wrapped around an unacceptable thought, and she found a distant pleasure in contemplating the pattern of roses and peacocks frescoed onto the ceiling plaster and winding around the great wooden beams.

Dominic stirred. "Are you feeling better?" His smile was tentative, awaiting her yea or nay.

"Better," she said, her voice as hoarse as if she'd been screaming. She couldn't remember. Perhaps she had been.

"I'm glad," he said, smiling definitely. Without needing to be asked, he handed her a freshly sealed jar. She broke the seal and drank deeply of lamb's blood. Faintly she smelled the lamb itself, roasting in the kitchen.

Warmth and strength spread through her. "I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't know." And she didn't, really, since she'd hidden that thought away.

"I saw your daughter's letters," he said, trying to reestablish some sort of normalcy.

Her daughter ... thoughts skittered around and under walls that weren't there, bouncing and diverting into long-lost labyrinths.

"I regret the loss of her child. But she'll no doubt do better when she's older."

Yes. There was something there that made her sad.

"I saw that she begs you to visit her. I'm certain that Master Simon would allow it, if you wish. He has no reason to refuse you."

No! Panic threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't do that! There was something terribly dangerous about that! If only she could remember ... something ... but there was some good reason why she couldn't remember...

"Mathilde? Don't you want to go?" He was frowning now, clearly puzzled by her reaction.

"No," she said, the word rasping in her throat. "No, she has her own life to live, and it doesn't include us."

"She could—"

"No," she said again, wondering faintly why she was so adamant. There was some reason...

"She's better off with her new family. I'm not certain I could conceal that I've—what I've become," her mouth said for her. That sounded perfectly reasonable. Maybe she could even make herself believe it.

"As you wish." Dominic frowned, but he didn't press her. "Do you wish anything else?"

"More sleep," she said. She would sleep.

She closed her eyes, weary and sick at heart. Something she dare not think ... or reveal, even to herself ... Keeping secrets was like keeping a nest of breeding scorpions. She just hoped her barriers worked against nightmares.

She willed her body to work harder on banishing the last of the headache, and fell into sleep. There was something she was not supposed to remember when she woke up...

* * * *

Ca' dalle Rose, Venice, Feast of St. Longinus (Thursday, March 16) AD 1262:

Dominic studied his consort, an uncomfortable mixture of emotions plaguing him: worry, dissatisfaction, friendship, lust, and stifling gratitude. He needed her so badly. How could she sleep for such a long time? What could strike down an Apkallu? Was her illness communicable to others?

She was pale. Should he try to wake her now? Or let her sleep longer?

He didn't like his own hesitance. Surely he could make such a small decision! He worried at these thoughts as he stared at her slumbering form, enthralled at the beauty she had regained in her time as a djinniah. Her face had a stillness to it that reminded him of the appalling funereal sculptures so beloved in this semi-barbaric age. Down her pillow streamed golden hair, painfully similar to Michael's—

She made only a small movement, but it reassured him that she was still alive. He crossed the distance from the door to the bed in a few strides. He took one limp hand, brought it to his cheek, and cupped her face with his free hand.

Mathilde.

"Mmmm?"

Mathilde, it's time to wake.

She groaned. *Head hurts.*

It hurt him to see her so weak. He snatched a jar of blood, opened it and held it up to her lips, raising her body to meet it. *Drink up. You must regain your strength.*

No. She pushed the jar away. *Smells bad.*

Drink it anyway. It's infused with medicine.

She stopped resisting, and he emptied the jar into her mouth as fast as she could swallow. He gave her another, as well, murmuring encouragement. When she protested drinking a third, he let her down, gently, and finished it himself. He took a damp cloth and washed her face, remembering the bittersweet moments when Michael had given him a bath at the temple of Alexander, so many years ago. Similar feelings of helplessness now made him want to ensure that Mathilde returned to the bloom of health.

Tell me what's wrong with you.

*Just tired ... *

Mathilde, you've been sleeping for days. That's not 'just tired.' What should I do to help you?

Let me ... how many days? Alarm filtered through their connection as she struggled to open her eyes. *Help me.*

Based on the image she sent to him, he washed her eyelids clean of crusted sleep with the cloth. She blinked hard, showing red-veined, bleary eyes. *Help me up.*

He raised her into a sitting position, her back against the wall, supported by pillows.

Water!

He got her a cup.

She drank that, too, and moaned, when done. "What army marched through my mouth?"

He smiled, but didn't answer. "Do you know what's plaguing you?"

"Can't remember." She rubbed her forehead with a pale, shaking hand.

Shocked, he thought of the possibilities. *Poison. Trauma. Brain hemorrhage. Aura degeneration. Coercion. Self-inflicted amnesia.*

He remembered his own trauma: ... *the crossbow bolt punches through his unprotected forehead. There is no pain, but he can't blink. He can't lift his arm to test the damage. He can't see his aura. He can't feel anything anymore. The houses tilt around him and the sun-bright sky, oddly divided, fills his vision...*

To his Seer's eyes, her aura looked as it always did. Passing his hand of air through her head, he checked again for damage. *Nothing.* Sniffing, and not delicately, he could detect no odor that would indicate poison. That left only coercion. Or amnesia.

Nothing else would affect her memory. But what sort of coercion would Mathilde be under? Who would have set it? Or what would she want so violently to forget?

What had she been doing, when he had first heard her call for help?

He searched his memory: the fallen letter, open to a childish signature ... *Most worshipful mother, above all things, I desire your presence and your company to comfort me, and I beg you with all humbleness of spirit to come to me before my travail begins...*

A letter from her daughter, whom she had not written since Constantinople. Whom she had not mentioned since then. Whom she never discussed, since she had revealed the girl was one of the Forgotten of the House, who had not yet served out her generations of penance.

Self-amnesia, then. He sympathized with the impulse.

"But you feel better now? The headache has gone?" he asked heartily, gauging the depth of her wince. "Rise now, and take a bath. You have duties, and Simon and Cosima grow anxious at the sight of a bedridden Apkallu."

She groaned, but threw back the coverlet and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Like a sleepwalker, she submitted to his tyranny of washing and dressing, and by the time he was done, she was fully awake and ready to work again.

But before he left her to her stack of correspondence, while she was dressing in a clean shift and gown, he went through all the envelopes and scrolls, looking for any other missives to extract. There were none in this pile.

He kissed her clean, damp hair at her forehead, took his leave, and went to have a word with Cosima, the Mistress of the House. No more letters from Blanche for Mathilde! He would take those missives himself, so that his consort would not be troubled by word from one she clearly desired to forget.

She might be angry with him, or feel betrayed, if she discovered what he had done, but he could bear this for her, to protect her. She did so much for him.

* * * *

Tuesday, September 12, 1262:

Mathilde was working alone in the pungency of the stillroom of the Venice House, putting packets of herbs together for the use of the kin while traveling. The bark of oak and horse chestnut for diarrhea. Hops, balm, centaury, and chamomile for a tisane against seasickness. Olibanum and stavesacre, crushed and mixed with barrow's grease, for a poultice against lice. Agaricus and wormseed, powdered and mixed with syrup of roses for worms. Grape leaves and cumin leaves, to stop bleeding...

Preparing medicines was not part of her regular duties, but she found the simple actions soothing to a spirit too often overset by the many restrictions of her daily life as a Protector. For many years she had been a merchant *femme sole*, legal owner of her own business; a respected purveyor of fine furs to noble and commoner alike; responsible to no man but the head of her guild. Now she found her life trammelled from morning to midnight with rules for this, rules

for that, and restrictions to her freedom that often made her long to return to the madness of Sekhmet. She knew exactly where she'd start the razing of this house of tyrants...

A knocking at the door, just louder than the pounding of her pestle into the hard marble mortar, jolted her from her bloody daydreaming.

"Enter."

Cosima, the Mistress of the House, came timidly through the doorway, towing her twelve-year-old daughter, Simonetta, by the hand.

Mathilde knew Cosima better, now, and didn't believe her submissive demeanor for a moment. If there was one thing Cosima was going to get, it was her own way.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Mathilde gathered her temper—but admitted to herself that it might just be worth a meeting with the Man of the Ax to finally be rid of this tormenting shrew. She bit her tongue, and put down the pestle, placing her palms on the work table. The bits of dried leaves and seeds scattered there dug into her skin. "Yes?"

"Lady Mathilde, I'm sorry to bother you—"

Mathilde gritted her teeth. What a liar! "Mistress Cosima," she cut her short. "You know this is my meditation time, when I compose my mind and heart to perform my duties. What is so important that you choose to disturb me now?"

"Lady," Cosima picked up the thread of her grievance without missing a stitch. "My daughter, Simonetta, is much disturbed in her mind. Go on, dear," she said to the girl, a plain but lively child, usually full of mischief, but never the

malice her mother kept carefully hidden. "Tell her what makes you fear to sleep at night."

"Lady Mathilde," the girl began properly. "I just—I worry for Lord Dominic. I know you work with him every day to heal him from some grievous wound—though he never wears a bandage we can see, even in the bath—but why does he scream so much? Every day!"

Mathilde glared at Cosima, showing all the dislike and contempt she felt. What a despicable ploy, dragging her daughter here to make her own resentful point.

"Your mother has told you that I'm healing him," she began. The girl did not deserve her wrath. She was an innocent pawn, a child not yet Raised and Named, and unmarried, though the same age as Blanche. A searing headache added to her woes. She tried to rub away the pain with trembling fingers, but the ache persisted. What had she been saying? "It's kind of you to show such care. The treatments are painful—"

"Why?"

"It's not polite to interrupt your elders," Mathilde corrected her, when it became obvious that Cosima wouldn't. "If you would like your questions answered, you must be patient and listen to them, yes?"

Simonetta, not entirely oblivious to the undercurrents swirling through this interchange, glanced anxiously between her mother and Mathilde. "I beg your pardon, lady."

"Pardoned, dear. The treatments are painful because I'm not *allowed*—" Mathilde let most of her frustrations out in that one snarled word—"to use the medicines that would be most

effective. As to why this is, you must ask your parents, and see if you can get a better answer from them than I can."

At the wounded-puppy look in Simonetta's eyes, she relented enough to try to soothe her. "Some treatments are painful, like digging out a splinter, or putting salve on a burn. Some hurts take longer to heal, and may not be visible—like the aching bones your great-grandmother Ginevra had, before she passed away last year. It is kind of you to care. I am doing all I can for him."

"It's just—so much screaming. I like Lord Dominic," Simonetta admitted in a rush, carefully not looking at her mother's disapproving face. "I hope he's not suffering too much."

"I'm sorry that you've been disturbed," Mathilde added somewhat stiffly. Mother of God, what she would give to have her own house again, but Venetian real estate was so expensive—

A bright and welcome thought occurred to her.

She was rich in her own right. Her business in Ypres was flourishing under the direction of her former apprentice. There was no reason why she couldn't go back to it, expanding her customer base to all the ports the Venetians served, buy a house in Venice, and take Dominic and herself out of this poisonous atmosphere.

She smiled at Simonetta, causing Cosima to widen her eyes in surprise, then narrow them in suspicion. "What are you—?"

"Simonetta, you're a clever girl," said Mathilde, ignoring Cosima's impertinent question, as she would soon be able to

avoid her uncomfortable presence. "You've just helped me plan a new and much better treatment."

The girl knew better than to ask anything else at this point, raising Mathilde's estimation of her even more. "Thank you, Lady Mathilde," she said, curtsying.

"You're welcome, my dear. And I thank you. Cosima, you may go now."

Cosima gave, rather than a curtsy, a short kick to the floor, and towed her daughter to the door. Once beyond it, Mathilde heard clearly Simonetta's plaintive question, "Mama, why are you angry with me? I did just what you asked—"

Dominic, Mathilde sent to her husband, who was in the middle of a meeting in the Rialto. *I've just had the most wonderful idea ... *

* * * *

Ca' d'Albrizzi, Venice, Feast of the Epiphany (Saturday, January 6) AD 1263:

Rippling light from the canal outside the window dappled the ceiling of Mathilde's rented house on the Beccarie canal, moving in time to the agony that gnawed at Dominic's aura. His throat felt hot, swollen from screams barely dampened by a gag, and reflexively he tried to curl away from the source of pain. The tightening prickle of rope around his right wrist reminded him that he was tied down. He could not escape from the burning wave sweeping across his body like a splash of vitreous spirits. He groaned, and tried vainly to curl up in a ball, to shield himself. The sexual arousal that kept him open and vulnerable retreated, leaving him wilted and sore.

"Do you want me to stop?" The voice was low, feminine.

For a frightening moment he thought it was Sharibet, mocking him again, but then some coherent thought returned. *It's Mathilde. My consort. Michael's sister. She's healing me.* The throbbing in his head threatened to swallow his thoughts but he forced a single word through their bond.

No.

She sighed, cool breath ghosting over his belly as she gathered her determination and his pain lessened by degrees. Then came a soft brush of fingertips against his hip, moving lower as he tensed with mingled dread and anticipation ... moist warmth surrounded his phallus, delicately lapping at him.

The tide of pleasure began to return, buoying him up with poisonous languor, opening him, until he arched against the restraints, moaning at the caresses that inflamed yet did not satisfy him.

This was the pleasure that preceded the pain, that *must* precede the pain, for him to be healed.

When his soul and his aura lay open and vulnerable once more, each of his senses straining for completion, the brilliant blue-green sweep of her aura wings embraced him. In another instant, the agony began again, her light invading every wound in his own aura, filling the ragged patches with corrosive strength.

He screamed despite his firmest resolve. He didn't want the neighbors to hear him, and he didn't want Mathilde to stop, not when he had sworn that he would find a way to be healed, find a way to be worthy of Honoria—now reborn as

Michael—once more. He tried to clamp his jaws shut, but he was hampered by the gag. The sound poured out of him like vomit.

The burning sweep of Mathilde's healing faltered. "I can't do this any more," he heard her say distantly.

Please ... don't, he begged, around the iron scourge of pain. *Don't stop. Not now. I can bear it. I'm sorry I screamed. I'm sorry—*

"I hate this! Hurting you when I'm not even certain that—" A feather-light touch swept across his aching brow, combing through the sweaty strands of his hair. "I hate being so ... so diminished! Forgive me."

No—no, please. I'll do better. I'll do anything—

Her fingers wrapped firmly around his aching phallus, and with a few firm strokes, gave him an empty release. He shuddered, gasping, nearly weeping as his shields fell back into place, sealing him off from the touch that hurt him. That was healing him, one minute fraction at a time. That was bringing him closer to Honoria ... Mathilde must continue!

But she wouldn't, despite his pleading. She removed the gag first, then one by one, she released the ropes around wrists and ankles, leaving him stranded on the vast expanse of their bed like a shipwrecked sailor on a desolate shore. He felt the warm softness of her body press against his side. "Sleep, husband."

He felt the softest touch of her aura, dragging him down. Her arm was across his waist, anchoring him as he drifted away, unable to face what her refusal to help him meant.

* * * *

He awoke some time later. The light of the short winter afternoon still played in watery patterns across the walls and ceilings, so he hadn't slept long. He was alone in the bed, and the worst of the aches had passed.

He sat up creakily, feeling every hour of his sixteen centuries, and saw that Mathilde had not abandoned him. She sat in one of the ivory-inlaid Byzantine chairs near the window, reading from a thick bundle of parchment pages.

"How do you feel now?" Her tone was apologetic, her expression a now-familiar mixture of concern and guilt.

"Better. Well enough." He longed to ask her whether she meant to discontinue his treatments altogether, but a cautious probe revealed her mental shields up and tightly sealed. He decided to wait.

"A courier arrived from London. There's a letter from Michael."

Michael had written? He restrained the urge to leap out of the bed, weakened as he was, and snatch the parchment from her hand.

"Tirgit's Transformation is scheduled for the spring equinox," Mathilde continued. "Michael says she's asked for you." She frowned. "I must say it's rather impertinent for her to demand your presence, even if she is to be elevated to djinniah. You spoiled her, Dominic, and gave that poor girl the wrong idea about her place in the world..."

Dominic lay back, hand over his eyes, torn between the customs of the House and his own feelings. It was true that he had raised her like his daughter. What if he never saw her

again? The initial Transformation from mortal to djinni was a risky event. And even if she survived, Tirgit would be bedridden for months while her body and her spirit slowly adapted to the vast changes that had been wrought in her. He thought of Tirgit: trusting, impudent, her blue-green eyes alight with mischief more often than not. His starved heart filled at the thought that *she* needed *him*.

But should he really go and foment another scandal in the House? She was Michael's concubine, and would be his consort, if she survived the Transformation. *You haven't seen Michael in eighteen months*, whispered the voice of temptation.

Mathilde's next words took him by surprise. "But I think you should go."

He wanted to, oh, how he wanted ... "What about us?" he asked, harshly. "I thought we were making progress. I want—" He didn't want to abandon the venture he had embarked upon with Mathilde. Going back now, still a failure...

"I can't. Not—not for a little while."

He felt bone-deep weariness and disgust at her own defeat trickling through their link, despite her shielding. For the first time he became aware of exactly how much it cost her to inflict pain in the guise of healing.

"Ah." Though his joints ached with the aftermath of her treatment, he rose from the bed, and put his arms around her shoulders. "Then, I'll be back by midsummer." *And perhaps you can bear to help me again.*

Chapter Three

For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came.—*Book of Job, 3:25-26*

Westminster, England, February, 1263:

Tirgit opened the door to Michael's rented house as he set his foot wearily on the shallow stoop. She greeted him with an ecstatic embrace before he fully came inside. "Lord, guess what?" she begged, dancing up and down on her toes as if she were a child again, and not a woman grown, a wife and a mother.

He had hoped to find some peace at home. He had spent all day in attendance on King Henry, who was frantic due to news received from the Marches, where Welsh leader Llywelyn ap Gruffudd had begun a revolt. Worse news had come in that former friends of Prince Edward, convicted last year of mismanagement of the Prince's financial affairs, had joined the uprising.

Tirgit's brilliant smile, and the most probable reason for it, left him even wearier.

"You received word from Dominic, then? He's coming for your Transformation?"

Her smile faltered at his unenthused guess. She nodded, but worry made her look even younger, and somehow frail.

He's coming!

It was more difficult to dampen Honoria's pleased response in his mind, so Michael simply ignored her, with great effort. Dominic's visit would cause inevitable disruption of the calm, happy life he had built for himself here in England.

He put his arm around Tirgit's shoulders and steered her inside, out of the cold wind that was blowing raindrops through the open door. Inside, the house was dim, and smelled of smoke, but it was warm. "Is my sister coming, also?"

"I'm sorry, lord, no. But she did write to you," Tirgit whispered.

He damned himself for ruining her simple pleasure. "Not your fault, sweetheart." He dropped a kiss on the dark braids crowning her head. Inside, she preferred to go without a veil or wimple, and her hair carried the light scent of rosewater. "The Venice House probably didn't want to be left without both of its Protectors."

She seemed unconvinced, and cautious of saying anything to upset him further.

"Did we get any other correspondence? Anything from Liege?" He was hoping for another report on his niece Blanche, courtesy of the Master of the Liege House. Michael dared not correspond with her directly, because the Templars kept watch over his known relatives in hopes of tracking down their missing Preceptor. Blanche's situation was troubling: she had been declared 'of the House but Forgotten'—although what her crime had been, no one would tell him, and his own unreliable memory refused to supply an answer.

Tirgit shook her head, looking stricken, and it was a relief to see the parlor door open. Bess de la Rose emerged, with young Robert clinging to her hand.

"Papa!" Robert detached himself from the maidservant's hand, and launched himself unsteadily at Michael. Halfway across the tiled distance separating them, he lost his balance and fell over.

Tirgit gasped softly at the audible thump, but Robert picked himself up with a grin and flung himself forward again, running on short legs to clutch at Michael's knee.

"Wet!" he declared, as Michael reached down and swung his chubby body up and around. He squealed in delight. "Again, Papa! Again!" he commanded, and Michael complied, unable refuse a command from his son.

His son ... Even now, the thought made Michael stop in amazement and a gratitude so intense it squeezed his chest with almost physical pain.

At two years old, Robert's features were beginning to emerge from the generic sweetness of infancy. He had inherited Michael's sea-blue eyes, but his thick thatch of hair was Tirgit's—black Saracen hair—and Michael expected that his son would become a Protector who might easily walk in both the Christian and Muslim worlds. Certainly, his mother spoke to him in Arabic, and sang the songs she remembered from her own fractured childhood, while Michael and the people of the House spoke to Robert in English and French.

He loved his son. And as for Tirgit, his wife and Robert's mother, perhaps it was not the same intensity of passion that had marked Honoria's relationship with Menelaos, but he *did*

love her. She was intelligent, loyal, and affectionate. He liked her smile, and her impertinent teasing when he found himself sinking too deeply into melancholy reverie. And she was a warm and enthusiastic bedmate. Who could want for more?

And yet Michael did, or his other selves did.... *Menelaos's quick smile glimmers in a shadowed, muslin-draped room that smells of roses, then he puts his lute aside. "Now that you're awake, I can think of a better diversion than music..."*

He pushed aside the memory with the same strength of will that he used in denying the memories of his last conversation with Dominic, when he—no, when *Honorio*—had mourned their lost life together, and given Dominic his quest for healing.

Had he succeeded yet? Was he coming to London alone because Mathilde had healed him?

God, let it be so! Honorio prayed.

No, Michael must not anticipate a future that could never be. A life apart. That's what he had built here. He had a wife. A son. It was enough. It had to be enough.

Michael lifted his son to his shoulders, and followed Tirgit up the stairs.

After the candles were extinguished, he made love to his wife, showing her with lips, and tongue, and hands, and hands of air, just how precious she was to him.

She fell asleep nearly at once, curled up against him, her breathing deep and even. Michael lay awake, listening to the rain beating against the shutters. Their lovemaking, enthusiastic as it was, never fully satisfied him. Nothing short of a full joining with another djinn ever would.

No one but our beloved, whispered Honoria's voice in his mind.

Finally, sleep came, but brought with it the horrors of another lifetime.

On the night of Honoria's first wedding, at eleven years of age, she clings to her new sister-in-law's waist, face buried in her lap, as a switch descends mercilessly on her bare back, her buttocks, and the back of her legs, leaving stripes that burn worse than nettles. Her skin is on fire, and it takes every ounce of strength she has not to scream. She won't give her tormentor the satisfaction. She won't. "I'm going to whip the devils out of you, Honoria," her new husband, Thiudabold, pants, as he wields the switch. "I promised your father I'd cleanse you of your foul sorcery." Honoria dares to look over her shoulder, and sees him, gray-haired and red-faced, as he raises his arm for another blow. To her horror, she sees that he's also aroused, his tunic tented where his phallus presses against thin cloth.

Another blow ... two ... three ... "Fredegunda, attend our guests," he barks, and Honoria tries—and fails—to hold onto the other woman, her only protection. Then Fredegunda is gone. Thiudabold barely lets the door close behind his sister before he shoves Honoria down. Half on and half-off the mattress, the wooden bedframe digging into her back, he forces her legs apart. Hands drag against her buttocks, the sensation nearly unbearable against the newly-inflicted injuries, and then she is invaded by something blunt and much too large, that stretches, and tears, and hurts. She tries to wriggle away, but his hand upon her flat chest holds her

immobile. She can only weep as she burns with the agonizing humiliation of his assault. Marcus, save me, she prays, having abandoned her pleas to a deaf, uncaring God. Help me, brother! Help me!

Then the scene shifts. It's a half-year later, and she's on her back, in the dark, stinking room of Glaukos, their new owner, who is pumping vigorously inside her, grunting and gasping and pulling her hair. "Don't worry, sister," she hears Marcus say. He's sitting against the stained wall, in a ragged tunic, forehead resting on bare, skinny knees drawn up to his chest. "Lord Menelaos will come for us." "No," she tells him. "He can't. We haven't met him yet." Marcus shakes his head. "Then you'll have to save us, sister..." She tries to kill Glaukos the rapist with a sword of light, just as she killed Thiudabold, but Glaukos laughs as the weapon passes harmlessly through his balding head. He batters her, inside and out, with his man's weapon. Marcus looks up, his eye-sockets empty, his cheeks stained with trails of blood. "Where's honest metal to do your work? Sister, did you think you could save me by using only magic?"

A sword! She needs a sword. She reaches out her arm, frantically groping around the pallet. She has a sword, she knows she has one. The Draper-Brother assigned her one, and the Templars assign punishments for any lost equipment. But her hands encounter only the hard-packed dirt of the floor. Glaukos's fat fingers dig into her shoulders. "You little whore! You were supposed to be a virgin, and your brother, too. Now I'll never get my money's worth!"

"NO!" Michael came awake, his throat vibrating from the force of his shout.

"Lord? Lord! Please wake up!" Tirgit's expression, in the light cast by his aura, was frightened.

He groaned hoarsely. His racing heart started to calm. "Just the same old dream, Tirgit."

"It's been months since you were troubled by it." She arranged herself against him, her head on his shoulder, her arm across his waist, comforting him. "I thought you were free of it."

"I thought so, too."

"Would you like...?" She bared her scarred forearm, offering the sweet comfort of her blood.

He shook his head. "No, no. Go back to sleep, mine own sweetheart."

She clutched him tight, then soon enough, her breathing slowed, and her arm lay heavy and limp across his torso. But Michael stayed awake, searching futilely through his disordered memories of Honoria's lifetime. There was something about that sword of light, something important. Something he ought to be able to remember.

But as always, coherent memory eluded him, and he was left only with the fractured images of nightmares.

* * * *

London, March 15, 1263:

Tirgit watched Robert play gleefully with a set of carved wooden blocks. He sat in a square of weak sunlight coming through a glass-paned window, trying very hard to smash a

green block to splinters by using a red one as a hammer. He giggled at each hollow reverberation.

Since they were in the parlor of the House of the Rose in London, a thick, green and tan Egyptian carpet cushioned the worst of the racket, but Tirgit felt each crack as a blow to her heart. This was the last time she would sit with him alone as his mortal mother. It was her last chance to simply be Tirgit, one of the kin of the House of the Rose, and not Elder Sister Theodora, djinniah and Protector.

She shivered. Perhaps she should have stayed at the house she shared with Lord Michel—no, Sir Michael de Murat, she reminded herself to call him. But Michael had left early that morning to go hunting with Prince Edward, who was newly-returned from his failed attempt to contain the Welsh rebellion. The prince, once more in conflict with his parents, was aggressively courting the loyalty of foreign knights. A royal invitation was a compelling reason to miss the arrival of the visitors come to witness her Transformation, and Tirgit suspected that Michael had been relieved to find himself thusly called away.

She knew he had his own secrets, as she kept hers.

So after some thought, she had decided to travel down-river to the House in London with Robert and the maid, Bess, to be on hand to greet the visitors. But tensions in the House were also running high.

The life of the djinni should be left to the Apkallu, to those who have the strength to bear it. She had heard that opinion over and over since the news of Nadira and Kobegun's evil deeds had reached England's shores two years ago. And she

had seen in the kin's eyes the unspoken thought: *If Nadira, born to the House, and raised in Mother Sharibet's own household, could fail so badly, what hope was there for Tirgit, born outside the House, to succeed as a djinniah?* For many Crown of Service djinni had been made in the past, and most of them had been Forgotten for the crime of acting according to a djinn's nature—drinking blood, and taking life against the will of the House.

In fact, the one person she was most eagerly awaiting, Lord Dominic, was himself under suspicion for terrible acts in Venice three winters ago, almost stepping over the line of causing harm to the House.

Terror, her never-distant companion, nibbled her bones. Would she have the strength to resist such a powerful desire, one that even Lord Dominic, kind, efficient, considerate Lord Dominic, nearly succumbed to? She didn't know. But of one thing she was certain: if her djinn nature ever led her to endanger her son, or any other child—she would run to, not wait for, the Man of the Ax.

Tirgit stooped to give Robert a quick and fervent kiss, then sat back down as she heard the sound of feet pounding up the stairs. Was this sour Joan—or her representative—coming to reprimand her for Robert's playful noise?

There was a preemptory knock at the parlor door, and then it opened. Tirgit braced herself for the expected recrimination, and felt her chest tighten as she recognized one of the children who served as lookouts on the House's quay.

"Cousin Tirgit!" panted the girl, who was perhaps eight years old and flushed from running. "The ship is coming!"

* * * *

A few minutes later, she left a protesting Robert behind in the warmth of the parlor, his wooden blocks forgotten as he wailed and struggled in Bess's capable embrace. She hurried down the stairs and then stood shivering on the quay alongside the other kin, watching the fat-bellied cog approach slowly, its Rose banner snapping smartly in the rain-spattered breeze.

Tirgit pulled her squirrel-lined cloak more securely around her shoulders and strained to catch a glimpse of the passengers on the deck, looking for a tall figure, his black hair blazed by a single streak of white.

It wasn't until the ship had moored alongside the wooden dock that stretched out from the quay, and the gangplank lowered, that she saw him. Gravely handsome, unmarked by the passage of the years since she first met him, he wore his customary sober grays and blues, the silver pommel of a sword gleaming beneath his cloak.

She heard her kin let out their collective breaths. Like the others, she folded her hands at her waist in the millennia-old gesture of respect for their Protectors.

"Lord Dominic, it is good to meet again!" they murmured in unison, Tirgit echoing them dutifully.

Her head bent in respect, she watched from beneath lowered lashes as Geoffrey and Joan stepped forward to greet Lord Dominic, their expressions politely anxious. He spoke

briefly to them, and a gust of wind blinded Tirgit with a spray of cold rain. She blinked to clear her vision, and saw Dominic approaching her.

Her heart began to beat wildly as she stood waiting, her chin tucked in and her hands clasped at her waist by sheer force of will.

He stopped in front of her. His face lit with a joyous smile. "Tirgit, child! You're looking well, and more beautiful than ever." He spread his arms, and she forgot her vow to be restrained and deferential, to observe the etiquette of the House. She leaped into his embrace. "Lord, I've missed you," she said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. "I'm so glad you're here."

His arms held her as tightly as she held onto him, and he placed a kiss on the crown of her head. "I have missed you, too."

It was hard to let him go, but she made herself.

Happiness blossomed when he did not release her. She did not want to relinquish the contact, either, no matter how Joan—or any of the others—glared at her. Dominic took her arm in his, and proceeded with her toward the House. He stopped frequently to exchange greetings with the kin and to meet the maids and lads who had arrived since he was last in London.

Everything would be all right. He was here. With Lord Dominic's help, she would overcome the ordeal of her Transformation.

* * * *

Later, after supper had been served, and the children—Robert among them—put to bed, Joan and Geoffrey finally withdrew, somewhat grudgingly, from the parlor.

Dusk had fallen, and candles lent the paneled chamber a cozy intimacy as Dominic and Tirgit awaited Michael's arrival. A hundred questions about her impending Transformation clamored in her mind, but where she had been too embarrassed to ask Michael, she now found that she couldn't ask Dominic, either.

She refilled the goblets of hippocras, a highly spiced wine favored by the English, and handed one to Dominic.

He gave thanks with a smile and took a sip. "Has Michael been treating you well?"

She blushed, unsure of how much to say to Dominic, who had been married for centuries to Michael's previous incarnation. Would she be wounding Dominic's heart to expound on her good fortune in sharing Michael's bed? And what would her husband think, if he knew that she was discussing his virtues as a lover?

It seemed safer to change the subject. "I've been very happy, even if it does rain all the time here in London. And I'm so grateful you came all the way from Venice to witness my Transformation."

"I was glad to be invited. But what of you, child? Are you certain that you wish to do this?"

She cradled the goblet in her hands, warming the cool metal between her palms. "I want to protect those I love. My son, most of all. But I'm greensick with nerves," she admitted. "What if I can't—control..."

"Ah." Comprehension permeated the quiet breath of that syllable. His expression became blank in a way that she recognized. He was concealing some deep emotion, but whether sorrow, disappointment, or rage, she couldn't tell.

The taste of cinnamon and cloves in her mouth grew oversweet as the seconds drew out. Dominic did not speak, his gaze turned downwards to the cool patterns on the carpet. At last, unable to bear it, she threw herself out of her chair, and prostrated herself at his feet. "Forgive me, lord! I was insolent!" She would gladly have borne any of the brutal whippings inflicted on her in the days of her slavery, if only it meant an end to this interminable silence.

"Tirgit, don't!"

She felt hands on her shoulders, raising her up.

She dared to glance at him. He seemed solemn, but not angry. With a sigh, she wriggled around, so that she was sitting at his feet, leaning against his knee. "I'm sorry. I'm worried, that's all."

His hand dropped to her head, warm and heavy, resting on the braid that she wore pinned in a coil. "Have you spoken to Michael about your concerns?"

She rested her cheek against his thigh. The Venetian robe that covered his legs was a little damp from the rain, and it smelled of salt and smoke under the musky scent of wool.

"No."

"Why not?" She felt his fingers stroke over her hair, brushing lightly against the top of her ear. It was a familiar sensation, one that brought back a hundred nights spent at caravanserais along the Silk Road. After a long day of walking

or riding, there would be a dish of spiced mutton and rice for her, and sometimes a wonderful hot bath. Afterwards, Dominic would sit by her pallet and tell her a story, stroking her hair until she fell asleep, untroubled by the nightmares that had plagued her in the slave-dealers' pens.

Dominic's fingertips were resting against her neck now, and she wondered if he could feel her pounding pulse as she spoke. "You know if I said anything at all, he would try to forbid me to go through with the Transformation. And I do want it! I just..."

His hand moved lower, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I would be more concerned if you felt no reservations about this, Tirgit. It is a decision that holds enormous consequences."

She released a breath. "But when I heard about Nadira ... and after what happened to you in Venice, I started to think that maybe..."

"You're nothing like Nadira, as I have cause to know." Dominic stopped. "Her Transformation was a mistake. Did you know that Arjumand wrote to me about you? He contacts me so rarely." He gave a short chuckle. "He tried to convince Sharibet that Nadira was unsuitable to be a Protector, but he was overruled. He hoped that Michael or I would examine your fitness before proceeding with the Transformation."

"And if you found me unfit?"

He did not reply, and the possibilities flashed in Tirgit's mind. They could refuse to Transform her, though denying her Crown would rouse the kin to outrage. Much easier, if she never awoke. Everyone knew Transformation was risky.

"I see," she said, finally. "Do you think I should withdraw my consent?"

"No," Dominic said with sincerity. "The House needs you, and ... Michael needs you. But the choice is yours alone. That is one of the reasons I traveled here: to be certain of your intent."

"Only one of the reasons?" She lifted her head.

It might have been a trick of the candles, but he looked suddenly ancient. His forced smile didn't reach his eyes. "Mathilde needed a respite from her efforts to heal me."

"And so she drove you out?" Anger replaced the fear that resided in Tirgit's chest. "How *could* she—"

"Peace, peace, little one!" Dominic's smile was genuine. "Mathilde did no such thing. I agreed that perhaps removing myself from her presence for a while would ease her sense of failure. She tries so hard..."

"There's no cure for your injury, lord?" Tirgit asked, softly. "But I thought—Lady Cecilia once told me that you were healing. That your powers were nearly what they once were."

"Cecilia's healing..." He shook his head. "It was the blood that restored me, Tirgit. I didn't know it at the time—"

"Well if it is blood you need, lord, take mine!" She pushed back the sleeve of her gown, baring her forearm and the inside of her elbow, patterned with small scars, old and white, pink, and the newest scabbed. "Please, lord, drink."

For a moment, she thought he might refuse. "Your generosity humbles me, Tirgit," he said, cupping her elbow. He stooped, and she felt the warmth of his mouth against the

inside of her wrist, followed by the familiar sting of razor-sharp teeth making a tiny cut.

"I want to help you," she whispered. "I would do anything for you—anything." She concentrated on happy memories, just as Cecilia had taught her: *... he lifts her finger to his mouth and bites, then says, "Dearest one, it is good to meet again, for I remember you. I know your True Name." ... a hawk flies high over sharp, snowcapped peaks ... she strides back and forth across the tiled floor, exclaiming at everything, until she notices the echoes her voice brings forth. All at once she stands still and begins a poignant love-song, quietly at first, then louder and louder, pausing at the ends of verses to listen to the reverberations from the stark walls...*

His throat moved convulsively as he swallowed a single mouthful of her blood. His gray eyes went black, and his face suddenly flushed. A shuddering sigh escaped him as he lifted his head, licking stained lips. An invisible pressure clamped firmly over the wound he had made, a smear of blood very red against her pale skin.

"How is it," he asked softly, when his eyes had cleared to gray again, "that you and Mathilde see something worth saving in this ruin I've become since Beziers?"

He removed his hand of air, and Tirgit shook down her sleeve to cover the new mark. "You've changed from the Ninshubur I first knew when I joined the House," she said slowly, searching for the right words. "But I've changed from that Lal-hamun who served the goddess Ninharsag, too. Time alters everything save the bonds we share together. In this life, I've only known you as *you*, Lord Dominic, my savior,

my..." Her cheeks grew hot, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "...father."

To her shock, Dominic laughed bitterly.

Still on her knees, she stared at him, uncomprehending. Had she insulted him by speaking her most secret feelings aloud?

"Little fool," he said, exasperated affection underlaid with something darker, angrier. "Do you know why I purchased you that day in Tashkent?"

"You recognized me..." Tirgit's voice trailed off uncertainly at his grimace.

"After I tasted your blood."

She nodded, apprehension returning like a coiling serpent.

"I couldn't see auras, then. I had no idea who you were," he continued, cruelly. "All I wanted was a young slave with healthy blood. I wanted to drink you dry so that I could do my duty as a consort and fuck Cecilia in 'the way of djinni.'" Irony frosted his tone.

"But you spared me." Tirgit clenched her fists in her lap. Her thoughts were a maelstrom of denial and grief and anger, and yet ... and yet...

"Because you are a daughter of the House." Dominic's expression closed again. "Many others ... were not."

Sick understanding twisted in her belly. "Was that what happened with the ... children in Venice? But Cecilia and I had left already. You weren't ... joining with..."

"I was searching for Honoria's next incarnation, though I was blind. If you hadn't written to me from Ypres about Michael ... Even though the Venice House forbade me to buy

slaves in their city, I'd probably be doing it in Ragusa, or Athens, or somewhere. The blood of innocents returned my Seer's eyes, but my aura is not yet whole again, and nothing Mathilde has done has healed it. Only the blood of mortals is effective."

A tiny thread of sorrow wound through her constant fear. He trusted her enough to share this awful secret. But would Michael offer her a similar forgiveness? *If only I can keep Cecilia's instructions private. I don't want to live with my thoughts and memories naked and exposed, the way my flesh was on the auction-block.*

"I'm so sorry, lord," she murmured, raising herself and hugging his knees. "I thought that if you could find yourself unable to control your desires, what chance did I have? You give me hope, that when I awaken as a djinniah, I will feel things—*want* things—and yet I will be able to restrain myself from acting upon them."

Dominic shook his head, disbelievingly, but she sensed his self-hatred draining away. "Foolish little Tirgit, and yet so wise."

Chapter Four

They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed.—*Psalms*, 102:26

House of the Rose, London, March 15, 1263:

As midnight passed, the House of Rose lay dark and quiet under the spring stars. Dominic waited, alone, next to a dying fire in the djinni's apartment. An exhausted Tirgit had gone to bed an hour ago, and the rest of the household had banked fires and extinguished lamps. Every sip from Dominic's goblet scraped the inside of his throat as if he were swallowing ground glass, not cold spiced wine.

"*You must live without me. We've been shattered, all of us,*" Honoria had said, eight hundred and thirty-five painful days ago. Michael had briefly allowed her to use his mouth to speak aloud, and let her use his arms to embrace Dominic. She had told him to go with Mathilde, and after all of the ugly stains on his soul had been bared, she had said, "*You have my blessing, my hopes, and all my love.*" It had been those words that had sustained him.

And now, the one he loved best in all the world had not come to greet him.

A fragment of ancient poetry echoed in his memory. He had translated the words carved into the walls of a ruined temple on the night he met Michael, and recognized his beloved in the body of that beautiful youth. *My strength perishes, thus perishes my heart. My mouth is become silent,*

and I cannot speak. My heart is finished, not even remembering yesterday. My bones have been in sickness a long time...

Michael was busy serving as Protector of the House these days, Dominic reminded himself. Hadn't his letters been filled with news of the turbulent political situation in England, as powerful barons sought to limit the king's power for their own ends?

And yet, the house was so silent. Shadows draped the walls and corners of this chamber that should have been illuminated by the glow of a familiar aura. Dominic felt his bones weaken in sickness, and his heart perish. So he drank steadily, choosing to brave the unpleasant taste of the wine for the temporary balm it offered. Perhaps it would drug his spirit enough for him to sleep tonight.

He had just poured the last cinnamon-reeking drops from the pitcher into his goblet when he heard a familiar tread approaching his door.

He froze, scarcely daring to hope, telling himself not to be disappointed if the person approaching turned out to be one of the kin, offering him more hippocras. But there were golden wings pressing against and opening the long-disused link in his mind, and Dominic knew before the first tap came on the door, that he was not mistaken.

Michael had come. Michael was *here*. Dominic rose to greet him, dizzy with wine and relief and joy.

Michael halted in the doorway to the djinni's apartments, the sunshine of his aura pulsing for an instant. Then he smiled, squaring his shoulders as if making ready to carry a

heavy weight, and stepped forward, his sable-lined cloak sweeping behind. "Dominic."

Michael's deep voice brushed against Dominic's soul with a touch softer than sable. The shadows fled, making way for the sun of his beloved's presence. Unable to resist, Dominic closed the distance between them, tilted his head, and touched his lips to Michael's mouth, chilled from the cold night air.

Michael made a small sound, not quite a protest. He returned the kiss, his lips parting, and Dominic felt fingers digging into his shoulders, pulling him closer. Unable now to resist the impulse, Dominic deepened the kiss until he could *taste* Michael, and feel his heart beating strongly against his own chest, even through the layers of wool and linen that separated their skins.

My other soul, my beloved.

Kissing Michael was not at all like kissing Honoria: she had tasted like citron juice, her mouth velvety, her soft skin perfumed with spikenard and roses. Michael's lips were rough, a little chapped, and the slide of his skin against Dominic's cheeks and chin bore the harsh rasp of stubble. There was nothing soft about him, save for the touch of tongue against tongue. He tasted faintly of beer and woodsmoke and his customary myrrh, and instead of a woman's warm curves, the hard pommel of Michael's sword jabbed painfully into Dominic's hip.

And yet Michael's kiss was the salve that soothed all the raw places in Dominic's soul, even as his wings surrounded Dominic's, gold invading bronze until the fusion of their auras

crossed the threshold of pain. Mathilde's treatments had helped, but not enough. *Ah, long-forgotten gods, not enough.*

He tried to bear it, tried to keep the precious contact for longer, but Michael noticed his discomfort, and released him. Dominic felt the pain ease immediately, but regretted bitterly the loss of the warm pressure of his beloved's mouth.

Michael's smile faded into an all-too-familiar expression of guilt, embarrassed color high in his cheeks. "I told myself I wouldn't..." he murmured, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." Dominic wasn't going to apologize. He *wasn't*. He reached out and caught Michael's hand, finding his skin chilled and damp from the rain. "Peace be with you, Ea," Dominic murmured in the ancient language of the House. "It is good to meet again."

"It is, indeed, good to meet again." Michael made a half-hearted attempt to free his hand. His voice was hoarse. "I've—"

* ... missed you,* Honoria's voice whispered through Michael's mental link.

Michael took a step backward, breaking the contact, fighting for control.

Dominic fought, too. *Don't press him, don't ruin this moment by pushing too hard.* After a moment, he found the strength to speak in something close to a normal tone of voice. "You look well, Michael. Come, sit. I'm out of hippocras, but I'm sure I could find some—"

Michael waved aside the offer as he dropped into the nearest chair and made a show of unfastening his cloak, fumbling with the wolf's head pin.

It gives you an excuse to avoid meeting my eyes, Dominic thought. He stirred up the hearth and added more wood before resuming his own seat, taking the opportunity to study Michael's face in the flickering firelight, which brought out the faint lines radiating from the corners of his eyes and bracketing his sensitive mouth. His hair had grown, and curled a little where it met the collar of his tunic.

You look as unhappy as I feel.

When Michael spoke, it was an obvious attempt to steer their conversation away from dangerous waters. "I've had more than enough to drink tonight, courtesy of Prince Edward, who's displeased with his father. Again. Honestly, over the past year, there is no situation the King hasn't made worse by offending those he considers his inferiors."

"And since he's the king, he considers everyone to be his inferiors except for the Pope and King Louis of France, including his son?" Dominic dared to joke.

Michael finally met Dominic's gaze with a rueful curl of his lips. "It took the queen's intervention to repair their relationship, and that only succeeded because Edward was deeply in debt. The situation worsened when the men accused of mismanaging the Prince's financial affairs went over to the rebels."

"Master Geoffrey mentioned that. Do you think civil war is imminent?" *Do you need me to return to England, and serve as Protector by your side?*

"Not imminent, but certainly possible," Michael said, gazing into the distance.

Dominic recognized that expression. Honoria had often worn it during their chess matches, when she was calculating strategy, and assessing her opponents.

Michael explained. "The barons were angered by Henry's obtaining the annulment for the Provisions of Oxford from the Pope last summer. There have been a few threats against the House for serving as the king's go-between with the Vatican. Luckily, our involvement isn't widely known, but one or two nobles sought to harm the kin in retaliation for doing Henry's bidding. I wish I had not agreed to offer Master Geoffrey's services, but the king didn't leave me much choice at the time. We needed his help."

Petitioning the king for his aid in convincing the Hansa to release a captured ship and her crew had been Michael's first duty as Protector in England, Dominic recalled. And he had succeeded where months of Cecilia's efforts had failed. "It's difficult to refuse a ruler," Dominic agreed.

His reply won him a brief lightening of Michael's expression. "But now the king has grown to expect secret—and free—passage on our ships. He's been sending diplomats to Urban, the new Pope."

"Have the barons taken arms against the king for repudiating the agreement he made with them?" *Tell me you need me, and I will come to you.*

"The only thing preventing outright civil war is the fact that Simon de Montfort left this country in disgust some months ago, and no one else has the influence to unify the barons." Michael rubbed his temples, as if his head ached.

Dominic pushed aside the temptation to offer a healing touch, and forced his own hands to lie quietly in his lap. "They're spending more time quibbling amongst themselves than opposing the king?" He had seen it before, many times—a weak ruler saved by the lack of a unified opposition.

Michael nodded. "But that advantage won't last, although Queen Eleanor is once again courting foreign knights to support the king against his barons. And if Henry only had some liking for his own people, he wouldn't need to purchase the friendship of the French and Flemish nobles. His subjects want to love him, but he seems determined to drive them away."

All this talk of politics, when what he really wanted to do was kiss Michael again, to feel that soft golden hair slide between his fingers as the skin around Michael's lips scraped against Dominic's mouth. Caught up in his heated thoughts, Dominic missed Michael's next words. But apparently he was still talking about the king.

"...and when someone in the crowd asked why he had no thanks for such a generous gift, he replied it was just what he was owed, but if the people of London wished to give him a spontaneous gift, then he would thank them. Can you believe it?" Michael said indignantly.

Dominic tried to formulate a reply that wouldn't betray his inattention—or the cause of it.

"Ah, but I must be boring you with all this talk of the English court," Michael said, more observant than was comfortable. He leaned forward. "How is Venice? I have the feeling that my sister composes her letters to ensure I don't

worry about her too much. She wrote that she rented a house apart from the kin ... why?"

Dominic intended to reply with an assurance that everything was going well, but in the presence of the person who knew him best, the lie faltered and died on his lips. "I—it was uncomfortable, living in that House," he admitted. His gaze slid from Michael's concern. "I ... deserved to lose the trust of the kin, after what I did, but, gods, the humiliation of being treated like a monster!"

Michael's silence gave Dominic the courage to continue. "Moving into the new house spared Mathilde the burden of being the guarantor of my continued good behavior. But Simon Minor has yet to regain confidence in my abilities as Protector, and unfortunately, I earned a certain reputation in the city."

"How are your treatments going?" Underlying Michael's cautious words was worry. *Will you start killing again?*

Dominic tried to sound confident. "Slowly." *Believe in my resolve, beloved.* He fought the urge to rub his wrist, which suddenly ached with the memory of a rope burn. He managed to summon a smile, but could see that Michael was not fooled.

To head off further uncomfortable discussion on the subject of his marriage, Dominic rose and picked up a thick packet of parchment from the writing table that stood under the shuttered window. "I've brought letters from your sister, from Arjumand, and one from Cecilia." He handed it to Michael, wishing he could touch warm skin. "And what of you, Michael? Are you happy?" *Have you forgiven me?*

"I have everything a man—or djinn—could wish for," Michael said quietly. "A child—a son of my own flesh. Power. All the books I want ... when I have the time to read them." He chuckled. "And you know what a treasure Tirgit is. I'm grateful for my life. I'm happy." His expression held nothing but conviction, but light rippled uneasily through his aura, as if he found himself submerged in deep water.

"I ... see." Dominic wasn't certain that it saddened or pleased him to see Michael working so hard to convince himself. It was cold comfort to know that he wasn't the only one who found living apart intolerable.

When at last Michael regretfully rose to go, Dominic steeled himself to express just the proper amount of gratitude for his visit. It was too much to hope for another kiss. But Michael had one more surprise left this evening.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he said, a little shyly, and Dominic's heart jumped in his chest.

"Anything," he said, immediately.

"Will you assist me with Tirgit's Transformation? It would give me much reassurance to know that you can step in if I falter," Michael said.

"But surely you will do it by yourself?" Dominic asked, trying to instill hope. "After all, you Transformed Mathilde, and she was very ill."

"I couldn't have done it without you," Michael admitted. "My powers can be erratic. I don't want to risk harming Tirgit, even if she *is* young and healthy."

"Of course I will help you."

He bade Michael a temporary farewell, his heart lighter. He wasn't healed yet. A gulf of old crimes and injuries divided them. Michael remained at war with himself.

And yet ... *He needs me. It's enough for now*, Dominic told himself.

* * * *

London, Thursday, March 22, AD 1263:

A week later, on the day of the spring equinox, Tirgit sat alone in her bedroom in a steaming tub perfumed with a year's wages-worth of attar of roses, hot water lapping over the tops of her breasts. The Westminster house was eerily quiet. Outside, dusk was falling and the candles had not yet been lit.

Tirgit found herself taking deep, deliberate breaths of the perfumed steam in an attempt to find some calm. She sank down, watching the tops of her knees emerge like small, smooth boulders as her chin touched the water. Fear, her constant companion, filled the room. *Death. Transformation. Hunger. Rules. The Ax. Disappointment...*

But she had to go through with this. She had to be strong enough to protect her son until he came of age and took up his own Protector's mantle. She had to be strong enough to keep Cecilia's secrets from the two men she loved best—husband and father.

The water began to cool, and the scent of roses turned cloying.

It is time, she told herself, and braced her hands against the sides of the wooden tub. Time to dry herself off, dress in

the simple white robe laid out on the bed for her, and descend to the Underworld.

Michael came to fetch her a short time later. Dressed also in a simple linen tunic, he gave her a reassuring embrace, then, hand-in-hand, they left the bedroom and went downstairs to the low-ceilinged cellar. The space beneath the house was stone-lined and dank, crowded with barrels and sacks of foodstuffs. There was a single locked room at the far end, used to store expensive items like sugar and pepper.

Tirgit had never possessed a Seer's Eyes, and so she had never seen the legendary auras of the djinni, but as she came to the bottom of the creaking wooden stairs, she could almost feel Michael's great wing sheltering her. Fingers firmly entwined in his warm grasp, she let Michael lead her to the threshold of the inner storeroom. There, she stopped short in amazement.

This small chamber had been outfitted well in advance of today's ritual. It was appointed with embroidered tapestries, thick, soft rugs, and even a large brazier, the glowing coals sprinkled with sweet-scented frankincense.

The day-servants had been given three days free, and the kin who served in the Westminster house had been sent to the House of the Rose in the city. Besides the two Apkallu, only Joan and Geoffrey were present. As soon as Tirgit finished giving formal consent, they would depart the House in accordance with ancient custom.

Michael released her hand with a lingering touch of his fingers. Each participant greeted her with a formal kiss in the English fashion. First Geoffrey, as solemn as if he were

attending an aldermen's meeting, and attired as resplendently; then Joan, her perpetual look of disapproval gone for once, replaced by a surprisingly kind smile. Dominic's lips brushed hers with the lightest of touches. Finally, Michael, his mouth as warm as his hands, infused reassurance.

As she had been coached, Tirgit took her place in the center of the chamber, facing the others. She clasped her hands at her waist in the ancient gesture of respect, and waited.

Dominic was the first to speak. "Tirgit abd al-Warda, first known to the House as Lal-hamun, do you understand why you stand before us today?"

Tirgit nodded. "I do. I wish to accept the duty of Protector."

"Listen well," Dominic continued, his gaze intense. "You know you will be eternally young and powerful, and revered as a Protector of the House." He paused, and she remembered that he had spoken these same words at Mathilde's Transformation two years prior. "Do you also remember that you will outlive your kin and friends? That you will become a drinker of blood, forced to conceal your true nature from all except your kin? Do you still wish this fearsome transformation? Do you accept this burden, and this gift?"

Tirgit nodded again, her hands clasped tightly before her, heart thudding. "I consent to my Transformation."

"Do you consent to your Transformation?" asked Michael, taking up the ritual words. "Protectors lead a difficult life,

filled with sacrifice and pain. If the House should fall, or if you leave its protection, you will be an outcast. Men shall name you demon. Do you still wish this fearsome transformation? Do you accept this burden, and this gift?"

"I consent to my Transformation," Tirgit answered for the second time.

Now it was Geoffrey's turn to step forward. "Tirgit abd al-Warda, daughter of the House, do you wish to enter into an eternal covenant with your kin? To protect us with your god-like powers, and in turn accept the shelter of the House? Do you accept this burden, and this gift?"

For the third time, Tirgit answered, binding herself to her fate forever: "I consent to my Transformation."

Now Joan stepped forward. "Protectors and kin of the House, let it be witnessed and remembered that Tirgit abd al-Warda, first known to us as Lal-hamun, has thrice consented to her Transformation. May she awaken in glorious strength and eternal youth!"

"May she return to us, and remember us," added Geoffrey. He took his wife's hand.

Tirgit was utterly surprised, and deeply touched, to see Joan's eyes streaming tears. Joan mouthed, "Good luck," and then they left.

Dominic inclined his head as he reached the door. "Be well ... daughter."

Moved beyond words, she bowed deeply. When she rose again, she heard the heavy door close. She was left with Michael alone to conduct the rite of Transformation.

* * * *

Michael, arranging soft coverlets of sable on the pallet that had been prepared for them, heard the door shut.

Tirgit, unnerved, was standing in the middle of the chamber. Despite the many months she had spent sharing his bed, and the son she had borne him, she was studiously avoiding looking at it.

He stepped close. When she flinched involuntarily, he asked, "Are you certain you want to do this? Tell me now, before we begin."

"But I consented—" she began to protest.

He laid a finger across her lips. "You know the risks."

"It's not that," she said, lashes lowered, a delicious blush rising up her neck and cheeks. "It's just knowing that Lord Dominic is waiting for us ... for you ... to finish fucking me."

He felt his brow twitch upward at her unaccustomed vulgarity, but said nothing, merely waiting.

"It ... brings back memories. From the time before Lord Dominic found me."

"Ah." Michael had never seen those memories in the blood she had shared with him, but he had suspected their presence. Involuntarily, his fists clenched.... *Honorias is on her back, in the dark, stinking room of Glaukos, their new owner. He pumps vigorously inside her, grunting and gasping and pulling her hair...*

He touched the smooth curve of Tirgit's cheek. She didn't flinch away, so he let his fingertip trail to the corner of her mouth, and, feather-light, traced the outline of her full lips. "It *is* part of the Transformation," he assured her. "It is less

dangerous to take blood when you are relaxed and happy, because less of it is required than if you are frightened and struggling. That's why full consent is so important, mine own sweetheart—if we take too much, then your body will pass over into death."

As he spoke, a brief disturbing image from his nightmare flashed in Michael's mind: ... *cold rain and frantically kicking the mare's sides with his bare heels, trying to put as much distance between him and his pursuer as possible ... suddenly, a crushing embrace from behind, tearing him from the saddle, lifting him into the air. Struggling against his attacker, whipping his head back trying to smash Dominic's nose, kicking his bare feet backward at Dominic's knees ... hearing a deep voice say, "I'm sorry," just before the tearing pain of sharp teeth at his throat...*

Michael blinked. His heart was suddenly pounding, and phantom desperation haunted him. He swallowed heavily, trying to dispel the sudden sickening pain in his head that accompanied the images. It was only a nightmare. It had never happened.

But why did it feel so *real*?

Was his conscience trying to rewrite the past? Certainly, a Transformation by force would have been more honorable than his cowardly acquiescence to Dominic's demand. *His right hand rises and grips Michael's chin in preparation for breaking his neck. "No! Wait!" Michael cries. "I want to remember! Whatever you want! Don't—don't—" He had let fear for his life overcome the vows he had sworn to the Templars.*

The pain began to retreat as he reasoned his way through the image. It would be different for Tirgit. She was not breaking any vows.

"Fear not," he murmured, putting his arms around her, reassuring himself as much as her. He stroked the glossy mass of her unbound hair. "I'll only drink a little bit. Just enough to make you sleep."

She smiled at him, tremulously. "I know lord. I'm not afraid." She drew off his tunic.

He could feel the truth of her words in the steady pulse of her heartbeat against his chest as he drew her down onto the bed. He kissed her as gently and sweetly as he knew how, awed by the utter trust she had in him—in all of them, even Dominic, that twisted bastard. Honoria had once given Menelaos that same unquestioning trust, and Michael ached with the memory of that other lifetime.... *No one escapes the Underworld unmarked.*

He would do his best to keep the honor of Tirgit's trust, he vowed to himself, deepening their kiss. She would survive her Transformation, and the extended period of recuperation. He would make certain of it.

Chapter Five

[If] I take the wings of the morning, [and] dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light [are] both alike to thee.—*Psalms*, 139:9-12

London, Sunday, March 25, AD 1263:

It was the agony that summoned Tirgit's nightmares, surrounding her with images she could not escape. Every injury came back to haunt her with the memories of who inflicted it, be it owners, or overseers, or even her fellow slaves, who took whatever advantage they could when opportunity presented it.

The scraped feeling in her throat and a heavy, pulsing pressure in her sinuses brought back the battle between her young body and the fever that wanted to devour it.... *thirsty, so thirsty, yet every choking swallow is punished by convulsive puking. "Leave her," says a voice in Persian-accented Arabic. "If Allah wills it, she'll recover. But I'm wasting no more food or water on her."*

The stripes burning across her shoulders reminded her of the day she was whipped for the first time.... *Even on the third day she cannot bear the pressure of a tunic. Why had*

she thought that her punishment would end after the overseer laid the tenth and final lash with his whip? Walking is agony. Sitting is agony. Sleep is impossible, except in ragged snatches...

And the savage pain in her lower back, thighs and buttocks recalled the night she was enslaved by mounted raiders.... *She runs from her home, blinded by torches, choking on the thick smoke that surrounds her until she tastes it, smells it, feels it burning her eyes. Rough hands snatch her up, raising her impossibly high, hard leather bruising her as she is dropped onto a saddle, and held fast. Endless hours follow, a night that never ends, every jarring hoof beat taking her farther from her Mama, her Papa, her home...*

"Papa!" She whimpered, and heard it as a distant sound, faint and weak as an orphaned kitten.

"Tirgit?" The voice was low, Greek-accented. *Lord Dominic.* The voice of her very own beloved deity. He gave her the strength to swim upwards from the clutching depths of her nightmares. Up, up, up into a blinding light that drove away terror...

"L—lord." Her voice was barely a puff of air. He was here. *I'm safe. I'm home.* The pain faded to mere aches and exhaustion, as if her journey from mortal to immortal had been an arduous ascent. Every bone, every muscle, every hands-breadth of skin felt exquisitely, painfully alive. She forced open her eyes, and recoiled at the glory of light.

Dominic shone with the bronze brilliance of the setting sun, his fond smile barely visible in the blinding glory of his presence. "You're awake," he said, warmly, his tone

incongruously ordinary compared to the divinity of his presence.

She wanted to laugh, but didn't have the strength. "Yes, lord." *Alive! I'm alive! It worked!*

"I'm glad," he replied simply. Then his tone became solemn. "Tirgit, Lal-hamun-who-was, you are a newly-created djinniah of the House of the Rose. 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, and your oath must be binding."

"I swear it," she rasped.

"So heard and witnessed." He made a movement that brought the piercingly sweet sound of a bell. She felt someone enter the room, heard the brief murmur of voices, but it was too much to comprehend. Then the scent of iron and oranges filled the air, and she felt the almost unbearable sensation of his hand lifting her head, and the cool rim of a cup pressed against her lips.

"Drink," said Dominic, and she obeyed, wanting to moan at the sheer pleasure of the smooth, thick liquid caressing the inside of her mouth and her throat, the clean taste of metal under sweet citrus, and the faint feeling of drifting, falling, as if the blood—and she *knew* it was blood—were an intoxicating substance.

Then the flow of liquid stopped, and she whimpered, craving more but unable to summon the strength to ask for it.

The supporting hand behind her head lowered her to the pillow.

"Sleep now," Dominic commanded. "Michael is coming soon. He'll be here when you awaken."

She smiled weakly, and obeyed. This time, there were no nightmares.

* * * *

London, Sunday, April 1, AD 1263:

"Tirgit." The familiar voice invaded a pleasant recollection of her first week in Lord Dominic's care. There had been a bathhouse, and he had paid for the luxury of a hot bath, the first one since she had been taken from her parents...

"Mmmm ... lord, please, just a little while longer," she murmured, deep in her dream of deliciously warm water and the skilled hands of the attendant, who had scrubbed and massaged her from head to foot before allowing her slip into the deep tub. *Was it time already to continue their journey? She wanted to stay in the bath ... they had been riding since dawn...*

"Perhaps we should let her sleep," said a deep voice, not Lord Dominic but just as dear to her.

"Mama!" Her eyes snapped open, and focused on a splendor of intermingled gold and green sitting on the top step next to her bed. The last remnants of her dream faded away, and she knew that she was at the House of the Rose in London. Those angels were her husband and her son.

"Mama!" The green light said, again, querulously.
"Mamamamamama *Mama!* Down! *Down*, Papa!"

"No, Robert," Michael said. "Your Mama isn't feeling very well right now. I don't want you to jump on her."

Through the brightness of two auras, she saw that he was restraining their son on his lap with one arm and holding a muddy rag ball in his other hand. Michael's wings were considerably larger than Dominic's, she was surprised to note, and shining like the sun at noon. Robert's aura was almost as large as his father's, the vivid green of springtime grass, but much fainter. He had evidently been playing outside in the courtyard, for his tunic was dotted with mud. At Michael's refusal, Robert's face began to screw up and Tirgit knew that tears and loud sobbing would shortly follow.

"It's all right," Tigrit said, faintly, her need to comfort her son warring with the thought of the active toddler clambering over her over-sensitized body. "Come here, Robert."

Michael lowered the squirming, dark-haired little boy to the bed, but kept him pinned in place with a firm hand. "Don't jump on the bed," he warned in a father-voice that inferred 'or you'll regret it.' "Mama needs her rest."

Tirgit heard Lord Dominic's chuckle, and peered blearily to where he sat on a padded bench under the bedchamber's glazed window. "You're a fine one to talk, Michael. I seem to recall having to pry you from this chamber by force, because your son became inconsolable with both of his parents shut away."

Weak as she was, she noticed the longing and pain in Dominic's expression despite his light tone, and saw the answering flash of regret in Michael's face. A desolate voice

whispered in her heart: *They will never love you like they love each other.*

I know, she answered. *But they do love me, and that is enough.*

Absorbed in her thoughts, she almost missed Dominic's departure. "I'll return after dinner," he said, from the doorway. "Geoffrey wanted to discuss borrowing one of Simon Minor's extra ships while the *Rose of Yarmouth* is dry-docked for repairs and caulking."

Michael raised his hand in half-hearted acknowledgment, his attention focused on her.

"Hurt?" Robert asked, suddenly. His dark blue eyes stared at her, blinking. He stood quietly, clinging to his father's hand. "Your flame hurt, Mama?" His chubby fingers traced a small, double-pointed shape.

"He can see it?" she asked Michael, surprised. Only Seers and djinni possessed the ability to see auras. And Robert would not become a djinn until after he had reached his eighteenth birthday.

"He started watching me while you were asleep," Michael answered. "And moving his wings to match mine."

"Flame hurt, Mama?" Robert demanded, again.

"It will get better. Do you want to come here?" With a supreme effort, she lifted up the coverlet, and Robert launched himself in her direction, crawling under the sheets and curling up against her side. Once there, he lay quietly, and her overtaxed nerve-endings were grateful for it.

Michael perched on the edge of the large, wool-stuffed mattress, and reached out his hand in an abortive attempt to

pat her knee before pulling it back. "Tirgit, mine own sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

"Well enough for having been turned inside-out." She attempted a smile.

In response, she saw one of Michael's great golden wings sweep out and caress the length of her body, from the crown of her head to her feet. It felt wonderful, both hot and cold at the same time, and it drove the aches before it like a goosegirl herding her charges.

"Oh," she said, softly. "Do that again, please."

Wide-eyed, Robert watched as his father repeated the gesture, stretching out one pale green wing in imitation. But the light of his aura was weak, and she could not sense its touch.

"He's growing so fast," Tirgit said.

Michael nodded, patting the boy's hip fondly. He reached into his sleeve and pulled out a folded and sealed parchment packet. "There's a letter for you. It arrived a few days ago, with instructions to keep it sealed until your Transformation was complete. Shall I read it to you?"

Tirgit nodded, wonder who had sent it. Lady Cecilia? Mother Sharibet?

Michael let his fingertips brush the back of her hand before he broke the rosette-embossed wax seals. Even that slight sensation was nearly too much to bear.

Brittle fragments, the color of dried blood, rained down as he unfolded the parchment and began to read the contents aloud: "Sharibet sends warmest greetings to you, Lal-hamun, well-beloved daughter, in the hope this letter finds you

awakened in good health and good spirits from the sleep of Transformation. May the coming months bring the return of your strength, and the blossoming of your skills as a Protector of the House.

"In the normal course of events, you would now be given into the care of another Crown of Service djinn, but as Elder Sister Leila and Elder Brother Basil are presently occupied elsewhere, Lord Michael has graciously consented to be your mentor during your probation period. I hope that you are cognizant of this great honor, and that you will humbly and gratefully submit to his tutelage.

"As you presently face a long road to recovery and the building of your powers as Protector, Lady Cecilia has offered to foster your son at the Malaga House so that you and Lord Michael can devote your full attention to your training. Utu is precious to us all."

Michael stopped reading, his features taut with anger. "Robert is only two years old," he said sharply. "That's much too young to be fostered."

Tirgit wanted to object that he shouldn't be fostered out at all, sent far away from them ... *torn away from his family as I was torn from mine*. Fostering out children to other households was the way of the European nobles ... and the way of the House. But it usually didn't happen until after the youngster was Raised and Named, which for Robert would not occur until after he became a djinn.

"Mama hurt!" protested Robert, twisting up to kiss her cheek. "Feel better, Mama!"

Michael's face softened at his son's attempt to help. He scooped him into his arms again. "I won't let anything happen to your mama. Or," he said to Tirgit, "to our son." He swept his wing over Tirgit once more, its touch warmer than goosedown.

Tilting the close-lettered parchment to catch the light from the window, he continued reading aloud: "We urge you in the strongest possible terms to consider Lady Cecilia's proposal. The rumors of civil unrest in England concern us, also, and we feel it would be most prudent to shelter our youngest Apkallu in a safer realm. I hardly need remind you that you have taken on a most solemn duty to our House. We wish most sincerely for your success and look forward to your Appointing.

"Health and eternal life to you, daughter of the House! Written by my own hand on this Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, December 21, AD 1262 in the Christian reckoning."

Michael refolded the parchment. "Everything will be fine," he assured her, again.

She wanted to believe him.

* * * *

London, April 30, AD 1263:

Dominic bent and kissed Tirgit's forehead, the strands of her tousled hair tickling his lips. "Farewell, child. I look forward to your letters, and news of your progress." He straightened up and studied her pale face, shadows of exhaustion and pain smeared under her eyes.

"Goodbye, lord. May we meet again, and soon." Tirgit smiled drowsily at him.

Propped up by a mound of brightly-embroidered pillows, she had yet to venture farther than the close-stool that sat, covered, in the corner nearest the fireplace. Dominic knew from experience that it would take months before she was even as strong as she had been as a mortal.

Remembering their conversation on the day he arrived, he added: "I know you'll be a fine Protector."

"Thank you. I'll miss you ... I wish you could stay lon—" She interrupted herself with a jaw-cracking yawn.

Dominic chuckled. "Rest now, and perhaps you can come visit me in Venice soon." *And if you can convince Michael to accompany you, all the better,* he added silently, hating the idea of their imminent parting.

His visit to London had passed too quickly. He did not relish his return to the tight-lipped, cold-eyed courtesy afforded him by Simon Minor and the others, but staying here was too painful. Michael's attention had been focused on his wife and his son, as was only right, and he had not even needed Dominic's help with Tirgit's Transformation. Add to that the demands made on Michael's time by Prince Edward and the King, and only crumbs had been left over for Dominic. He had been so close to Michel this past month, and yet they remained as far apart as ever.

Tirgit's eyes had already closed, losing the battle against sleepiness.

He left the chamber quietly, and went to seek out Michael.

* * * *

The sound of Robert yelling, "Again, Papa! Again!" led Dominic to the large courtyard at the center of the house, where he found Michael tossing his son high into the air, and catching him again. Robert was squealing with laughter at each ascent, and there was an answering grin on Michael's face as he swung the child around in a circle before launching him upwards again.

A pang ripped through Dominic's chest as he recognized the expression on Michael's face. It was happiness, pure and untainted by the somberness that infused most of his other expressions.

Had he ever seen Michael truly happy before? Dominic thought back, and the nearest memory was that night at the ruined temple in Egypt, when Michael had been alight with youth and curiosity. But even at seventeen, he had been weighed down with burdens—*duty, poverty, honor ...* And so Dominic held his peace and simply watched the two of them. None of the empty parting words he had rehearsed were worth interrupting this rare moment when Michael's face shone bright as the sunlight of his aura.

As he observed, he remembered Honoria's longing for children. Because of the risks of childbed, she had not been allowed to bear children before her Transformation. And after she had been Found, her chastity had been jealously guarded, only surrendered to Dominic on their wedding night, when she was already a djinniah. Her eyes had been as bright as sunlight on water even through her gossamer veil. Her memories, as they shared blood, had been overshadowed by

her painful experiences as a slave. As he cherished her with all of his six centuries of anguished waiting, joy had blossomed, and finally, shared ecstasy. She had blazed so brightly in his arms, a creature of cream and copper and great golden wings. *My flame...*

If only he could remember what he'd felt at that time. The images fade, flat and unreal as faded frescoes, and there is only Sharibet, her small breasts pressing against his abdomen as she takes shallow bites along his ribs, raising blood to strengthen the bond between them. Her aura passes through his, and pain tears through him. 'Remember!' she commands.

He did. And it profited him nothing. For all that Michael had lost in this lifetime, he had gained one thing—a child of his body as well as one of his heart. Watching him, Dominic thought of Honoria, who dwelt as a living presence in Michael's mind. Was she, too, fulfilled by Robert? He hoped so.

After some time, Robert's nursemaid Bess came to fetch him in to his dinner. When he caught sight of her, the boy bolted in the opposite direction, running for the warehouse as fast as his short, plump legs could take him. Amused, Dominic saw Michael sweep out one wing, and scoop up his son, who struggled against the inexorable hand of air.

"No! No! Nononono!" Robert wailed as Michael dropped a hearty kiss on his cheek and handed the squirming toddler to Bess.

"I'll come and tell you a story about the king and queen after you finish eating," Michael promised as Robert was carried away, wailing. He caught sight of Dominic, and his

smile, if not shining with the same unadulterated joy which he had reserved for Robert, was welcoming.

"I was hoping to see you before the formal departure ceremony," Michael said, pulling on the hanging sleeves of his blue-dyed court gown.

"And I, you," Dominic said, inclining his head. All of his carefully-composed parting speeches fled, leaving only longing.

Michael rescued the moment by opening his belt-pouch, and handing Dominic a thick, sealed letter. "For Mathilde, if you please."

He took it, both damning and blessing the simple courtesies of speech. The weight of the parchment packet in his hand, sealed with Michael's new wolf's-head signet, reminded Dominic of something. "Michael, was your sister ever prone to severe headaches before her Transformation?"

Michael looked puzzled. "Not that I know of. Why?"

Dominic nodded to himself. "After we returned from Constantinople, she was plagued by them. They didn't occur often, but when they did, she was prostrated with pain. I wanted to consult with you."

"Of course."

"It seemed to happen only after she had been reading, and in particular, reading letters from her daughter, Blanche, or letters from Arjumand which contained reports of the girl. I surmise that she does not want to remember her tie—"

"That's possible. When I wrote to the Liege House to see how she was doing, I was told by Matthias, the Master there, that my niece is of the House, but Forgotten. He could not tell

me why, or who she was," said Michael, aggrieved. "She was a charming, bright child. It's a shame."

"Have you ever heard of an Apkallu or djinn suffering from headaches from trying to forget something?" He had never heard of such a thing, in all his centuries, but Michael had been a patron of the medical arts, lifetimes ago.

"Let me see." The damaged flame of Michel's Raising and Naming mark flickered madly over the crown of his head. "I can't—it hurts *me* to remember."

Dominic said, automatically. "It's all my fault. I ruined you, and I probably ruined her, too, agreeing to Transform her when she was so ill."

Michel asked, "You say this only began after she went to Constantinople? Then it can't be due to her Transformation. If the weakness from her mortal illness lingers, she will grow stronger in time. It may not be your fault."

"It is all my fault." Dominic swept a palm out in an encompassing gesture. "Look what's happened to us ... my aura crippled, your memories damaged, Arjumand denying being Raised and Named, and now ... Mathilde."

Expressions passed like cloud-shadows across Michael's face—anger, denial, then a reluctant acceptance. "Promise me that you'll never come near Robert."

It hurt that Michael had not continued to deny Dominic's culpability. He placed his hand over his heart in solemn promise.

He tried to think of something, anything to say. Saved by church bells ringing the hour of Nones nearby, marking mid-

afternoon, he blurted, "I should go. The kin will be gathering on the quay soon."

All hope of a parting kiss fled. Dominic studied the pulse throbbing in the hollow of Michael's collarbone, imagining what it would be like to press his lips to that pulse, and to have that touch welcomed. *Honor* always liked it when I ... He quashed that thought. Even if Mathilde's treatments eventually succeeded, allowing Dominic to fully join with another djinn, even if Michael would ever consider resuming their relationship, should Robert live to adulthood and be Transformed and Raised and Named successfully, the fact remained that they could never be consorts in this lifetime.

The House demanded that their Protectors consort as male and female, to influence the social spheres of both men and women. They would never permit two men to declare a consortship. Sexual relations were another matter, of course, but to fully share their lives was impossible—now, and forever.

Dominic tore himself away from his despairing thoughts at a light touch on his arm.

"May we meet again," Michael said softly, in the ancient tongue.

Then he was gone, leaving Dominic to stand alone in the courtyard, the first cold drops of rain running down his cheeks like tears. *This* was what he had to look forward to now: a near-eternal life of lonely separation made bearable only by brief, platonic visits with the one he loved above all others.

Perhaps it was penance for the crimes he had committed, but it had to change sometime. He would find a way to *make*

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it change. And to do that, he had to convince Mathilde to resume her treatments, despite the pain they caused.

Chapter Six

Henry, by the grace of God, king of England, etc, to Simon de Montfort and Gilbert de Clare, and their partisans.

Since, from the war and general confusion existing in our kingdom, which has all been caused by you, and by the conflagrations and other lawless mischiefs, it is distinctly visible that you do not preserve the fidelity which you owe to us, and that you have in no respect any regard for the safety of our person, since you have wickedly attacked our nobles and others our faithful subjects, who have constantly preserved their fidelity to us, and since you still design to injure them as far as in your power, as you have signified to us by your letters, we consider their grievances as our own, and look upon their enemies as ours; especially since those our faithful subjects before mentioned are manfully standing by us and maintaining their fidelity in opposition to your disloyal conduct, and we do not care for your safety or for your affection, but defy you, as the enemies of us and them.

Witness my hand, at Lewes on the twelfth day of May, in the forty-eighth year of our reign.—From Flores Historiarum (a 13th-century chronicle ascribed to the monks of St. Albans and of Westminster)

London, Friday, May 16, AD 1264:

A year later, Tirgit sat, very uncomfortably, in the rarely-used djinni's suite of the London House of the Rose. Her Appointing as a Protector of the House would be held on Midsummer's Eve, and the first guests were already here. A

pigeon had arrived earlier, alerting Master Geoffrey that their most important guest, Lady Cecilia, would be docking later that morning.

"I should be donning armor," Tirgit complained, held prisoner as Mistress Joan and her eldest daughter, Beatrix, braided and pinned her hair in a complicated weave, preparatory to covering it with a gold hairnet and matching gold-and-pearl diadem. Tirgit was already wearing her finest gown in honor of Lady Cecilia's impending arrival, and Beatrix had tinted her lips with rouge and outlined her eyes with precious kohl.

"This *is* your armor, Elder Sister Theodora," Mistress Joan said, using Tirgit's new and ugly Christian name. With a pin between her teeth she continued, "Personally, I'd not like to face Lady Cecilia's censure if I don't have you looking your best."

"There's such unrest in the city." Tirgit fidgeted and had her half-plaited hair tugged sharply in retribution. She felt it was her duty to go and help Michael protect the House, but Joan, with her strict notions of propriety, would not hear of it.

It was a bad time for Cecilia to come because the conflict between King Henry and Simon de Montfort had come to a head. There had been a battle earlier this week, near some village called Lewes about forty miles south of London, and the first news reported that de Montfort had won, taking the king and Prince Edward prisoner. But before the battle ended, Prince Edward and his men hunted down and slaughtered the contingent of Londoners who had marched off to aid de

Montfort. As a result, the mood in the city streets was sullen, simmering, despite the victory over the King.

Yesterday Tirgit had suggested taking a boat downriver from their house in Westminster in anticipation of Lady Cecilia's arrival, but Michael had wanted to ride through the city in armor, leading his great war horse, to remind the citizens that a knight protected the House of the Rose.

The last three years had been difficult for the people of the English Houses, their fortunes waxing and waning with the king's. They had prospered through a steady stream of orders from the royal household and other noble customers, but royal patronage had not come without a price. Throughout the realm, manors and farms owned or leased by the kin had fallen victim to the outbursts of violence in support of the barons, who wanted more control over the man they considered a weak and spendthrift ruler. Michael had been frequently called away to avenge a wrong done to the House, and returned with a bloodied sword more often than not.

He and Tirgit had arrived safely at the London House yesterday, but tempers in the city were running high. She wanted so much to help Michael, and to show Cecilia that she was a good enough Protector to deserve to keep her son. And here she was, restrained by the women of the House who were frantically trying to get everything—including her—shining and spotless for a visit from the Eldest.

She was distracted from her worries by the patter of running feet, and a frantic pounding on the door of the chamber. Young Richard de la Rose came pelting in without waiting for permission. He was the assigned rooftop lookout,

and Tirgit's heart began to pound at the terrified yet excited expression on his face.

"Elder Sister Theodora, there's a mob," he panted.
"Coming up Thames Street and headed this way and Lord Michael orders everyone to invasion stations!"

As the boy dashed out, Tirgit turned to Joan. "Bring me my sword and armor," she ordered, surprised at how calm she sounded.

Joan dared to refuse. "Elder sister! You're supposed to come with me and ensure the safety of our children and our coin! It's not your place to fight with the men."

Then why had Michael been training her in the use of arms all this past year? Thwarted at every turn, Tirgit acquiesced. She dashed from room to room, gathering up women and children, including her son, and herding them to the House's secure cellars, while Joan and her daughter collected documents and coin and vials of perfume. The stableboys were fastening the shutters, and filling great jars with water. There was a sullen roar boiling up the street and she heard Michael's deep voice, shouting orders.

Joan was counting heads in the cellar.

"All present?" Tirgit asked.

Joan nodded. "Yes, Elder sister."

"Good. Lock yourselves in, till you hear the all-clear." Tirgit shut the stout iron door and closed the camouflaged door from the outside, ignoring Joan's protests.

Then she was flying up the stairs, back to the djinni's apartments, and digging for her armor and sword. The mail shirt fell like silver rain across her shoulders and down her

sides. The padded hood fit over her hair, gilded pins scraping her scalp as she settled the neckpiece. *Don't give the enemy anything to grab*, she remembered Michael telling her during one of their many lessons.

Her helmet was a simple conical cap of hammered steel worn over the hood, with a fringe of mail to protect her neck and throat. She had tried on a more concealing helm at Michel's urging when she was being fitted for armor, but found that the restriction of metal around her face made her panic. It had been too dark, too confining.

Her year of training was about to be put to the test. She was a Protector of the House.

She emerged from the narrow passageway that led from the main courtyard of the house to the storefronts along the muddy expanse of Thames Street. Michael was already mounted on his destrier, and behind him, all the able-bodied men, older boys, and even a few of the huskier maids were ranged in a ragged line, ready to protect the entrance to the House and the row of storefronts they leased out. Most looked apprehensive, and Tirgit forced down her own roiling fear as she came through their ranks to stand next to Michael, whose outstretched wings blazed with a scarlet shimmer.

She was as strong as any mortal man now, but her aura was tiny. If it came to a fight, she could rely only on her fledgling skills with her sword and the large wooden lance that Edmund, Geoffrey's oldest son, handed her.

Then Michael noticed her. "What the hell are you doing here, Tirgit? Why aren't you at your post?" His face was obscured by his great helm, which left his visage an inhuman

expanse of gilded metal, broken only by narrow eye-slits and a decorative pattern of small breathing holes. But his voice ... never had she expected to hear such anger from him.

"Wait. Here they come. I'll deal with you, later!" Michael then commanded the kin. "Don't provoke them. Don't draw blood unless absolutely necessary. Use the flats of your knives to beat them back, if they come this far."

The sullen roar of a crowd drew nearer. A surging mass of caps and sticks approached, sweeping everything before it.

Tirgit took a deep breath, the fingers of her hands cramping around the shaft of the lance.

The crowd was nearly upon them now, a hundred faces distorted with drunken anger. Slimy vegetables began to fly through the air, hitting the wooden shutters and plastered walls of the storefronts with loud splats and sulfurous stink. "Damned foreign royalists! You and your murdering Prince Edward can rot in hell!"

"Hold ... hold," Michael warned the kin behind him, reining in his destrier. As it had been trained to do, the war-horse reared and struck out with its iron-shod front hooves, forcing the leading edge of the mob to halt their advance. Michael took advantage of the distraction to sweep out one large wing, and force the mob back even further.

Tirgit used the heavy wooden lance to echo his actions. "Back!" she shouted, pushing at a laggard with a sideways sweep. "Get back!" Her voice sounded shrill in her own ears, and not at all commanding, but the man fell back.

And then the mob ground to a halt, staring at her. Tirgit took a deep breath. Perhaps bloodshed would not be

necessary. Perhaps ... She caught sight of a heavy-set man, his hair dusted white with flour, and indignation made her step forward.

"John Baker," she cried, pointing her lance at him as he recoiled and tried to backpedal through the wall of resisting bodies behind him. "Shame on you! And I tended your wife last month in childbed. Is this how you repay—"

Fury replaced anger. "Whore!" they called her, and "strumpet," "armor-wearing bitch!" and worse. They damned Michael for an apple-squire and the queen's pet foreigner. For a moment, nothing flew but epithets. Too late, she saw the large stone arc out of the crowd, and head for her face. She was too slow. She couldn't dodge it. *Too slow, too slow, too...*

"Tirgit!" Michael's shout was the last thing she heard.

* * * *

Sunday, May 18, AD 1264:

Consciousness was a door she did not want to open. She became aware first of the bed, then of thirst. Her head throbbed, a pulse of pain centered on her right brow. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes.

"Elder sister, you're awake," a woman said, in tones of relief.

Tirgit focused on her, and recognized Adelaide, the plump German kinswoman who served as the House's physician. "What—?" Her word came out as a croak, her throat and tongue drier than desert sand. *Where's Michael? What happened?*

"Your skull was cracked," Adelaide said, briskly. "You broke your arm, too. You've been asleep for two days, healing—it's lucky you're a djinniah now, girl. I mean, Elder Sister Theodora," Adelaide corrected herself.

"Indeed," said a sweet, familiar voice from behind Adelaide. "Or you would have surely perished at the hands of that mob, my dearest child."

Cecilia! Lady Cecilia had arrived. And the House was still standing, despite Tirgit's miserable failure. She buried her face in the pillow. "I'm sorry," she whispered, swallowing shame.

"As you should be," Michael's deep voice said. "But I'm so glad that you live, and that you've woken."

Ah, merciful God, he's here, too? Tirgit felt the light brush of his lips against her cheek, and the sweet, familiar sweep of his wings down the length of her body, infusing her with his strength.

"There's no shame in having fallen in battle. After all, it was your first time in arms, Tirgit. You survived. But next time—stay at your assigned position!"

Cecilia gave a polite cough.

"We were fortunate that Lady Cecilia appeared in time to help me drive off the remnants of the mob," Michael added, hastily. "There weren't any other injuries—on our side, at least."

"I believe a few of the good citizens were trampled by their fellows in the rush to escape Sir Michael's wrath," Cecilia said, amused.

Tirgit gathered her wits despite the monstrous pounding in her head. "Welcome back to London, Lady Cecilia. It is good to meet again," she said, knowing Cecilia would hear her though her voice was muffled by the pillow.

"Tirgit, I need to speak with you," Cecilia said gently.

No, go away, Tirgit thought, but she turned her head obediently to meet Cecilia's gaze. The Eldest had altered her features with the clever use of cosmetics, and she had lightened her heavy fall of black hair to chestnut brown, with paler streaks of auburn running through it. The effect was startling.

"Cecilia, can't it wait?" Michael said, roughly. "Tirgit's just woken up. She was sore wounded."

"All the more reason for her to hear my proposal." Cecilia's voice was like cold steel. "While her recent experiences are fresh in her mind—and in yours, Michael."

Tirgit felt the mattress sag as Cecilia settled herself and rested a cool hand on her aching head. She sighed as the persistent heartbeat of pain receded.

"Dear child," Cecilia said, her tone warm now, motherly. "I am deeply concerned about the situation here. Michael tells me that the king is a prisoner in the hands of his enemies, and that several of our manor-houses have been put to the torch. And now, with the citizens of London so bold as to try and assault us in our beds..." She traced light fingers along the line of Tirgit's brow and down to her temple, banishing the last of the ache.

"I am—we—are Protectors here," Michael said.

Tirgit heard his heavy tread over the floorboards as he paced. "We defended the House successfully, and we will continue to do so."

"And what if you cannot?" Cecilia asked. "One stone—" Her fingers traced the swollen lump on Tirgit's forehead. "Or one arrow ... just *one*, and all may be lost."

Tirgit felt the agitated beat of Michael's wings, and knew he remembered what had happened to Lord Dominic.

"I know what you want," Michael said. "You can't have him. My son is too young to travel."

"Would you risk him to civil war? To another angry mob? What if they burn down this House, next time?" Cecilia's fingers quieted, and grew warm against Tirgit's skin. "I only want what's best. For him. For the House. For all of us."

No, don't take Robert away from me! Tears begin to roll from the corners of Tirgit's eyes. But Cecilia was right. Next time, a carelessly-flung stone might crush *his* skull ... "Lord Michael, we—we should do as Lady Cecilia suggests."

"Tirgit, no!" Michael protested in an anguished growl.

She wanted to yield to his will, wanted to save her own heart from breaking. "What else can we do?" *One rock ... one arrow ...* "I only want him to be safe. Safe!"

"He's only three years old. Have mercy, Cecilia," he implored.

"He is Apkallu, and precious to the House. I'll train him well, and raise him to accept his heritage so that his transition to fully-fledged Apkallu will go easier. Do you remember how we raised Marcus and Honoria? Their Transformations were successful."

Michael bowed his head. "Granada is so far away ... can't we send him to France?" Unspoken, his thought echoed through the blood-bond he shared with Tirgit. *Then we could visit him.*

Cecilia shook her head as she brushed away Tirgit's tears. "I am the only one who can do it. You know that. You cannot leave England for France in this time of great turmoil. And Tirgit's powers are not yet strong enough. Who else is there?"

Michael did not reply, but his wings dimmed as if a cloud had passed in front of the sun.

Cecilia's great silver wings settled and she continued, mercilessly. "Would you send him to Italy, to your sister?" She shook her head, not giving Michael a chance to reply. "Given Dominic's reputation among the kin, Simon Minor would never consent to let your child live under the same roof, and by association, that puts Mathilde right out of the picture. Unless she might be willing to leave Dominic?"

Cecilia waited a moment. "I thought not."

"Roland could—" Michael began.

"Arjumand stubbornly refuses to be Raised," Cecilia interrupted, using Roland's adopted Arabic name. "Therefore he is not qualified to take on this task. And after the botch he and Sharibet made of Dumuzi and Nadira, I don't trust either of them with our Utu."

Michael remained silent, his wings dimming even further.

"Lord, please," Tirgit begged. "I don't want him to go away, but what if something happens? We have to make sure Robert is safe. Please."

"I don't want to," Michael said brokenly. "But I want him safe, too." The glorious light of his aura was nearly extinguished now, and he bent in agonized defeat.

Cecilia inclined her head, gracious in victory. "I will treat him like my own son. And he will be safe. I swear it, by the blood that binds us."

She rose from the bed, leaving an aching emptiness where her touch had been on Tirgit's forehead. "Thank you," she said, pausing in the doorway, her expression sweetly sympathetic. "I know this is a painful moment. But you have made the right decision."

The swish of Cecilia's heavy gown had barely faded when Michael climbed into the bed and pulled Tirgit against his chest. He kissed her tear-stained skin. "Our son. Oh, Tirgit," he whispered, brokenly, and putting his face in her hair, he wept in great ragged sobs.

Tirgit wept with him, her face tucked into his neck, his arms around her, drawing comfort as he comforted her. *One rock, one arrow*, she told herself. *We are doing the right thing. The only thing.*

But it didn't make the pain go away.

* * * *

Sunday, June 1, AD 1264:

A fortnight later—a day which came far too soon for Tirgit's liking—she found herself making a heroic effort to hold back her tears as she supervised Bess's attempts to dress an overexcited Robert in his best tunic and hosen. He submitted only when Tirgit threatened that he would not be able to go

on board the ship if he did not behave ... *a damned lie*, she thought bitterly.

She reached out and smoothed his dark hair. How she wished she could witness the day he climbed on his first pony and learned to ride! Or his first lessons with the sword. She was certain that Michael would be as patient with him as he had been with her first, clumsy attempts. And what about the day his voice broke, and he first blushed when a girl smiled at him...?

She would not see any of these things. She was sending her son away, to be raised by strangers. *No, not strangers*, she reminded herself. Robert would be among kin ... souls she had known for many lifetimes. They would love him, and care for him. Cecilia would care for him, and she was the Eldest, the Undying, the strongest and cleverest of the Apkallu, who had defeated death time and time again. But it was a bitter draught to swallow, when she stood here in the chamber where she had given birth to him, and felt the soft strands of his hair tickling her palm.

"Mama," Robert said, his momentary fretting forgotten as he bestowed one of his sun-bright smiles on her, and clung to her thigh. "Can we go see the ship, now?"

* * * *

Tirgit clung to Michael's hand all through the formal leave-taking speeches, her attention focused on the little boy darting around the deck of *The Rose of Yarmouth*. She watched through a haze of tears as he climbed excitedly over the coils of rope and peered into the cabins. She longed to

shout at him to be careful, but to do so would imply that she did not trust Lady Cecilia to care for him. And she did. She *did* trust the Eldest. Had Tirgit herself not thrived under Cecilia's fostering, even with the rigors of traveling the Silk Road?

Finally Geoffrey and Joan finished their formal speech of gratitude for Lady Cecilia's aid during the riot and her gracious offer to foster the youngest Apkallu. Tirgit was left with Cecilia's cool kiss burning on her brow, right over the spot where she had been injured, and a desolation in her heart as vast as barren plains of the Gobi Desert. Then Captain Thomas de la Rose gave the command, and the ship was unmoored.

Tirgit raised her hand, along with the other kin, to wave goodbye as the ship began to pull away slowly from the quay. She saw the moment when Robert realized what had happened, and his infatuation with the fascinating structure of the ship vanished in frantic wails as he tried to climb over the low deck railing.

"Mama! Mama! Don't want to go! MAMA!!!"

"Oh, gods!" Her son's screams struck her like a flight of barbed arrows aimed at her heart. She turned to Michael and laid her cheek against the soft woolen fabric covering his chest. Her last clear glimpse was of Cecilia holding Robert in her arms, her great silver wings surrounding him. She would not let him fall. She would not let him go.

A flood of tears blinded her.

* * * *

Michael picked her up and carried her into the house. The scent of oranges and preserved blood surrounded her as they entered the djinni's apartments, and then she was being lowered to the bed. Michael sank down next to her, holding her against him with bone-cracking strength, and she yielded, allowing his arms to anchor her while the tide of grief and raw pain swept over her. It was too much to bear alone ... too much...

With a ferocity that surprised them both, she grabbed his hair, and began to kiss his face, craving the sensation of his skin against her lips, the sound of his breath hitching, the taste of salt from his own tears. He was her lover, her husband, her consort, and the only thing of hers that remained in this cold, gray country. Lord Dominic was gone, Lady Cecilia was gone, and now her son was gone, too. She needed to know that Michael was still here.

She devoured his mouth, reveling in the tiny stings of sensation as she cut her tongue against his sharp teeth, and tore at the neck of his gown, pushing him back into the pillows, the bones and muscles of his shoulders solid, *real*, against her hands.

Silently, he submitted to her uncharacteristic ravishing of his body, responding to her sharp caresses with gasps, and a frantic thrusting into her curled fingers as she pulled up his garments and yanked down his braies.

"Don't move," she warned him, her voice husky from prolonged sobbing, and to her surprise, he obeyed, except for the involuntary jolt as she squeezed gently, feeling his member swell and thicken. He was beautiful as he lay there

at her mercy, her knight, her lord, with his clothing disordered, and his breath coming fast as he awaited her will.

She stared at him, unsure whether she wanted to pleasure or punish him. Without deciding, she reached out and traced the side of his throat, letting her fingernail scrape a red line across the beard-roughened skin.

His mouth opened in a silent plea.

"Shhhh," she commanded, resting her finger against the rapid throbbing of his pulse. Her mouth watered, and she knew what she craved. Deliberately, never breaking her gaze from his, she straddled him and sank down upon him, letting him fill her.

As his eyes widened, pleading to be allowed to move, she grasped his chin, and turned his head to one side, exposing the mark she inflicted moments earlier. She bit down, hard, letting his blood rush into her mouth. She heard his rough cry, felt it vibrate against her lips, and he took control at last, thrusting up into her with a frantic, broken rhythm.

But she no longer cared what he did. She soared, released by the images that tumbled through their blood-bond, the memories of his lives. She didn't understand them, didn't even recognize from which of his many lifetimes some of them came. All she cared about was avoiding the ones that dealt with Robert. She saw Michael as a young man, she saw Honoria and her beloved Menelaos, she saw events and places that were not London, not this day.

She was pulled into his memories of the night he was Transformed, struck by how dull and colorless the violent images seemed.

Dominic sighs. "It is in your hands to choose forgetfulness, or to choose memory. I remember you—we were friends, once. If you do not choose to be Raised and Named, then ... may we meet again." His right hand rises and grips Michael's chin in preparation for breaking his neck.

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

His next words choke off as Dominic wraps him in wings of light. "Remember me. Remember everything." His teeth touch Michael's throat...

As always, it chilled her to see the bad things that her beloved Lord Dominic had done in the depths of grief for his beloved. Not for the first time, she wondered how Michael had been able to leach all emotion from those memories.

While she floated, limpid and freed from sorrow, she felt his bite, his climax, and she heard his wordless shout.

No! What would he see in her blood? Hastily, she searched for her happy memories, but all she could recall was: *Robert's sucking grows slower as his eyes droop and his body begins to relax. Soon his mouth slips away from her breast ... Robert plays gleefully, trying very hard to smash a green block to splinters by using a red one as a hammer ... Robert clinging to his father's hand. "Your flame hurt, Mama?" His chubby fingers trace a small, double-pointed shape ... Robert realizes what's happening, and his infatuation with the fascinating structure of the ship vanishes in frantic wails as he tries to climb over the low deck railing. "Mama! Mama! Don't want to go! MAMA!!!"*

They clutched each other, tearful and lonely together.

Chapter Seven

For a second time, rejoicing in fearsome terror, [Inanna] spoke out righteously: "My father Enlil has poured my great terror over the centre of the mountains. On my right side he has placed a weapon ... My anger, a harrow with great teeth, has torn the mountain apart."—"Inanna and Ebi," c.1.3.2 (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Bressoux, near Liege, Sunday June 8, AD 1264:

Blanche put down her pen, waiting for the ink of the last line she had written to dry. The paper she bought in packets from the merchants of the House of the Rose in nearby Liege was the least expensive of the different kinds they had to sell, but expensive nonetheless. It was her one extravagance in a life that had not turned out the way she had been expecting.

She shifted in her hard chair, her knees sore from kneeling in church all morning.

There were many things she needed to do for the estate, but this was her hour. She had trained nearly everyone—servants, brothers-in-law, and even her father-in-law, that during this hour on Sunday she was not to be disturbed. This was her time for writing to her mother. And even if Maman did not ever reply, she would continue to write, just as she had promised. It was her time. And in a life filled with account-books, spinning, weaving, sewing, and tending sick servants with maladies of all kinds including putrid fevers, this was her refuge.

Except from ... As if she had summoned him, she heard heavy, unsteady footsteps approaching. The door to the solar opened.

"Blanche, my sweet girl," slurred her father-in-law, looming large in the doorway. Trapping her neatly within the solar, and not a servant in earshot. Even her sister-in-law Genevieve was gone, outside in the garden, no doubt. "Why are you so cold, so cold to me?" He staggered in and slapped the door closed. The latch fell with a soft click.

She shoved her half-finished letter and goose quill into the box where she kept her paper, and slapped the cap onto her inkpot. Just how drunk had the Sieur de Bressoux gotten already? Carefully, trying to hide the shaking in her knees, she turned to face him.

He wasn't supposed to be here! It was scarcely mid-afternoon. He was supposed to be down in the great hall, drinking beer and playing draughts with their neighbor, the Sieur de Ayeneux, who had joined them today. Blanche had been counting on de Ayeneux to stay until sunset, or she wouldn't have allowed herself to be so easily trapped.

But here he was, with *that look* on his face, that combination of self-pity and awful interest. She remembered what had happened the first time he had managed to trap her while drunk, and she clenched her jaw so hard that her teeth ached.

"I'm so lonely, dear girl, my sweet Blanche. Aren't *you* lonely, without Evrard? Though I can't believe that runt of a puppy can get it up long enough to—" She calculated her distance from the door, and the Sieur's position in front of it.

She was six months pregnant, courtesy of a Christmas visit home by Evrard—even if she managed to maneuver the Sieur away from blocking the doorway, could she run fast enough to escape? Thank God that Pieter, who had passed his second birthday, was elsewhere, in the company of his wet-nurse!

"My lord, you know Evrard comes home to us from the cathedral school next quarter!" she said, as brightly as she could.

"Hah! If he'd been a dog, I would have drowned him at birth," the Sieur continued on, relentlessly. "You need a real man, before you shrivel up and become more shrewish than you already are." He stopped, and resentfully said, "De Ayeneux left because we finished the beer, and Amboise said we had no more. Why didn't you brew more beer, you lazy slut?"

He took a staggering step closer, and she wanted to scream. "I'm sorry, my lord. I'll start a new batch tomorrow. We have wine, though. You were going to save it for Evrard's return, but I could—"

"Useless son!" the Sieur said, spitting into the rushes on the solar's floor. "Good-for-nothing spendthrift! Let him stay in the cursed Bishop's school. All he's learning is how to screw whores. Don't talk to me of Evrard."

She hastily put more space between them—hard to do in the small, stone-walled chamber—as he tilted his head coyly and reached out for her.

"Come, pretty Blanche. Come and give your papa a kiss."

Oh, no. No, no. She'd made that mistake once. Never again.

"Papa!" she said, forcing a smile. "Would you like some of my special cordial?" It was sweet, laced with precious sugar ... and milk of poppies. One dose, and he would sleep harmlessly for an entire day.

"No, no! I don't want to drink that. It makes me sleepy! Come and give me a kiss!"

She wanted to hit him, but settled for scuttling out of reach. It was getting harder and harder to evade him in this small chamber, slowed by her bulging waist and shortness of breath. But she couldn't let him catch her.

Blanche had tried to fight, last time. That had made the *Sieur* very angry, and no matter how loudly she had screamed, no one had come. He was a large man, who had been a champion of various tournaments in his youth. Even now, he remained an imposing figure, with his muscled arms and scarred knuckles. The servants, the men-at-arms—everyone here was afraid of his drunken rages. She was lucky she still had teeth, even if her honor was gone.

Now she had her unborn child to think of, as well.

If only *Evrard* were here! She thought of her gentle, slender husband. No, it was better he didn't know about this, didn't try to oppose his father. She wished futilely for a real protector, someone tall and strong, like her missing Uncle Michel.

The *Sieur* staggered another step closer.

"My lord, I know you want some of my cordial," she coaxed. "It's right over here."

"No, no. I told you. I don't want any!" But he shuffled the one step closer to her writing table that she needed him to. Now there was a straight line to the door.

Quick as a flash she leapt forward, flipped the latch, jerked the door open, and sprinted down the stairs and out to the kitchen before he even had time to turn and gape. It was amazing how terror could put wings on your feet, she thought, gasping and holding her belly.

Now, she could hide until the beer-induced madness had subsided. But he would probably destroy the contents of the solar in thwarted rage. The letter to her mother, along with all her paper, was probably lost. The writing desk and her chair ... might remain safe. But that was a small price to pay, compared to the one she'd already borne ... *his face is so pale, eyes shut, and the tiny mouth never opens to take a breath, or to wail ...* and yet mourned.

She thanked God that he had too much pride, even dead drunk, to come after her where his household could see what he did. But she could not expect that mercy to hold good forever. Evrard would be home by Michaelmas, but could he protect her?

She slipped into her stillroom, and checked the bundles of herbs and flowers hanging from the drying racks, and the rows of jars lined neatly on her shelves. Her syrup of poppies was running low—she would have to purchase more from the small, foreign-looking merchant of the House of the Rose, the next time he called upon her.

She kept an ear cocked for the sound of unsteady steps. It would be bad, *very* bad, if she was trapped here.

If only she had a parfait knight of her own, like in the stories! She began to sort through the herbs on the rack, dividing out those already dried, and indulged in her favorite daydream.

Her knight would be taller than the Sieur, stronger. Handsomer. Cleverer. And not lusting after her body. He should be able to play the lute, sing, compose historical poetry, and sing all the ballads of the past, the olden days when true love united lovers, and giants walked the earth. His voice should be as beautiful as an angel's.

She thought about the qualities of this paragon and laughed at her own fancy. This perfect knight would not only laugh at her jokes, but give as good as he got. He should be someone she could talk to, or weep with, without feeling weak and stupid. Someone who would understand what she wanted. She wouldn't ever have to explain to him why she wanted to know more. He would understand why she needed to badly to *know*. To know *everything*. He would know what she needed before she knew it herself. He should be a friend. And best of all, she laughed at her own conceit, he should be an Amazon, a *she*. A woman friend. Never a lover, never a rival. Someone who would stand at her shoulder and protect her, even, sometimes, against herself.

Angrily, she dashed the tears from her eyes. There was too much to be done to waste time moping. There could never be such a knight. She would never have such a friend.

"Lady Blanche! Lady Blanche!" It was Jeanne, Genevieve's maid, out of breath and terrified. "Oh, you must come. Something has happened!"

She felt a sick lurch in her chest. Abandoning ladylike decorum, Blanche picked up her skirts and ran, following Jeanne. As they cut through the great hall, and Jeanne took the stairs leading the solar, Blanche's dread congealed into certainty. *Oh no, please no*, she prayed as her slippers kicked up drifts of rushes. *Not Genevieve, too!*

Her father-in-law was already gone when she and Jeanne arrived, but the drift of ruined paper and overturned writing desk told the story ... Genevieve must have come up here, looking for Blanche, and instead, she had found a drunken man, inflamed with angry lust, bigger and stronger than she.

She was hunched over in the rushes, sobbing. Her pale hair had come loose from its pins and wimple, and it streamed over her shaking shoulders in a tangled fall. The neck of her gown was torn, and the pale skin of her breasts and shoulders was marred by reddened bruises like bite-marks.

Blanche knelt carefully, and put an arm around her sister-in-law's shoulders. Her husband, Evrard's younger brother Henri, was away serving the Sieur de Cheneux. *Of course. Another defenseless woman for the Sieur to prey upon.*

Genevieve tried to flinch away from Blanche's light touch, and Blanche bit her own lip, tasting blood. It wasn't just her, not any more. She could have continued to evade the Sieur's attempts, armed with caution and syrup of poppies, if it had just been her. But now, he had set his eye upon Genevieve, as well.

Blanche was fifteen years old, and she knew that it was foolish to wish for her parfait knight. She might be great with

child, but she would have to be the knight, now, and protect Genevieve from the same fate that had befallen her.

She struggled to her feet. "Jeanne, fetch a basin of hot water, and cloths. I'll return shortly."

She hurried back down to the stillroom, to find the pennyroyal, which would induce Genevieve's menses and cleanse her womb, preventing the Sieur's seed from sprouting. Blanche was determined to spare her good-sister the fate of her twelve-year-old self—*tearing pain and blood and a small, limp body*. Not for her the shame of conceiving while her husband was away. Not that Evrard had ever blamed Blanche. He had a good soul, her husband, and a generous spirit.

Blanche would protect Genevieve—and herself.

With trembling fingers, Blanche reached for the jar of dried foxglove. It was time to make another special cordial. Evrard might be sad to hear of his father's passing, but perhaps, like her, he would feel only relief at hearing that his father's heart had finally given out.

No one would ever know.

* * * *

Feast of St. Augustine, Thursday, August 28, AD 1269:

Blanche was playing ball with her four young sons—all of them healthy, sturdy boys, God be praised!—in the garden when Evrard came striding across the lawn, his cheeks aglow, eyes alight, looking for all the world like the mischievous fourteen-year-old she'd been betrothed to, rather than her

serious husband, a man of twenty-three. "Blanche, dear wife! We're going on Crusade!"

Her heart sank as she saw the cross sewn crookedly to his summer cloak. He had ridden to Liege to purchase a book, and he was coming home with *this*? What on earth had possessed her scholarly husband?

Baudouin's laughter died. The three-year-old looked up at his parents, puzzlement furling his little golden brows.

"Maman, what's a Crusade?"

She straightened her skirts, which had gotten somewhat tangled in their game. "Well..." she began.

Her second-oldest son, five-year-old Reynaud, answered for her, tossing the ball to his father. "It's a war to defeat the enemies of Christ, stupid. You don't know *anything*, do you?"

Baudouin screwed up his face at the insult. "Maman! Reynaud called me stupid."

"Don't cry, Baudouin." Evrard ruffled his son's hair as Reynaud crossed his arms in a gesture eerily reminiscent of his late grandfather. "Yes, it's a glorious enterprise to free the Holy Land from the Saracens." Blanche saw his eyes shining as he spoke. "There was a marvelous preacher in the market square, dear wife, and he said that the King of France, a most pious man, was in dire need of fighting men on behalf of Our Lord."

"But you're not a knight, Evrard," Blanche protested. "Why did you—"

"Henri said that didn't matter, as long as I brought men-at-arms with me," Evrard said, his excited expression beginning to wilt.

Henri talked him into this? When Blanche remained silent, trying to control her impulse to scream at him for his foolishness, Evrard weighed the rag ball in his hand, and tossed it to Pieter, who was standing patiently a short distance away, holding the hand of Blanche's youngest son, two-year-old Giselbert, and listening intently to their conversation.

Pieter was her oldest, slender and brown-haired like his father, and with the same scholarly bent. Even at seven years old, he preferred to stay inside reading his father's books rather than go outside to learn to ride or fight. He was outside today, looking sullen, because Blanche had locked away the household's copy of *The Story of the Holy Grail*.

"—and he called me a coward for hesitating to answer the good king's call for aid," Evrard finished, looking ashamed.

Blanche sighed, unwilling to reprimand her husband in front of their sons.

"I'm sorry, but he made me so angry! You know how he is, always needling me because he's a knight and I'm just—just—" Evrard's fingers rose to trace the cross on his cloak.

"—the lord of Bressoux," Blanche finished for him. "And did Henri take the cross, too?"

Evrard flushed. "No. He said that it would be enough if one of us did it. But he did promise to look after Bressoux, and protect it in our absence."

"No doubt." Blanche remembered her handsome Uncle Michel, limping into the church, in pain everywhere he had to walk. And he, God be thanked, had come home from the last Crusade, unlike her mother's cousin Roland, who had been

thought dead for years and named in every prayer her mother had ever spoken aloud.

"Henri is the one who should have gone!" she said, fruitlessly wondering whether Henri had gotten her husband drunk, first. Evrard was normally so cautious...

"But surely, it won't be so bad," Evrard said. "Things are peaceful enough here, and you've always wanted to travel. And I would like to see Jerusalem, too."

"I've always wanted to—? Oh, Evrard, you can't mean you want me to—" She wasn't certain whether it was horror or shameful excitement that coursed through her, making her heart beat quickly. When he had announced that "we" were going on Crusade, earlier, she had assumed he meant his men-at-arms and any willing knights from their district.

"Now that Giselbert is weaned, I want to take you with me, wife. I need you—you're so skilled at medicines and the art of managing, well, all manner of things! I understand that the Crusade will be, ah, starting from North Africa, perhaps Egypt. I'll ensure that you're kept well away from any fighting. And I'm counting on you to help with all the arrangements." He drew her into his arms, while Baudouin watched them, goggle-eyed, firmly clinging to her skirts.

"You've been a good wife, Blanche. I know the dreams you've had, and the ... while I was away, at school in Paris for years..."

Thank God he never held his father's sins against me, nor suspected me in the Sieur's death. Her father-in-law had been in his grave five years now, but his shadow loomed large over Evrard and Blanche's marriage. She had often wondered if

she would be damned for brewing that cordial, but even if God was as vengeful as the priest portrayed him, then she was more than willing to pay the price for protecting Genevieve.

"I need you," Evrard repeated. "Oh, dear wife, you're trembling. Please say you'll accompany me!"

"I don't want to be parted from you again," she said into his collarbone. She should be happy. There was no other way she would ever travel beyond Bressoux, otherwise. "But what of the children? We can't possibly take them."

Evrard grinned at her. "Henri said that he and Genevieve will care for them in our absence!"

Blanche's heart sank. She liked her sister-in-law, and it was a generous offer, but she also suspected that Henri would not be satisfied merely becoming the Sieur of Micheroux when Genevieve's father went to his heavenly reward at last. Why else taunt Evrard into taking the cross, if not to become the lord of Bressoux, as well?

Well, too late now. If Evrard had taken the Crusader's vow, then she could only try to make the best of it. She would protect him as well as she could, and ensure that they both returned home safely.

In the back of her mind, behind the worry for her husband and her sorrow at being parted from her children, she felt excitement. *Egypt*. Uncle Michel had described Egypt: ancient temples with picture-writing, filled with statues of animal-headed gods; walled cities crowded with flat-roofed houses; and the spires and domes of the Muslim churches, called *mosques*.

"So, you'll come with me?" Evrard asked, anxiously.

"Yes, husband." As soon as she spoke the words, Blanche felt, not a gossamer premonition of danger, but a full-fledged dread of what the future would hold for her, and for her children.

* * * *

Tabriz, Mongol Capital of Persia, Wednesday, April 16, AD 1270:

Sweating in his yellow silk coat, Arjumand sat cross-legged on a dainty embroidered pillow in the presence of Abaqa Ilkhan, son of Hulegu Khan who had been the conqueror of Baghdad, and five hundred of his closest friends. He was pretending to eat pomegranate stew and to drink *airak*, the world's foulest liquor. Blood he could drink. Milk he could drink. Spirits he could drink. Fermented milk? He'd as soon try to ferment blood. But he smiled, laughed at royal jokes, and tried to keep up with Basil's cheerful chatter. This was business, not pleasure, and Basil was much better-suited for the light banter of a court banquet than he was.

The Mongol court was being nicely corrupted by Persian pleasures and the overwhelming wealth looted from every town that dared to resist. Today, each courtier who appeared was dressed, as Arjumand and Basil were, in yellow silk. Tomorrow it would be red. If you didn't wear the correct color, you didn't gain admittance.

He almost wished they hadn't gained admittance. He was bored, and missing his monthly reports from Philomena. He suppressed a yawn as Basil made conversation with some

noyan fresh from Mongolia about the charms and benefits of rose perfume in the bedroom. They'd been after the Mongol women, too, about smelling more like flowers than like sheep, but it was slow going. Basil said their efforts would pay off in the next generation, but Arjumand doubted it.

He was grateful that Baibar's aggressive reconquest of the Holy Land had prevented from being trapped in Persia this past decade. Leaving Basil to manage the bulk of the duties here, Arjumand had frequently been recalled to protect the Houses in Palestine.

He smiled tightly and grunted a reply to a friendly toast from a neighbor, and wished this afternoon would end soon.

It didn't, but he was rewarded for his patience when the court dispersed at sunset. He found one of their young Raised and Named stableboys, who acted here as pages and spies, waiting for them outside the gate of the palace with a red-banded pigeon capsule.

"Lord Arjumand," the youth said, handing the message to him.

Dread and anticipation brought Arjumand to life. Controlling his aching curiosity, he thanked the boy and mounted, ignoring Basil's interested stare. "I'll read it in the House," he said, feigning calm indifference.

It took forever to ride the short blocks to the reclaimed complex of buildings that had been the Khaneh Goleh Rose in Tabriz for millennia. The Mongols hadn't honored the House's title to the property, so they'd had to buy it back, which had hurt, but the chests of gold buried in the basements had been

important to recover. They were slowly re-staffing the house, too.

Arjumand made it to his suite, tore off the stifling silk jacket, and closed his door. He lit a candelabra full of candles with his hand of air, and pulled open the capsule.

Of necessity, the message was short, but it made his stomach drop. *Crusaders shortly to depart Aigues-Mortes. Destination: North Africa, exact city yet unknown but likely Egypt. The masters of the houses there beg the aid of a Protector. Proceed to Alexandria with all possible haste.*

After years of recruiting and fund-raising efforts, it seemed that Louis of France had finally mobilized his new Crusade.

Trailing the thin ribbon behind him like a banner of war, he set off to tell Basil he was on his own once more with the Mongols in Persia.

Chapter Eight

For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came.—*Book of Job, 3:25-26*

London. Monday May 5, AD 1270:

Such a typical English afternoon, Tirgit thought glumly. She stared down at large puddles peppered with raindrops in the House of the Rose's muddy courtyard. After all these years in England, she had not accustomed herself to this island's mild sunshine and frequent showers. *Summer should be bone-dry and hot, not this bitter, cloudy mockery.*

She sat at the loom in the djinni's suite, her shuttle at rest as she gazed out the window. Reluctant to stay alone in Westminster, she had moved back to the London House a fortnight ago, after Michael had been summoned to deal with pirates in the Irish Sea. The *Rose of Dublin*, along with her cargo and crew, had disappeared in April, and her fate discovered only when the pirates' boasts of their rich booty had reached the ears of House informants.

Her gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a brisk knock at the door. It was Joan, holding out a packet of letters. "The *Rose of Yarmouth* has docked, and Captain Thomas—" Her son's name temporarily brightened her habitual sour expression, "—sends these letters, with his compliments."

"They're nearly a week ahead of schedule," Tirgit said, startled. Why had no one summoned her to the dock to greet

the safe arrival of the ship? More of Joan's pettiness, no doubt. "But I'm glad they've arrived home safely."

She accepted the thick bundle of folded parchment, and untied the ribbon that bound it. Ten letters, of varying heft ... including one addressed to her and Michael in Robert's childish scrawl.

She put it aside to read later, when she was alone. Neither she nor Michael had seen their son since that terrible day of parting six years ago, though they had received regular reports of his progress from Cecilia, and, in recent years, dutifully composed missives from Robert that made her heart ache. Among the stiffly courteous phrases, she had extracted small gems of information—his excitement at being taught how to handle a sword by his tutor, Antarah. His first riding lesson. A visit by the captain of the *Rose of Tripoli*, who had brought with him a trained monkey. His letters arrived in awkward Latin at first, then imperfect Greek and mangled Arabic in turn, as he learned those languages.

But what the letters could not tell her was whether his hair had stayed curly or had grown out straight. How tall was he now? Did he have Michael's smile, or hers? Did he resemble any of Tirgit's long-lost brothers, or did he favor his father?

As usual, a letter from Lady Cecilia accompanied the one from Robert. She put that one aside for later reading, too. She didn't want to read about all Robert's faults, not with Joan standing impatiently before her. She continued to shuffle through the pile of letters.

"Mostly letters from the Houses in France ... Paris, Beaume, Lyon, Aigues-Mortes, Marseilles, Beziers," Tirgit said, after scanning the wrappers of the remaining letters.

Joan's mouth turned down. "All of them requesting a Protector for a Raising and Naming progress, most likely," she said, referring to the djinni's biennial circuit through the Houses in their region, when adolescents and the newly-Found would undergo their rite of passage to adulthood in the House. "Well, they'll just have to wait, then, until Lord Michael returns. Whenever *that* may be."

"I could go," Tirgit said, stung as always by Joan's ready dismissal of her abilities. "I've done it before."

"But not on your own, elder sister," Joan replied promptly. "And not with a new Crusade departing next month. The highways will be crowded with armed men, mark my words, and all of them looking for trouble. Not only that, but with so many of our own English knights and lords having departed to join King Louis, who knows what kind of trouble the king's enemies will stir up this time? After all, it's only been five years since our good King Henry was restored to his throne..."

"If we wait until autumn, the roads will be impassible," Tirgit argued. "And things are quiet right now in England. Isn't Beatrix supposed to depart soon to marry young Benedict of Lyon? We could bring an extra escort and kill two birds with a single stone."

Joan scowled at the mention of her daughter. She had wanted the girl to marry someone from the Paris House, and stay closer to home, but Mother Sharibet had sent explicit

instructions for the match with the Lyon House. "I'll speak to Geoffrey about it. I still think you should wait for Lord Michael."

"And *I* think I should go. I may not be an Apkallu, but I do know how to Raise and Name. And I haven't lost a candidate yet," Tirgit said, more determined than ever to prove herself. She had worked hard after her first, disastrous experience with the mob. Her aura was tiny, but it would continue to grow steadily, or so she had been promised. In the meanwhile, who did Joan think she was, to tell a Protector which requests for aid she might accept?

* * * *

Tirgit's will prevailed in the end, although Joan tried mightily to wear her down, an effort which served only to make Tirgit more determined to embark on this journey.

Finally, the Master and Mistress of the London House yielded, and before Tirgit knew it, the combination bridal party for Beatrix and Raising and Naming progress had expanded further. They would also escort the young kin of the York and Dover Houses on their journeys to the continent to apprentice themselves at Houses there.

They had smooth sailing across the Channel. They switched to a riverboat at Le Havre and sailed up the meandering Seine to Paris. After a week's stay, during which Tirgit successfully Raised and Named approximately twenty youths and maidens from the northern French and Flanders Houses, her party set out for Beaume, riding through pleasant fields, vineyards, and forests. There, they stayed for three

days while Tirgit Raised and Named a group of five, and then they continued their journey south.

As Joan had predicted, the riverboats and roads were jammed with processions of knights, squires, men-at-arms and their associated households, camp followers, and servants, all moving south to the port of Aigues-Mortes at the mouth of the Rhone, where they planned to join King Louis's latest Crusade. Accompanying the knights were mule trains and wagons carrying tents, cookware, furniture and fodder. Wagons piled high with sacks of grain and crates of chickens shared space on the deeply rutted roads with herds of bleating goats, and trains of horses and mules plodding along, bound together with ropes and kept moving by drovers.

Amidst this bustle and traffic, Tirgit's party attracted less attention than she had feared. Their Rose banners and the presence of armed guards sufficiently deterred everything but catcalls from the youths who rode alongside their little train, begging for kisses and favors from the pretty girls of the House perched on their sturdy mules. Tirgit didn't even mind when the girls blew kisses, knowing from Michael's tales how many of the young men would likely not return from the Holy Land alive, or whole.

They all sang and told stories and jokes to pass the time, and the dusty miles between Beaume and Lyon proved to be a merry journey indeed. Tirgit was glad for it, especially for the pleasure of disproving Joan's predictions of doom.

* * * *

Lyon, Monday, June 16, AD 1270:

Tirgit's first impression of Lyon was juxtaposed with the memories that Michael had shared with her through their blood bond. It was odd to see the city with the new eyes of one who had never traveled this way before, and also to remember these hills as they were when the Roman emperors ruled Gaul. The temples, baths, and amphitheater that had been the pride of Colonia Copia Claudia Augusta Lugdunum had vanished, and the city itself had retreated from its hilltop location, leaving behind only a few ruined walls.

As Tirgit and her party rode through the gates of the new city, which huddled in the valley below the site of the old city, she craned her neck and peered up at the Fourviere Hill, wondering if some of the tumbled stone blocks and broken columns she saw there had come from the villa that had been Honoria's birthplace.

Then, as now, the river was dotted with boats, and the riverbanks were crowded with wooden wharves and stone warehouses. Situated near the wharves, the Hotel de la Rose was a handsome building, four stories high, with wooden balconies on each floor and a smooth plastered façade of rose-pink. The scent of roses and other perfumes drifted from a ground-floor shop located next to an archway leading to a large courtyard.

As was customary upon the arrival of a Protector, the majority of the household had assembled in the courtyard to greet Tirgit and her companions. A babble of voices rose in greeting as she dismounted from her mule, speaking langue d'oïl, English, Latin, and Arpitan, which was the language of this region.

"Elder Sister Theodora, welcome. It is good to meet again," said a brown-haired man in his early forties who was wearing a thick gold chain in the European style, signifying that he was the Master of the House. He was surprisingly fair for one of the kin, probably one of the souls born to outsiders and then Found again. "I am Martin de la Rose, True Name Marduk-apla-iddin, and this is my wife, Isabel."

Isabel, who had the usual black-haired, golden-eyed coloring of the kin, curtsied, a little shyly. "Elder sister, I welcome you. It is good to meet again," she said, in Egyptian-flavored Arabic. "My True Name is Elisheva."

"It is good to meet again," Tirgit said automatically, though she had not, in fact, actually met either of them in any of her previous lifetimes in the House. Ah well, with the kin so numerous and far-flung, it was not uncommon to have first meetings, even after dozens of lifetimes.

Their son Benedict, tall and hazel-eyed and having inherited Martin's fair complexion and chestnut hair, also stepped forward to murmur greetings, though Benedict's attention was, naturally-enough, focused on his bride-to-be. He bowed awkwardly to Tirgit, then rushed to help Beatrix dismount.

After the ceremonial courtesies and greetings had been dispensed with, there were hot baths and refreshments for the travelers, and for Tirgit, a plain but private room. Not the Apkallu's suite, of course, but it was clean and had a soft featherbed as well as a writing table, already stocked with blank parchment sheets, several goose quills, and a brass inkpot for her use.

* * * *

The Raising and Naming ceremony was held the following evening, as the midsummer summer dusk draped the city's spires in smoke-blue shadows against a smoldering sky, and the narrow streets and courtyards echoed with the deep, melodious clanging of bells.

When it was time, Tirgit descended stone stairs into the large cellars beneath the House. Costly rugs had been scattered across the paved floor, and the arched ceiling had been recently whitewashed, but the air was dank and cool, and smelled of stored foodstuffs.

There were eight candidates awaiting her: five youths and three maidens, and all of them surrounded by clusters of relatives.

"Elder sister!" came the dutiful chorus as she made her way toward them.

A table had been set up along one wall of the cellar, and on it were the usual accoutrements of a Raising and Naming: a bronze mirror; soft clay chips on which to note the person's new lifetimes-in-service number; a huge, leather-bound register of True Names, with a scroll to copy the information to Mother Sharibet; and cotton bandages to tie off the tiny wounds Tirgit would inflict. The kin had also created a small, private area in one corner of the cellar by erecting a set of tall wooden screens and hanging them with a heavy fabric like bed-curtains.

Tirgit came to a halt in front of the assembled candidates, and their parents and other kin tactfully withdrew. She

studied them briefly—they looked nervous—then opened her Seer's Eyes. Seven of the eight bore the flaring mark in their auras that attested to their having been Raised and Named in past lives.

The final candidate was surrounded by a smooth, unmarked shimmer. *A first-lifer then, new to the House.* She felt a twinge of apprehension—Raisings were overwhelming, even to those who had experienced them before.

"E-elder sister? Is something wrong?"

Tirgit blinked and looked at the first-lifer, a handsome youth of perhaps sixteen years. Like his older brother Benedict, Bruno de la Rose had curly chestnut hair and hazel eyes.

Tirgit mustered up a smile for him. "No, nothing," she lied. "Shall we begin?" She raised her chin, and began the ritual questioning of the candidates. "Now, then, why do you appear before me today?"

"Today, we have come to be Raised and Named, if you please, Elder Sister Theodora," the eight candidates replied, more-or-less in unison.

"I 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?" asked Tirgit.

"We do," chorused the candidates.

She raised her hand and pointed at the first candidate, a girl. "Please state your name and why you are here."

"I am Sancha de la Rose, elder sister. I wish to find out if my Name is known to the House."

"Is this truly your wish?"

"It is," Sancha replied firmly.

"So heard and witnessed," the onlookers said.

Tirgit continued: "I will Raise you up, Sancha, and discover if your True Name is known. Come here, younger sister."

* * * *

Later, after she had taken seven candidates into the privacy of the curtained-off space, and successfully performed seven Raisings, it was Bruno's turn to step forward and give his public consent. Exalted by the unaccustomed taste of human blood and the accompanying rush of lives and memories, Tirgit had saved the hardest task for last.

As she had with the others, she escorted the youth into the curtained area. "Bruno de la Rose, give me your hand, that I may remember you." She smiled at him encouragingly, and extended her own hand. No need to scare him any more than he already was.

He obeyed, and she took his hand, raising it to her forehead in the gesture of respect. "If your Name is known, I will find it and restore it to you."

"Thank you, elder sister," he said, his voice cracking a little.

Then it was time. She brought his hand to her lips, and held it past the expected flinch when her sharp teeth broke the skin of one of his fingers. The taste of his blood expanded through her body in a flood of warmth, like hot wine. The first images conveyed by his blood were happy ones, of a childhood in this House and in this city, loved, well-fed, and sheltered from most of the cruelty of life outside.

Although she was certain he had not been a member of the House before, duty impelled her to look deeper, to peer into as many of his previous lives as she could, just to make absolutely sure that he had not previously been Named....
cold and hunger and sharp lust. A woman's face, seen by firelight, and the soft press of her lips against his ... a square-sailed ship, bucking wildly in seas that fling waves over bow and stern ... the hot darkness of an unfinished tomb, pressing in around the golden circle of light from her oil lamp. She dips her brush into the smear of white pigment on her palette, then carefully fills in one of the red-outlined figures on the plastered wall in front of her ... the feel of mud itching his bare feet, and the ache in his back as he stoops to plant the precious rice seedlings...

Tirgit crested an incoherent whirl of images, reaching back, and back, and back. Finally, she released his hand. He was staring at her, intently, as if trying to divine what she had seen. "Welcome to the House, Bruno de la Rose."

At her words, his anxious smile turned into a grimace. She hastened to speak the rest of the formula used to welcome a first-lifer to the House: "Your name has not been known to us, but we will remember you. Henceforth, you will always be our kinsman, no matter what flesh you wear."

"I—I see." He bowed his head, clearly fighting back tears, and Tirgit put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You are now truly of the House of the Rose, younger brother. I am the Opener of the Way. Through me, you can remember all of your lives. May your experiences enrich the House! Will you let me in?"

He swallowed, nodded, and found the courage to meet her gaze. "Yes, elder sister."

"Kneel, Bruno, and let me open the way."

The boy dropped obediently to his knees. Her aura was too small to be effective at any distance, so Tirgit kissed his forehead, and rested her flesh hand on the top of his head, as if administering a blessing. Just as she had been taught, she reached into his aura and broke the seal that kept him from remembering his past.

The flood of images returned, tumbling through their newly-established blood-bond like waters breaking a dam. Bruno stared up at her, wide-eyed, and clutched his head. "No! It's too much—make it stop!" He swayed, groaning, then collapsed on the floor, clawing at his temples, his eyes tightly closed, and his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Stopstopstopstop ... please! Please!"

Tirgit threw herself down at his side, and cradled him in her arms, murmuring soothing nonsense. There was nothing she could do now, except comfort him. His own strength would determine the rest. He was a strong youth, she told herself, as he shuddered and wept in her embrace. He was strong. He would overcome this. He would—

Bruno screamed hoarsely, then stiffened from heels to head, forcing Tirgit to release him. He gasped, then vomited, and was gripped by a seizure of frightening intensity. One last, hard shudder, and he went still. Tirgit felt something bright and intoxicating push against her aura. It felt like the times when Michel would caress her with his aura wing in the act of love, only more intense.

The sensation mounted, moving rapidly from pleasure to something painful. She cried out and fell to her knees as she was ravished by light, sent tumbling from consciousness as if she were thistledown, soaring on a wild wind.

She didn't know how much time passed before the strange wildness began to dissipate, and she was able to recall her surroundings once more. Blinking as she swayed on her knees, she heard the concerned murmur of the waiting kin and looked down.

To her horror, Bruno's aura had disappeared. He lay sprawled on the stained carpet, his eyes staring. Crawling forward, awkwardly, she caught him up, and blew breath into his lungs, hitting his chest to try and shock his body into life again. But he did not respond. Tigit finally slowed her efforts, sickened by the taste of vomit and defeat that mingled with the last shivers of that inexplicable exaltation.

This isn't happening! He can't be dead! She didn't want him to be reborn outside the House. She wanted him to live, and to draw breath in this lifetime, in this House. *So young...*

Tirgit held his heavy, limp body, and wept. And as her tears flowed, wetting the lifeless face of the boy cradled in her arms, she knew that in another moment, she was going to have stand up, and face the assembled kin, and confess to them that she had lost a son of the House.

* * * *

[text of a letter written in code, from Tirgit to Sir Michael de Murat in the care of the House of the Rose in London]

To my right worshipful husband and beloved lord:

Dear husband, I recommend me to you, &c. This letter finds me with a great soreness of spirit. My soul is wounded and my heart cries out for your presence. I regret to send you sorrowful tidings of the Raising and Naming lately performed in Lyon. Of the eight youths assembled there, one was new to our House and thus unaccustomed to the rite of passage. I did not think to inflict so grievous an injury by removing the seal that bound his past-life memories, but though I attempted this with the greatest gentleness, alas, he collapsed and after a while, drew breath no more. May we meet again!

Lord, I do not request this lightly, but send me your aid and your strength: I cannot do this alone. I pray you will answer this humble petition and come to me and that you will aid me in bringing my remaining duties to a good conclusion. I travel next to Avignon, thence to Aigues-Mortes, where I intend to take passage on the Rose of Marseilles for Beziers.

I pray you will greet well our brethren at the House in London, and tell them that I send them my blessing. Written by my own hand at the House of the Rose in Lyon on the feast of St. Mark (the 18th day of June)

Your most faithful wife and servant, Tirgit

Postscript: If time and weather permit, perhaps we can continue south and be reunited with our son in Malaga. Lady Cecilia cannot object to our visit.

* * * *

Tigit took no joy in the lush landscapes of green fields, softly rounded hills and oak forests that she traveled through

over the next week as the Rhone bore her and her companions steadily southwards.

Soon, they passed into Provence, where the pale, jagged limestone bones of the land thrust through a thin skin of soil and trees. The sun grew stronger and the air dryer, the warm air fragrant with laurel and sage and wild rosemary as they neared the Middle Sea. The first olive groves appeared, crowding out the apple and cherry trees of the north. The sky turned a pale cloudless blue, and the noon sun was no longer golden but electrum, blazing down, warming Tirgit's bones. Her heart had yearned for this bright sunlight during her years in the damp chill of the northern countries, but now, hollow with failure, even the strong colors and scents of these southern lands seemed pale and uninteresting,

The only hope she clung to was that every league she traveled southwards brought her just a little bit closer to Malaga, and Robert.

* * * *

28. Tirgit arrives in Aigues-Mortes: sees King Louis's Crusade

Aigues-Mortes, Saturday, June 28, AD 1270:

Arriving at Aigues-Mortes heartsick and weary, Tirgit discovered the seaport so crowded with Crusaders and the staff of the royal household that lodging was not to be had for all the gold in Christendom. A vast city of tents covered the fields outside the newly-fortified city walls, and the air reeked of smoke from countless campfires. Close-packed livestock,

rotting garbage, and overflowing latrine pits added their own stench.

Fighting the temptation to hold her nose, Tirgit and her remaining companions fought their way toward the harbor through throngs of Crusaders.

As she was supposed to do, Tirgit kept her Seer's Eyes open as they rode through the narrow streets, looking for the bright auras that marked the Lost of the House, but her thoughts wandered, hoping that the *Rose of Marseilles* had not been requisitioned by the King as transport for his army, and that they could find one ship anchored amidst hundreds of others in the harbor. It would be distinguished only by its Rose banner, flapping in the brisk wind that blew off the water. She wished that the breeze would reach into the overcrowded city and dispel some of its horrific odors.

Thus distracted, Tirgit was shocked to actually see the unmistakable aura-flare that marked one of the Lost Apkallu as they crossed a busy marketplace.

The aura surrounded a young woman, who stood with her back to Tirgit, a large basket looped over one arm as she bargained with a seller of fried fish.

Tirgit's heart stuttered, and she stopped, hand to her breast. The aura was bright rose-pink.

"Elder sister? What is it?" asked Tomas, one of the guards. His question was immediately echoed by the others.

"I—" Tirgit began, and then the woman turned around. The words froze in Tirgit's throat as she recognized familiar blue eyes, and the cast of the girl's face, eerily similar to Lady

Mathilde and Lord Michael. An Apkallu who resembled them, with a rose-colored aura...

The Cursed One! Here? Tirgit quickly ducked her head, concealing her face. Had Blanche seen her? Would she even recognize Tirgit after this many years?

Tirgit touched her heels to her palfrey, and urged it away from the line of foodstalls. "It's n-nothing," she told the others. "I was mistaken."

"But elder sister," Tomas persisted, bringing his horse alongside hers. "Are you certain?" His eyes, more brown than amber, studied her intently.

Tirgit nodded, damning her shaking hands. "There's nothing here for us. Let's find the ship."

"If you say so, elder sister." Tomas didn't sound convinced, but he followed her obediently away from the marketplace.

Tirgit hoped they would find the *Rose of Marseilles* quickly. She needed to borrow pen, parchment, and a pigeon at the first opportunity, and send urgent messages. Perhaps by this stroke of luck, she could redeem her failure in Lyon. She wasn't sure how Mother Sharibet would react, but Lady Cecilia would be grateful for the news.

Oh Michael, thought Tirgit, as her palfrey stepped over piles of rotting vegetables and manure in the rutted street. *I wish I had not bidden you to come.* Because if he did come, then he might discover the truth about Blanche—and Tirgit's deceit.

* * * *

29b. Arjumand, now in Alexandria, receives word of Blanche's presence amongst the Crusaders.

Dar al-Warda, Alexandria, 19th of the moon Thul qidah AH 668 (10 July AD 1270):

The pigeon-delivered message brought to Arjumand, waiting impatiently in his rooms for just such news, was written oddly, not conforming to the standard format.

His jaw dropped when he read the encoded text.

Cursed One sighted in Aigues Mortes by ES Tirgit on routine R&N. Liege confirms departure.

After a space, the message continued normally.

From Philomena in Constantinople, greetings: Louis of France and fleet departed Aigues Mortes July 2. En route to Sardinia, probable destination Tunis. Master Farid begs Protector to arrive with all possible haste. Written 7th July AD 1270/17th Thul qidah AH 668

Many thoughts went through his mind at that moment. The first one was, *Philomena, I owe you*. The next was: *What was Evrard de Bressoux thinking, to bring his wife on Crusade?* Invigorating anger filled his veins, followed immediately by fragile hope.

Arjumand had heard rumors that the French king intended to ally himself with the ruler of Tunis, who had dangled the possibility of conversion to Christianity before Louis in hopes of using the foreigners against the powerful Egyptian sultanate. But it was doubtful that the Tunisians would agree to abandon their faith for temporary political advantage.

However, this situation meant that he might finally get to meet his daughter. The Tunis House required his presence. He could go where she was, and no one would forbid him!

He raised his arms and shouted silently in the secret recesses of his mind *Praise God! Allahu Akbar! By great blue heaven!* He was finally going to lay eyes upon Blanche!

* * * *

Thursday, August 14, AD 1270:

The weeks sailing slowly down the coast towards Beziers brought Tirgit nothing but regret. The splendid weather they had enjoyed in May and June traveling through Champagne, Burgundy, Auvergne, and Provence vanished upon their departure from Aigues-Mortes. The journey by sea, meant to be swifter than the uncertain roads, was instead slowed by a series of violent storms that seemed to spring out of nowhere. Captain Remy de la Rose spent weeks staying far from shore, hoping to ride out the foul weather without seeing his ship battered to pieces against the jagged cliffs and rocks. Everyone felt it was a reprieve to depart the choppy waters of the Middle Sea and sail up the calmer River Orb.

Beziers was ten miles inland, set high on a hill overlooking the river. The air shimmered with heat as Tirgit and her companions staggered off the ship, their hair and clothing stiff with salt and filth. Even once safely on land, the solid stone of the quay seemed to roll under Tirgit's feet. They were greeted warmly by the gathered kin, dressed in their finest garments, which made Tirgit feel even grubbier than she already was.

"Elder Sister Theodora, we are honored by your visit," said Guibert, the elderly Master of the House, the golden chain of his office set with garnet rosettes. He stepped forward, and extended his gnarled brown hand. "It is good to meet again, and good to see one of our Protectors within these walls once more."

Tirgit respectfully took his proffered hand, and pressed his warm, dry fingers against her forehead. "It is good to meet again, Master Guibert."

He shook his head, lips pursed regretfully. "I hope you will forgive us for making you travel yet a little further, to our farm at Villeroze-sur-Orb, where the candidates and their families await your arrival."

More travel now? Master Guibert must have seen Tirgit's dismay, for he quickly added, "But first, of course, you shall bathe and refresh yourselves at the House. We need not depart for Villeroze-sur-Orb until the morrow."

"Elder sister!" A youth of perhaps sixteen stepped forward. He was old enough to be one of the candidates, and of obviously mixed parentage. He had the amber eyes of the kin in a fair, freckled face. He swept her a deep bow better suited to a queen than a simple elder sister of the House. "I am Peter de la Villeroze-sur-Orb. My father, Sir Jean de Pezenas, sends his greetings and apologies for not being able to guide you himself. He begs you to allow me to be your escort."

Tirgit was charmed by his handsome speech, and opened her Seer's eyes to check whether he had been Raised and Named. Only an unmarred aura met her gaze. *Oh gods, another chance to fail!* She gathered her composure,

answered him courteously, and they began the walk to the House.

As they walked (slowly, in deference to Master Guibert's advanced age) through the narrow streets of Beziers, alien memories crowded Tirgit's thoughts, memories from the blood she had shared with Lord Michael.

The city had been rebuilt and repopulated in the sixty years since the Grand Massacre, though roofless buildings remained here and there, their scorched stone skeletons exposed to the sun and rain.

As the street turned, a vacant lot allowed her to catch a glimpse of what remained of St. Nazaire cathedral, now a heap of blackened rubble and broken walls crowning the hill, the nave surrounded by scaffolding that attested to reconstruction efforts.

Michael's memories of that terrible afternoon pushed through her head, making her feel nauseous. ... *Standing on the broad, shallow steps of the cathedral, the sun hot on pale golden stone, the air stinking of blood and smoke. Holding a sword, its blade saw-toothed with nicks and lacquered with blood ... Footsoldiers surge forward, thrusting lances and swinging axes in a silver-red blur. "Witch!" someone screams. "Sorceress!"*

Tirgit swallowed heavily, and glanced at Master Guibert's profile, wondering what he remembered, and how he felt about living within the walls of a city haunted by the slaughter of nearly all its citizens. Certainly, the atmosphere seemed subdued even now. The few passers-by that they

encountered on their walk from the docks did not stop to greet them, but bowed their heads and hurried on.

As Master Guibert had warned, the House of the Rose in Beziers was vastly reduced from the large residence and workshops that Michael had known so well when he was Honoria. It was a narrow stone building, consisting of a ground-floor shop, with two stories of living quarters above, and outbuildings in the back. It lacked the usual underground hall or even a large cellar, so it was really not suitable for the ceremony of Raising and Naming.

Despite the thought of further wearying travel, Tirgit was relieved to put off another worrisome Raising.

As promised, there were baths and clean clothing for all the travelers, and for Tirgit, a jug of fresh chicken blood and a bed all to herself. The first bit of solitude she had enjoyed for weeks gave her nothing but worry, especially when drinking the chicken blood, with its faint echo of death, reminded her of how Bruno's death had intoxicated her with its taste of godhood.

She should be dreading the prospect of killing another Raising and Naming candidate, but instead she found herself craving that ravishment of the senses.

* * * *

Friday, August 15, AD 1270:

Despite her fears for the future, young Peter proved to be an entertaining companion for the next morning's ride into the stony hills surrounding the city. He spoke passable Arabic, though it was rusty with disuse. He was clearly excited about

having the honor to escort a Protector, and Tirgit almost found herself giggling at his exaggerated courtesy.

As their conversation unfolded with the miles along the dusty road that connected Beziers and Pezenas, she learned that Peter had spent his early years at the House in Acre, only to be evacuated by Lord Arjumand almost ten years ago during the threat of Mongol invasion. His father, Sir Jean, a former Crusader from Languedoc who had been Found at the same as Lord Michael and Lord Arjumand, had petitioned and been granted the right to stay in this area as the Master of the new rose farm and probable successor to the Master of the House in Beziers.

Peter spoke of Lord Arjumand in glowing terms, and Tirgit, who had seen Michael's memories of his cousin back when he had been Roland D'Agincourt, wondered at how the responsibilities of a Protector had changed the carefree, beautiful young man that Michael remembered into the rather stern, awe-inspiring figure of Peter's stories. How many years would pass before she, also, turned into someone stern and remote? Would the children of the House remember her with awe rather than affection? The thought made her sad, even though she was only a Crown of Service djinniah and not one of the mighty Apkallu.

"...you were born outside the House and Found, weren't you, Elder Sister Theodora?" the boy was asking her.

Tirgit blinked, realizing that she had been lost in thought. She smiled at the youth, who was riding a mule alongside her, with the rest of their party trailing behind. "Yes, indeed.

Lord Dominic found me in Tashkent, along the Silk Road, when I was about eleven years old."

"Lord Dominic?" Peter's eyes widened, and his voice dropped. "Is he as scary as—? I've heard that he, um..." His voice trailed off.

"Killed the children in Venice?" Tirgit shook her head. "I heard that also, but to me, he was always very kind. He saved me from a cruel life and brought me into the House, never treating me like anything but his beloved daughter."

Peter looked skeptical and a little disappointed that the notorious Lord Dominic was not as bloodthirsty as his reputation.

Tirgit remembered Dominic's confession that he had very nearly killed her, too. Until now, she had not really understood the lure of experiencing another's death. It was more seductive than hashish smoke. How had he been able to stop?

Peter flushed at her long silence. "I meant no offense, elder sister," he mumbled, then, clearly seeking safer conversational ground, asked, "What's London like? Have you met the English king?"

Chapter Nine

It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.—*Romans*, 15:27

Villeroze-sur-Orb, a half-day's ride from Beziers, was a large estate that had once been a vineyard producing plentiful but mediocre wines. A small vineyard remained near the manor house, but most of the hillsides had been replanted with rosebushes sprung from the rootstock brought with the kin from the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

As Tirgit, Peter, and the others rode up an olive-shaded lane, she saw the red-tiled roof of a manor house nestled behind high walls, with children posted atop the walls waving excitedly. As their party approached, Tirgit heard them shouting notice that the guests had arrived.

They rode through the thick wooden gates and clattered to a halt in the stone-paved courtyard in front of the house. At one end of the courtyard cushioned benches sat invitingly under an arbor overgrown with grapevines, offering welcome shade. More grapevines, climbing up the side wall, softened the severity of the golden stone. The house itself was a large, square, three-storied building, with a windowless bottom story, and small windows on the second and third floors.

As was customary, all of the kin had gathered in the courtyard to greet their Protector. The master of this farm, Sir Jean de Pezenas, proved to be a scarred but cheerful man in

his fifties. His True Name was Utusagila, and like Tirgit, he had been born outside the House and Found later in life. He was also hobbling on crutches, which explained why young Peter had been sent to escort her.

"...because that damned mule—a spawn of the Devil of the Earth, if you ask me—trod on my foot. Deliberately, I swear, and I've been half-crippled ever since." Sir Jean paused, and made a belated bow. "Begging your pardon, elder sister."

"I've met more than a few mules and camels who were sired by afreets," Tirgit said, wryly. "I thank you for your courtesy in sending me a placid horse, Sir Jean."

He winked at her. "Wouldn't do for such a pretty Protector to arrive with hoofmarks on her gown!" He chuckled, then quieted abruptly as a slender woman, her golden eyes and black hair marking her as one of the kin, touched his arm.

"I'm sure that Elder Sister Theodora would appreciate something to drink, and our other guests, too," she said, sweetly.

"Ah, yes, to be sure," Jean said, suddenly on his best behavior. "Elder sister, may I present my wife Alais?"

"My True Name is Aaliyah, elder sister," Alais murmured in fluent Arabic. "It is good to meet again. Remember me!"

"It is good to meet again. I will remember you," Tirgit replied, and with that, the round of introductions to all the rest of the gathered kin commenced. Besides Sir Jean's four children (sixteen-year-old Peter, twin fifteen-year-old boys named Jean-Philippe and Olivier, and a thirteen-year-old girl named Alinor), there were five other adolescents and their

families come from as far away as Montpellier for the Raising and Naming.

Tirgit smiled and said all the proper phrases, but she couldn't help studying nine eager, curious young faces. She opened her Seer's Eyes, and the feeling of nausea returned, stronger than ever. Besides Peter, Jean's youngest daughter, Alinor, and one of the other girls, Garsende, had the unmarred auras of those new to the House.

Tirgit found herself unable to enjoy the refreshments served in the courtyard, and it was hard to pay attention to the exchange of news.

The late-afternoon tour of the property seemed an ordeal of heat and dust and endless rows of rosebushes. The annual blooming had passed in late spring, so only a few of the deep pink roses remained amidst the dark green leaves and wicked thorns. The head gardener, Philippe de la Rose, who managed the care of the bushes, proudly showed off the clever system of cisterns and stone-lined irrigation channels dug into the hillside.

But Tirgit scarcely saw any of it, moving through polite observations by rote, her mind filled with the memories of young Bruno clutching his head in agony. *Make it stop!* And all the while, her damnably perfect djinniah memory recorded details as they rode around the farm so that she might send a report to Mother Sharibet later.

At the far end of the vineyard rose another stone building. Formerly the winery, it now housed the great copper kettles and stills used for boiling rose petals and making the precious attar of roses. Now that summer was at its height, the

gleaming kettles stood cool and empty, the stone floors stained from years of crushed petals. The tall baskets used to gather the petals were stacked neatly at the winery entrance and the lingering smell of rose oil, overlaid with the ghosts of old vintages, temporarily banished the scents of vomit and despair haunting Tirgit.

The wine cave excavated into the side of the hill behind the winery was crowded with racks holding wax-sealed glazed jars of rosewater. A small, tightly-locked cellar contained shelves filled with vials of attar of roses. Tirgit marveled at how few in number they were in comparison to the thousands of rosebushes growing on the estate.

As they entered the cave, Tirgit saw several of the kin carefully moving jars and repositioning racks, clearing a large space so that this cave could serve as a secret great hall for the Raising and Naming. Peter, continuing as Tirgit's guide, proudly told her it had been a natural limestone cavern, so all that had been required was to enlarge the entrance and make the floor smooth.

Tirgit shivered in the cool air, and thought that it resembled nothing so much as an ancient tomb.

* * * *

After a generous dinner served to the kin who had come for the Raising and Naming, and a jar of fresh goat's blood for Tirgit, she withdrew into the parlor with Sir Jean and Lady Alais, and prepared to exchange the letters she had brought for ones that they wished to give her.

There was other news, as well, garnered from the Houses along her route, principally having to do with this latest Crusade. There was also the Paris House's request to take young Alinor on as an apprentice perfumer once she had been Raised and Named, with an eye towards arranging a match with one of Master Rogier's sons.

After Alais, who was clearly pleased with the proposed match, finished questioning Tirgit about the details, Sir Jean cleared his throat. "It's my particular pleasure to welcome you to my home, elder sister, since I, too, have been an Apkallu's concubine. There are not many of us who have had that honor—and all praise to you for fulfilling every one of your duties. I was not so fortunate."

He stopped, and muscles in his face worked, telling of old, painful memories. Alais grabbed and held his hand as if to anchor him in the here and now. As he pulled himself together, Alais explained, "He was of the Beziers House."

Before Tirgit could make a sympathetic comment, he forestalled her by saying with an effort to be cheerful, "In fact, I was the concubine of Raymond-Soleil, Utu-who-was. So I owe you many many thanks for returning Lord Utu to us. How is he doing in his new life?"

Tirgit rarely had a listener so interested in the details of her son's birth, his babyhood, and his education in Malaga. No anecdote was too trivial. It was sweet torture to recall her child, and to hear Sir Jean's stories of when he had been Jehanne de la Rose.

"Yes, that's exactly how stubborn he was," Sir Jean exclaimed, and grinned, fulfilled. "May we meet again! And how does Lord Menelaos—I mean, Lord Dominic?"

"He came to visit Lord Michael and me in London twice, for my Transformation and my Appointing. We get occasional letters saying that Lady Mathilde continues to work to heal him." She hoped that painfully slow progress had improved. The cost of the effort had been written in his face and his aura, both wan with accumulated exhaustion.

Sir Jean steepled his fingers. "There are those among the kin who are worried that he may not be fit to be a Protector, especially now that other Apkallu have been Found."

"Who worries? The Venetian House?" Tirgit asked, feeling a jolt of anger.

Sir Jean's gaze flicked away, which was answer enough.

"Simon Minor has no right to say that Lord Dominic is unfit!" Underneath her indignation, fear began to stir, and the shadow of the ax fell chill across her soul. "Lord Dominic has served the House well, and lived an exemplary life since..."
Since he Found Lord Michael again, and convinced him to join the House.

"No need to convince *me* of that, Elder sister." Sir Jean said. "Lord Dominic was gravely injured in defense of the kin—a fact that Simon dalle Rose chooses to forget, but it may be that he has cause to worry what might happen if Lord Dominic fell into despair once more." He lifted his goblet, and took a deep swallow.

"I owe Lord Dominic my life, elder sister. All that I have—" and his arm swept out to encompass the house and the rose

farm that lay beyond. "—all that I am, my wife, my children, my memories, all these I owe him. He Found me in this life, and gave me the chance to belong again. And yet ... and yet, I remember him in the moments before I was Raised and Named by him. He was without pity. My heart grieves to remember when he was Lord Menelaos, and to think of him now so broken..."

"He's not broken!" Tirgit protested, but against her will, she remembered, ... *I wanted to drink you dry so that I could do my duty as a consort and fuck Cecilia in the way of djinni.* "It's just that Lady Mathilde seems unable to cure him entirely, and from all reports, her failure is ... distressing ... for both of them."

"In this lifetime, you know him better than any other of the kin do," Sir Jean said. "But I remain glad *you* came to Raise and Name my children."

"I hope the ceremony will go well tomorrow," Tirgit said. How could he prefer her over Lord Dominic? Had Sir Jean not heard the news from Lyon, then? "I saw that most of the children have been Raised and Named in previous lifetimes, so that will ease their Raisings. But you should know that your son Peter, your daughter Alinor, and the girl named Garsende..."

"...are new to the House?" Sir Jean frowned. "That's only to be expected."

"There—there is some risk in Raising them." Trigit's throat felt dry, and tight, and she could barely force the words out.... *something bright and intoxicating pushes against her*

aura ... "You may wish to wait another year, and let Lord Michael—"

"No, no, elder sister," Jean said, though his wife grabbed his sleeve. "We trust you."

"I'll do my best," Tirgit said, hating the hesitant tone in her voice. *A Protector should inspire confidence, even if you don't feel confident*, That had been one of Michael's first lessons to her.

"Ah," he said in the same Arabic that they had been speaking all afternoon. "I was thinking that perhaps it might be better—less frightening for the candidates—if you were able to speak to them in Occitan. I could share my knowledge with you."

Tirgit had never done this alone before, but she had shared blood with Michael and the kin countless times. "I appreciate your offer, Sir Jean," she said, diffidently. "It would be helpful. That, is, um, you will permit me to drink of your blood in the way of djinni?"

Sir Jean stared at her with an unreadable expression on his weathered face. Satisfaction and ... something more. He blinked, then chuckled. Reaching for his wife's hand, he winked at Tirgit. "I offer you freely whatever you need from me, elder sister. I will come to you later, if that is acceptable?" Turning to Alais, he said, "Dearest wife, I do hope I have your permission?"

"Too late to ask me now!" Alais snapped, and with visible effort, added, "We are happy to help our Protectors however we can."

Tirgit glanced from one to the other—Sir Jean now looking a little smug, and Alais' mouth drawn into a tight line—and wondered if she had overstepped the bounds of a Crown of Service djinniah's prerogatives.

* * * *

The rest of the afternoon passed in conversation, interrupted at intervals by offerings of food for her companions and goblets of fresh blood for Tirgit.

Tirgit caught Sir Jean staring at her with an odd sort of anticipation at various intervals, but as the hours passed, he made no reference her request, nor did she see any sign of a desire on his part to fetch the ceremonial tray with its knife and bandages.

Wasn't he going to let her learn from him? Had he decided not to trust her with his memories? Had he realized how badly she failed in Lyon? She decided not to mention it again. No sense in alienating another set of kin.

After supper and a skilled performance on flute and harp by Lady Alais and another kinswoman named Aveline, Tirgit retired to the private bedchamber that had been assigned to her. Like the other accommodations offered to her on this journey, the room was small but clean and comfortable.

She had just taken off her kirtle and chemise, and opened the window to admit a cooling breeze when a tap came at her door. Wondering if one of the kin had a private matter he or she wished to discuss with a Protector, Tirgit quickly pulled on her chemise again and called, "Enter!" She prepared a gracious smile, though she felt bone-deep weariness.

To her astonishment, it was Sir Jean, clad in a spotless robe, carrying the ceremonial tray with penknife and a bandage.

Sir Jean, placed the tray on her bed, then casually unfastened his garment, revealing a muscled body with the beginnings of a paunch. His skin was marked with the white scars of a knight's life—one in particular caught her eye, running down his left side, pitted and puckered as if an infection had eaten the flesh away. He let the robe drop to the floor, and seated himself next to the tray.

"I—ah, what?" Tirgit stuttered, forgetting all of her lessons.

"...you *did* request that this be done in the way of djinni, elder sister," Sir Jean said, calmly, not at all embarrassed to be sitting, completely naked, on her bed. "Naturally, I was flattered. *Deeply* flattered."

What have I done? Tirgit thought. *By 'way of the djinni' I meant only that I wanted to taste his blood! How could I have forgotten that the kin would think ... am I forcing him to serve me in that way...?*

He gave her a frankly assessing glance, read the confusion on her face, and smiled, his confidence visibly returning. "May I say that you have the most beautiful eyes, elder sister?" he said, in a teasing tone, his gaze focused much lower than her face.

She glanced involuntarily at Sir Jean's lap, and saw the evidence of willingness. In the back of her mind, fighting with the embarrassment of having inadvertently summoned the

master of this house to her bed, she was horribly reminded of all the men who had used her when she was a slave.

But he *wanted* this—wanted her.

"Sir Jean," she said, taking care to put a goodly distance between them. "I would not compel you against your will, nor do I wish to make trouble between you and your wife. If you will but allow me to taste your blood, I would be well-satisfied."

He grinned at her, and straightened a little, throwing out his chest and pulling in his belly. "I've never been more willing in my life," he declared. "And Alais understands that this is the way of the djinni, and a great honor."

He patted the coverlet, and Tirgit swallowed, hard. *Oh, gods, if I send him away now, he'll be insulted. But I don't want to bed him!* With an effort, she composed her expression. She could do this. She was a djinniah now, not a helpless little girl.

Sir Jean was kind, and he was of the kin. He wouldn't hurt her, just as Michael had not hurt her when she had been sent, equally reluctantly, to his bed all those years ago.

But I don't want to! And what will Michael think?

Too late, now. She took a deep breath, readying herself. "Sir Jean, known to the House as Utusagila, do you freely and willingly offer me your blood, so that I may serve the House?"

"I do," he said, eagerly.

"So heard and witnessed," Tirgit said, fighting to keep the resignation out of her voice.

She shed her chemise and joined him on the bed, doing her best to give him an inviting smile. This misunderstanding

was her fault, yet another mistake she had made on this journey, and it would only make things worse if she humiliated him by implying that he was not attractive enough to satisfy her. But it was hard not to flinch when he leaned forward and kissed her moistly while putting a friendly hand on her bare breast.

Sir Jean was skilled and considerate, but as he kissed and fondled her, Tirgit remained unaroused though she murmured soft encouragements and pretended that he pleased her. He was trying so hard, the poor man!

His hands and mouth moved lower, and she began to panic. What happened if he found her dry! He would know she didn't really want to lie with him. Frantically, she closed her eyes and tried to pretend it was Michael moving against her, that it was his tongue and not Sir Jean's dipping into her navel.

To her relief, the ruse worked well enough that he had no complaints of her readiness when he finally positioned himself between her thighs and entered her. Her gasp was genuine, though born of relief rather than desire, and that seemed to please him greatly.

His expression of intense concentration faded, and was replaced by the now-familiar grin. With a start, she realized that he had been as nervous as she, and it was suddenly easier to pretend pleasure as he thrust energetically. After all, she was doing him a kindness, and a courtesy.

Tirgit dug her fingers into his shoulder blades and arched, striving to remember how she normally responded to Michael

in the height of passion. She still didn't feel anything, but somehow her pretense felt less onerous.

As he began to speed up, sweating and flushed now, she remembered the knife, and his ultimate purpose here. She should have done this earlier—it might have made things easier for her!

The tray had slipped too far to the foot of the bed to reach, so with painstaking care, Tirgit put her mouth to his shoulder, and bit him, deep enough so that the blood would well freely, but not so deep as to damage the muscles or tendons. She moaned with the familiar ecstasy of a blood bond as his memories began to flow into her with a dizzying rush of images, and her mimicry of desire suddenly became real, and urgent, in the way of the djinni.

"I recant my heresy! I confess my sins!" he whimpers through broken teeth, repeating hollow words of a false faith as the inquisitors watch him, ready to apply glowing irons if they doubt his sincerity. But he is sincere ... sincere in his desire to live.

Tirgit swallowed a mouthful of blood, the painful memories of Sir Jean's torments too difficult to bear, and searched earlier in his memories, looking for his childhood years, where she might learn how to speak.... *hunger. Painful, permanent hunger, so deep it is beyond crying over. He sucks vainly at raw knuckles, wishing his real parents would find him, and bring him to his true home. Instead, he hears the voice of his this-life mother shouting for him, telling him that the Sieur de Douzens has agreed to foster him, and he'd better be a good*

boy, and work hard if he wants to eat and have a future as a knight.

Here were the memories that she wanted, though they, too, were filled with pain and loneliness. She immersed herself in young Jean's years as a page, then a squire, learning how to be a knight. She learned the courtly songs and poems brought to the manor by troubadours. She learned the language of combat—and of courtship. She learned how to grieve in Occitan, and how to worship God in ways that the Roman church declared heresy. And, finally, she learned how to lie, how to tell tormentors what they wanted to hear, so that the pain would stop.

Tirgit was dimly aware of the tears flowing down her cheeks as she clung to Sir Jean. He jerked and shuddered his climax, then relaxed into a sweaty weight on top of her. As the rush of memories slowed, leaving behind vocabulary and grammar and a great sadness, she stroked his back, and sought one final memory to comfort them both: of the day that Sir Jean had been Found. The day when everything had been made right again...

"I make no pact with you. I will not sell my soul!"

"You were always so stubborn." Lord Dominic rests his cheek against Jean's mail-coifed ear. "I do not want your soul. Shall I open the way, or not?"

Jean tries to twist free, but Dominic's hold pins him. Dominic sighs. "It is in your hands to choose forgetfulness, or to choose memory. I remember you—we were friends, once. If you do not choose to be Raised and Named, then ... may

we meet again." His right hand grips Sir Jean's chin in preparation for breaking his neck.

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

Wait. *Wait.* Wasn't this the same memory she had seen in Michael's blood for years? But, for the first time, the images were bright, gilded with terror and exultation, leaping out to her notice in all the color and vitality of life.

Tirgit raised her head, the scene fading as she swallowed the last of the blood. Her expression must have been transparent, for Sir Jean touched her cheek, his homely face concerned.

"Elder sister, are you all well? Is anything wrong?"

"I—I don't know. I saw something..." Confusion and the taste of iron lay thick on her tongue. "May I—may I look again?"

It was an unorthodox request, but Sir Jean forced a jovial laugh to cover his concern. "Anything for a beautiful elder sister of the House," he said, but his brown eyes were troubled.

"Thank you." Delicately, she reopened the shallow wound on his shoulder and lapped at the salty blood that beaded there, letting it carry her up and into the sea of his memories, where she floated like a vessel of shell and spider-silk, amongst the waves of pain, joy, sadness, and laughter.

She revisited the day of his Raising and Naming in the heat of an Egyptian day, when Lord Dominic had abducted him from the party of raiding Crusaders, and offered him a choice of truth or death. Then she recalled what she had seen in

Michael's blood, using the perfect recollection of a djinniah to compare the two sets. Two days, two Raisings, two men, and yet, eerily, the same conversation, the same emotions, the same capitulations. And the same djinn: Lord Dominic.

Had Dominic made a mistake when he Raised Jean or Michael? Jean's experiences of that day felt *real*, salted with terror and simmering in the humid heat of a papyrus swamp. And then there was Michael's memory of that same conversation in the cold rain of a Flanders night, oddly muted and leached of any real flavor of joy or terror or anything other than the shame that overlay most of his memories of that day:

And what about her own memories?

...the sound of angry voices awakens Tirgit awakens from an uneasy sleep. She creeps out from her alcove, to see Sir Michael and Lady Cecilia in bed together, both naked. But Lord Dominic is there, too, and Sir Michael looks both terrified and very, very angry.

"Lady, why do you torment me? You know I am a knight of the Church. I cannot promise to protect sorcery, nor can I swear you a false oath," Sir Michael says, his voice shaking a little.

What have I done? I should never have defied Lady Cecilia and sent that letter. Now Sir Michael will be killed, and Lord Dominic won't survive losing him again ... *Perhaps, if she moves quietly enough, she can creep to the door leading down to the great hall ... But Sir Michael sees her, and there's a horrible hopefulness in his glance, as if he's hoping that she will summon aid...*

A spear of agony through her temples made her arch. *Oh gods, is this what Bruno felt?*

Sir Jean was crushing her—she couldn't breathe—she had to get him off.

"...elder sister..?"

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she pushed him frantically away, and the force of her motion sent her rolling off the bed tangled hopelessly in the sheets. In slow motion but helpless to stop herself, she crashed down to the tiled floor. There she lay, scarcely aware of anything but painful throbbing, as if her head wanted to explode. It was worse than the pain she had endured in the aftermath of the riot in London.

Had she cracked her skull again? But how? The room was whirling now, and black streaks were draping her...

* * * *

"Elder sister! Elder sister!" Cool tile hard against her back and legs, something soft and firm under her neck, and a warm hand stroking her forehead. "What happened?"

"Head ... hurts," she managed. She opened her eyes and focused on golden eyes, delicate features. Lady Alais. Tirgit 's head was in her lap. Someone had covered her with a sheet, which she wrapped around her like a gown from another era.

Oh, gods, no wonder she was displeased with my request. She knew that Jean would ... would...

"Here, drink this." Cool metal touched her lips. She opened her mouth, and swallowed obediently, feeling the pain recede slowly with each swallow of tepid chicken blood. After a few

minutes, she was able to rise, with Sir Jean's help, and sit in one of the bedroom's chairs.

Both Sir Jean and Lady Alais hovered over her.

"What is it? What did you see?" Sir Jean asked bluntly. He had put his robe on again.

Tirgit told him, rubbing her head, and saw confusion deepen in them. And no wonder—Tirgit did not even know what to make of her discovery.

"I've never heard of such a thing!" Sir Jean declared, when she had finished relating her observations. "What shall we do? I'm quite certain that my memories are my own, but..."

"It's troubling," Tirgit said.

"I heard that Lord Dominic is conducting Raising and Namings at the House in Genoa," Alais said. Her expression had gone from confused to pensive. "We could send a pigeon, and tell him what you saw."

"I don't want to trouble him over what might be my mistake," Tirgit mumbled, wishing the remnants of her headache weren't clouding her thinking. She felt she was missing something important...

"What if it's *his* mistake, elder sister?" Alais asked, an edge to her voice, and Tirgit's head cleared with alacrity. Belatedly, she remembered that Alais was a niece of Maryam dalle Rose, the mother of Simon, Master of the Venice House.

Oh no, Tirgit thought, already regretting her mention of the duplicated memories. What if Lord Dominic's critics amongst the kin used this to further argue his unfitness to be a Protector? Botching a Raising and Naming was a serious matter, worse even than killing children not of the House.

"It's a long journey from Genoa," she protested. "And I'm really not certain that there's a problem. Perhaps it's just my inexperience. I would feel like a fool bothering Lord Dominic with a trifle."

"Or perhaps your fresh eyes have seen something that others have missed," Sir Jean said. He leaned forward, and patted her knee. Tirgit twitched, but mastered the impulse to move her leg out of reach.

"And seeing how Lord Dominic is the common factor in both sets of memories, he appears to be the only one who can clear up the confusion," Alais added.

"I—I don't know." What if asking questions led to Lord Dominic getting in trouble? What if she had just betrayed the man who had shown her nothing but kindness?

"Elder sister," Alais said firmly. "A short time ago, you tasted my husband's blood—and collapsed. You were unconscious for the better part of an hour. Never, in all of my lifetimes, have I seen one of the djinni do that. Something is wrong, and I want to postpone tomorrow's ceremony until we can be certain that there are no problems with Raisings." She said this with calm determination, but her fingers clenched the material of her gown in a fierce grip.

Sir Jean reached over, and gentled his wife into releasing her skirts. Her fingers disappeared into the shelter of his big, scarred hand. "The sanctity of a Raising and the immortality of the djinni are the foundations of the existence of the kin," he said to Tirgit, as his thumb stroked the back of Alais's wrist in small, comforting circles. "If you are ill, or if it's possible to return the wrong memories, then we need to know."

"I know," Tirgit whispered miserably, relieved that she wouldn't have Raise and Name anyone tomorrow, but feeling like a traitor for giving the kin yet another reason to doubt Lord Dominic. "I'll write a message tonight, and we can send a pigeon to the Genoa House at dawn."

Chapter Ten

'We opened for them the doors of all things, until when they rejoiced in what they were given/We seized them suddenly; then lo! they were in utter despair.'—Surah "The Cattle," *Holy Qu'ran* 6.44

Saturday, August 23, AD 1270:

Flying by night from Genoa to Beziers had taken Dominic four days since the pigeon's arrival. The blue-banded ribbon meant an urgent personal message, but all it had said was, *Beg your aid and advice in person, soonest. Tirgit, True Name Lal-Hamun at Villerose-sur-Orb.*

Knowing that whatever she needed must be extremely urgent, he had left immediately, following the coastline of the Middle Sea past Savona, to Marseilles and beyond, stopping near dawn at the nearest Houses of the Rose or farms of the kin.

As he flew, the coastline began to take on a familiar aspect, pale limestone cliffs lit by the River of Milk above, looming above a sea that glittered in the starlight like black diamonds.

Menelaos had made this journey many times that last night of his life—and Honoria's—ferrying the children and visitors from the doomed Beziers House to the waiting ship. Tonight felt just the same, warm summer air slipping over his hair and shoulders like the softest cloak. If only he could recapture the man he had been then, turn back time, and undo the errors and terrors of the following day. But even the

lost powers of the Apkallu never included the power to change the past. He had only this moment in which to act. He kept flying.

Master Guibert and his household greeted Dominic warmly when he arrived in Beziers, shortly before dawn. The years he had spent in Venice had conditioned him to expect cold courtesy and barely-veiled suspicion, so it was a pleasant surprise to meet kin who genuinely welcomed him. But then, Menelaos had known Guibert as a tousle-haired lad.

After a few hours' rest, and breakfast, Dominic declined an escort, obtaining the directions to Villeroze-sur-Orb from Guibert's blood, given willingly. He wanted to ride out alone, to compose himself before seeing Tirgit again. What did she need him for?

* * * *

"Lord, you came! Thank you. I didn't want to inconvenience you, but..." Tirgit's words were emphasized by the fierce strength of her arms, flung around him. She had run out of the house to greet him as soon as the children posted on the walls announced his arrival.

Dominic kissed her forehead, and then returned her embrace, basking the forthright affection that had miraculously remained untarnished by the truths of his existence.

"Tirgit. It's good to meet again," he murmured. "I want to help you, if I can." He held her, relishing the rare intimacy, then, reluctantly, stepped back to greet Sir Jean. The knight

appeared both older and happier than the last time they'd met.

He addressed Dominic warmly, with a hearty kiss on both cheeks. On the other hand, Lady Alais, Sir Jean's wife, wore a familiar expression of cold propriety as she made her curtsies.

A flurry of introductions followed, with the kin evincing a range of reactions at meeting him, but on the whole, most were more welcoming than the kin on the Italian peninsula. Finally, the formalities completed, Tirgit—he must remember to call her Theodora—Sir Jean, Lady Alais, and Dominic withdrew to the parlor for a private conference.

Dominic settled down in a cushioned chair, a gilt beaker of fresh chicken blood in his hand. "Please tell me what happened. Why have you summoned me?"

Tirgit related the events of the previous week, with Sir Jean and Lady Alais interjecting commentary at intervals.

"...and we thought it best not to tell the rest of the kin, nor to perform the Raisings and Namings, until your arrival, lord," Sir Jean finished.

"I think," Dominic said cautiously, "that I need to see this for myself."

Sir Jean glanced at his wife, who gave a tight-lipped nod, before he said, "Of course, lord."

"Shall I fetch the knife and tray?" Alais had her husband's hand in a tight grip.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary." Dominic rose, and crossed the parlor. He knelt next to Sir Jean's chair. The knight was already rolling up his sleeve, but the formalities

were required. "Do you freely and willingly offer me your blood, Utusagila, known in this life as Jean de Pezenas?"

"I do." Sir Jean extended his arm, revealing the line of an old burn-scar snaking from wrist to elbow.

"So heard and witnessed," Tirgit said promptly, echoed a heartbeat later by Alais.

Dominic began to raise Sir Jean's wrist to his lips, but Alais gasped apprehensively. "I won't hurt him," he said, more sharply than he intended.

"Of—of course not," Alais said, in a tone that implied the opposite.

Dominic suppressed his anger. He had never harmed any of the kin, all the lost gods be damned!

He bent his head and made a swift cut with his teeth, sharper than the edge of a honed sword. The first drop of blood touched his tongue, opening the gates of memory, and Sir Jean's life flooded his senses in an ecstatic jumble of images and impressions. Dominic let the intense sensations flow through him, holding himself aloof. A djinn could not afford to lose himself in these first critical moments—that path ended in a meeting with the Man of the Ax.

He waded back through memories of joy and sorrow ... *A little girl clutching his leg, her cheeks gleaming with tears. "Papa, Olivier broke my doll!" ... Holding the tiny, squirming bundle of his firstborn son in his hands. "I want to call him Peter, after my father." ... Arjumand, his expression stern though his face is the same as the golden youth Dominic had met two decades ago, commands in a brisk tone: "I am sending your House to Languedoc, Sir Jean, to establish new*

rose farms. Even if the Mongols are turned back from the Kingdom of Jerusalem, we cannot continue to rely on a single source for our livelihood." ... at the House in Acre, filled with the delicious scents of baking bread, garlic, and roast lamb, Alais, barely past her Raising and Naming ceremony and dressed in a gown the same shade of gold as her eyes, smiles shyly, and presses warm fingers against his. "Mother Sharibet has given her permission for us to marry. She wishes us many strong sons and daughters."

Finally, Dominic reached the memory he sought. He relived the day he had kidnapped Sir Jean from the raiding party of Crusaders. He was seeking vengeance on the raiders of the caravan that he was escorting, and he tasted Sir Jean's blood not to test him, but to execute him. He had been astonished at finding yet another of the Lost among this particular group of knights. His desire to inflict righteous vengeance dissipated in the triumph of returning a lost soul to the kin.

There was no mistaking the richness of Sir Jean's memory. That day was seasoned with escalating emotions—anger, panic, terror, culminating finally in an overwhelming relief at finding his true identity at last, all his memories, all his lifetimes restored to him in a single, overwhelming rush.

Having found what he sought, Dominic broke his contact with Sir Jean, and sat back on his heels, aware of anxious eyes fastened on him. "It is as Tirg—er, Theodora says. Sir Jean bears a true memory, and it matches my own."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear it." Sir Jean sat back with a smile, letting Alais dab her handkerchief against the tiny wound Dominic had inflicted.

"Now, I will examine my memory of Lord Michael's Raising," Dominic said, returning to his seat. Closing his eyes, he returned to the night he had abducted Michael from the Templar preceptory.

The initial memories were as vivid as Sir Jean's had been: *... cold rain, and darkness, and Michael's unconscious body lying warm and heavy in his arms as they flew through the night, leaving the Templar dormitory far behind. Michael's bewilderment at awakening in Cecilia's bed, and his terror at seeing Dominic. "You killed them all ... I won't sell my soul." Dominic defying Cecilia, desperation squeezing his chest: "I won't let you kill him. I won't chance losing him again."*

...Michael, crouched low in the saddle, kicking the mare's sides to keep her at a gallop in the slippery mud of the road leading to Ypres. Dominic swoops down, preparing to snap Michael's neck, as ordered. It will be a swift, painless death. And yet ... Dominic hesitates. He cannot cast Michael's soul adrift in the Underworld without trying one last time.

...Dominic sighs. "It is in your hands to choose forgetfulness, or to choose memory. I remember you—we were friends, once. If you do not choose to be Raised and Named, then ... may we meet again." His right hand rises and grips Michael's chin in preparation for breaking his neck.

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

Those memories were indeed an inexplicable echo of the moment when Sir Jean had consented to his Raising a decade earlier. Not only that, but as Tirgit had mentioned, the flavor of those images was odd. Pale, as she had described.

With a sick lurch in his chest, Dominic recognized the particular nature of that paleness. He had reason to know it well. In the aftermath of the injury that had felled him during the Great Massacre in Beziers, Sharibet had returned Menelaos's memories year by year. Each one of those returned memories felt like this one, like another person's experiences taken into his mind, transcribed as if from a faded manuscript.

He began to make a careful examination of those frantic moments in the rain.

...a desperate Michael fights him, whipping his head back trying to smash Dominic's nose, kicking his bare feet at Dominic's legs.

"I'm sorry. But I couldn't let you go."

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

White-hot pain lanced like a crossbow bolt through Dominic's temples, shattering his concentration.

"Lord!" The scrape of chairs over tiles, and Tirgit's voice in his ear, her hands cradling his head. He realized he was sprawled on the floor. When had he toppled from his seat?

"Geas—" He managed to force the words past terrible pain. His skull was on the verge of exploding, and his vision was obscured by flurries of black snow. He wondered if he were dying. But even through the radiating agony, part of his mind

kept working. Why had a geas been set around *that* particular memory? And who had set it?

What had really happened that night?

Because if his memory of Michael's consent were false, then perhaps Dominic really *was* the monster that some of the kin feared. At the very least, he might have committed a great crime against the House ... and against the person he loved above all others.

* * * *

"I've never heard of such a thing happening before," Alais complained, for the fourth or fifth time. "Djinni fainting. Duplicated memories. Lord Dominic, what happened? Did you do something?"

It took all of Dominic's tenuous self-control not to glare at her. The better part of an hour had passed since his disastrous attempt to investigate the possibly-falsified memories, but each heartbeat still drove a red-hot spike through his forehead.

He was sitting upright now, though given the anxious scrutiny of the two kin across from him, perhaps he should have stayed prone on the floor. He had told them all he could, but they wanted answers that he didn't have. Perhaps he might be able to make sense of all this after a few hours of sleep in a darkened room.

"I don't think *he* did anything," Tirgit interjected, entering the parlor. She handed Dominic a steaming cup filled with an herbal tisane. "The same pain and fainting happened to me, too, and well before Lord Dominic arrived."

"True enough," agreed Sir Jean, rubbing nervous fingers over the white threads of old scars around his mouth. "Before you collapsed, lord, you said it was a geas."

"It would seem so," Dominic said, taking a cautious sip from the glazed beaker. The hot liquid was spicy-sweet with lavender, fennel, horehound, cassia, and something earthy-tasting ... asparagus root, perhaps. He relaxed—not that he didn't trust Tirgit. These were all excellent remedies against pains of the head, falling-sickness, and fainting. The throbbing in his head gradually began to ease as he took one swallow, then another.

Tirgit seated herself next to him, the space between her brows creased with worry.

"But why would looking at a memory trigger a geas?" Jean asked.

"To hide something?" Alais suggested.

As Tirgit shot Dominic a frightened glance, he nodded cautiously, his thoughts moving at a snail's pace. "It's an effective way to forbid an action."

"Such as questioning whether Lord Michael actually consented to his Transformation?" Alais asked, her voice shaky but her expression determined.

"Dearest wife, don't—" Jean began, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged him off. "Lord Dominic would have the most to gain from concealing any irregularities from that time," she insisted.

Dominic raised his brows in astonishment. "Are you really suggesting that I did this to myself?"

Alais held her ground. "I've never heard of anyone else—djinni or mortal—fainting because they happened to remember something they shouldn't."

"My memories of that night must have a geas on them, too," Tirgit said "I know you wouldn't have done any such thing to me, lord."

Dominic could have kissed her for her loyalty. "It's an uncommon geas, to be sure," he said. "I think we need to look at Lord Michael's memories, and see if a geas has also been set on his recollection of that night."

Alais clearly wanted to object and didn't quite dare. Her thoughts showed on her face—how could they trust Dominic to investigate an event that he might well be responsible for? She was right to be wary, he admitted. What if he *had* forced Michael, and altered his memories—altered all of their memories, even his own—afterwards? Was such a thing even possible? The sick throbbing in his head, which had been in retreat, began to advance once more.

"Lord?" Once again, Tirgit stepped in to rescue him. "We should summon Lady Mathilde also. She wasn't there, so her memories should be unsullied."

"Ninharsag was always the most skilled of us all at diagnosis," Dominic agreed. "She can shed some light on these strange events." *Not to mention there's a greater chance that the kin will trust her findings. Whatever they are.*

"What do you suggest we do until then, lord?" asked Sir Jean.

"Wait," Dominic said. "Some forms of geas can kill. The effects of this one are severe enough that it would be best to leave it alone until Mathilde's arrival."

"If you say so, lord. But what shall we tell the others? They're already wondering why we've postponed the Raising and Naming ceremony."

Alais leaned forward. "We should ask for a House council. If Master Guibert comes, we will have enough elders to make a binding decision on what to do."

A triumphant gleam rippled through her aura like the light shining on the blade of the great ax, as if she couldn't wait to see the notorious Child-killer found guilty of memory-tampering ... or worse.

Tirgit's face was sickly-pale, her eyes enormous, her fingers icy as she took his hand. "Lord, I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's all right, dearest daughter," he said. "I need to know the truth. We all do."

And the truth was that Alais might be right, he thought, remembering how bleak his existence was before he realized that Michael had not died in Egypt, after all. He had in fact abducted Michael from the Templar preceptory in Ypres. What if he had accidentally transferred a set of his own memories as part of Michael's botched Raising? Or done it deliberately, and then caused them all to forget his crime?

He bowed his head to Alais and Jean. "I will abide by the ruling of the House elders, of course," he said, humility leaving a taste like bitter smoke in his mouth.

* * * *

House of the Rose, London, Sunday, August 24 AD 1270:

Michael was relaxing in the first hot bath he had had in forever, it seemed. It had been several months of grim and bloody work in the cold fogs of the Irish coast, tracking down the pirates who had captured the *Rose of Dublin*, and exacting vengeance for the kin they had murdered and the goods they had stolen. And he hadn't even recovered half of the missing goods.

He had returned to London wanting nothing more than a hot bath and his wife's warm welcome, and then sleep. But Tirgit hadn't been home, and the Westminster house had been cold and closed up.

So he had hauled himself onto his palfrey, which was as weary as he was, if not more, and left Westminster for the London House, knowing they'd have information on where his consort was.

Of course Joan had gone into a frenzy of 'Lord! We weren't expecting you! What you must think of us in all our disarray!' but she had organized a bath for him, and given him her opinion of Tirgit's foolishness for going on a Raising and Naming progress alone.

He had ignored her, giving orders to have any important correspondence delivered, and then taken himself to the bathhouse to soak away his aches of body and spirit.

When he had recovered some peace of mind, he had started reading the mail. It was mostly routine, until he came to the last letter. Joan was often spiteful like that, putting Tirgit's mail on the bottom of the stack. He tried to let go of

the annoyance before he opened the wrapper, marked as having come from Lyon.

But the letter wrenched his heart before he had read more than a few words. *This letter finds me with a great soreness of spirit.... My soul is wounded and my heart cries out for your presence ... alas, he collapsed and after a while, drew breath no more ... send me your aid and your strength: I cannot do this alone.*

Losing a Raising and Naming candidate was like losing hope for the future.

But the letter was nearly three months old by now. She was probably over most of the upset. He tried to get up from the bath, and had to use his hands of air to lift himself. He wouldn't do anyone any good to push himself into the air to go rescue her tonight.

He would depart tomorrow. After he had slept.

Chapter Eleven

When [Ninshubur] had entered the E-kur, the house of Enlil, she lamented before Enlil: "Father Enlil, don't let anyone kill your daughter in the underworld. Don't let your precious metal be alloyed there with the dirt of the underworld. Don't let your precious lapis lazuli be split there with the mason's stone. Don't let your boxwood be chopped up there with the carpenter's wood. Don't let young lady [Inanna] be killed in the underworld."—"The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld," c.1.4.1, (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

The Fort of Carthage, Tuesday, August 26, AD 1270:

Blanche bowed her head, too tired to weep. She closed Evrard's eyes, and left her hand on his rapidly-cooling face.

He was dead. Her husband was dead. *Why couldn't I protect you?*

Her hand started to shake, where it rested on his cooling skin. She had failed to save him, so why did she suddenly want to slap him, to punish him for the crime of leaving her alone and undefended in this strange and horribly hot country?

I'm sorry, Blanche, he had whispered his final apology. But she had seen the relief in his soul as he'd escaped into death. His will to live had been broken by the rumors of the king's death from fever. If the king could die, rather than fall in glorious battle, then he could, too...

She crossed herself, hoping to achieve some remorse or penitence for her blasphemous thoughts, but the prayer performed no magic; her disgust didn't go away.

"Damn you!" The words wrenched from her tight throat. She slammed her fist down upon Evrard's chest. The movement brought the smell of voided bladder and bowels.

He was dead. What should she do now? She tried to think.

For the sake of Evrard's soul, she have to fetch a priest to come and say an absolution. But after that, she had to get away. And soon. Evrard's liegeman, Sir Gawaine, would be visiting in a while, as he had promised—or threatened. She shuddered at the memory of his avid eyes, counting the wealth her husband had brought with him on Crusade. His silver-chased saddle, his sword and mail, his hawk and horse, the linen sheets she'd insisted they bring, their silver goblets (a wedding present from Maman!) and her clothes and jewels.

But she had just become the biggest prize of all—the widowed Lady of Bressoux. She suspected Gawaine would not hesitate to secure her son Pieter's inheritance for himself with a forced marriage.

With that thought, she jumped to her feet, grabbing a woolen cloak that was far too warm to wear in this climate, and frantically bundling up items that she could easily carry. Money. Jewelry. His spurs and dagger. The promissory note from the Templars. Her spare gown—no, just her chemises. Her pen and powdered ink. She'd have to leave the paper. Damn.

She gave a last look to the tiny room above the saddlery that was all they had been able to find for lodgings apart from

the other females who had been brought along as the soldiers' camp followers.

She had to find that priest, and then she had to find a berth on one of the supply ships home. Her sons were awaiting her return. Pieter, her eldest, who had just become the Sieur de Bressoux, was in his Uncle Henri and Aunt Genevieve's keeping. Not that she had any solid grounds to suspect either Henri or Genevieve of covetous designs, but she had often wondered why Henri had maneuvered Evrard into taking the cross.

She had her hand on the door latch when she heard heavy footsteps and the chime of mail on the stairs below. *Ah, damn.*

This old Moorish fortress had the most beautiful carved window lintels Blanche had ever seen: swooping quatrefoils and graceful swirling Arabic letters. She leaned over, looking down onto a flat rooftop over a delicate colonnade. Then she climbed up onto the sill, lifted her skirts then her legs over, twisting to ease through the narrow opening. Better that she fall and break her neck now, than fall into the hands of Sir Gawaine.

Hoping her slippers would keep purchase on the rooftop, she jumped.

* * * *

Dar al Warda, Tunis, Tuesday, 7th of the Moon Muharram, 669 AH (August 26, AD 1270):

Arjumand paced impatiently back and forth between the scented rose garden and the triple-barred front doorway of

the House of the Rose in Tunis. Messengers had gone out earlier today to check on Blanche and her ill husband, but had sent no word back yet.

Well, they needed to infiltrate the *ribat*, the fortified mosque of Carthage, which Louis and his Crusaders had captured in the fourth week of July—so logically Arjumand shouldn't be worried that none of them had reported yet. However, logic had gone by the boards somewhere during the hours spent flying from Alexandria, and he was afire with impatience.

He gnawed a thumbnail, wishing he had something meatier to chew on. Bad enough his daughter had accompanied her husband on Crusade, but then he'd succumbed to the same dysentery that had felled, *at last*, King Louis, the incompetent.

So many men were dying in the king's camp, just like during the last Crusade. The danger to her was driving him mad. Where was she? Was she safe?

His heart ached with the dangers she'd already survived. Ship-tossing storms, battles, unaccustomed heat, disease ... Arjumand spat in a flowerbed, trying to rid himself of the taste of fear, metallic as blood, in his mouth. The summer heat, even in this pleasant, green, well-watered garden, dried up the moist spot almost immediately.

She had to be safe. She had to be. *Please, God ...* he started to pray, before breaking off with a choked laugh. He was done petitioning Nothing. He, himself, would keep her safe...

Pattering footsteps approached him from the front door. He whirled, and saw Farid al-Warda, the young Master of the Tunis House, skid to a stop on the graveled path, out of breath, and looking nervous. *God's Nails, what now?*

"Well?" he demanded.

"She's gone, lord." Farid averted his long-lashed brown eyes, which were several shades darker than the usual golden-amber of the kin. "She left the room where she was tending her husband. When Abd al-Sattar went up the stairs to see how she was doing, he found her husband dead, the lady missing, and the room ransacked."

Arjumand's very bones burned with rage. "You *lost* her?" He took a stiff step toward Farid, who fell to his knees and prostrated himself.

"Lord!" he cried, voice muffled by his flowing sleeves. "'Abd al-Sattar is searching for her now."

Arjumand wanted to berate the young man, but controlled himself. No matter that he was currently humbling himself, Farid was the Master of this House, and if he decided to oppose Arjumand ... "Get up. I can't hear you when you're eating dirt."

"Yes, lord," Farid said, rising to his knees. His head bowed, so that all Arjumand could see of him was his rose-red turban, he mumbled, trembling in every limb, "I am not willing for you to kick me!"

Arjumand put his foot back down on the ground with rigid precision. He had only planned to nudge Farid with his toe to get him onto his feet, but it would be foolish to run afoul of the kin over a misinterpretation. His relations with the Tunis

House were already strained by his requests for surveillance of Blanche, and the kin's fear of the Crusaders.

He swallowed rage and tried to think what to do. How could he *ensure* that she would be safe? "I'll go myself," he said.

"Lord?"

"I'll need Frankish clothing."

Farid was face down in the dirt again before he'd finished speaking. "Yes, lord!"

"Damn it, get up! You won't find clothing for me where your nose is now!"

"Yes, lord!" Farid said, scrambling to his feet.

"Go!" said Arjumand, keeping his voice even with an effort. But his agitation could not be fully restrained, and his emotions, magnified by his aura, blew hot wind, gritty with dirt, into Farid's face.

His eyes watering, the young man ducked his head in acknowledgement. Before he finished the motion, he was running out of the garden, shouting with much more volume than Arjumand would allow himself. "Clothing for the djinn!"

* * * *

The ten miles from Tunis to Carthage took Arjumand less than twenty minutes to fly. Traveling by air was much faster than riding a horse, but also more strenuous, for it was broad daylight and he had to take care to maintain a glamour of invisibility. Below him, in the fields that lay outside the walls of Tunis, he saw the disorderly army gathered by Sultan al-Mustansir, and he strengthened the glamour as far as he

could. He did not want to risk a bowman taking a shot at him, even though he hoped he was high enough to be out of arrow-range.

Cutting northeast, across the ruffled greenish waters of Lake of Tunis, he swooped over rounded hills where the bones of Roman occupation poked up through the soil. The damned Franj clothing itched. And the thoughts he could spare from the dual effort of flying and maintaining the glamour revolved around one thing: What had happened to his daughter?

The Crusader camp spread out on the slopes of the Byrsa hill in an untidy jumble. Tents, pennants, shirts tied up as awnings, all hung limp in the furnace-like heat. Few Crusaders were stirring, and Arjumand found it was easy to land behind a ruined stone building. His blond hair uncovered and a Frankish broadsword riding on his hip, he took a moment to remember his native tongue, before striding casually up to the arched gate of the square fortress at the top of the hill, upon whose lintel was inscribed a cautionary comment altogether lost on the illiterates guarding it.

These sentries were listless, hardly inquiring who he was, or what he wanted. They didn't know where Evrard de Bressoux was, nor had they seen his wife. They seemed overwhelmed by the relentless heat and the stench of death permeating the air, a pungent reek of sewage, vomit, and rotting meat. With only the lightest touch of coercion from his aura-wings, they let him pass through the groined vault pierced by boiling oil slits into the chaos of the courtyard within the fortress.

On all sides, dozens of dead and dying men and a few women lay slack on the stones. His stomach threatened revolt, and he had to quell it ruthlessly as he approached the bloated female corpses. *Please let me not find Blanche here!* he prayed, forgetting his earlier intention to abandon appeals to a God who didn't exist.

A swift and gingerly check of age and hair coloring revealed none of the dead women likely to be his daughter. Feeling dizzy with mingled relief and nausea, he studied his surroundings, trying to determine where he should search next.

On all four sides of the ribat was a covered walkway with arched openings. Above this arcade was a floor of rooms with narrow, screened windows. A fortified passage led through one wall into the mosque. Round towers guarded the corners of the fortress, and rounded battlements with arrow slits crowned the structure's walls, shoulder to shoulder. There were more battlements than there were live men in the fortress.

His spies had told him that Evrard had occupied a room on the upper level above the saddlery. Stepping over bodies to reach the stairs in the corner of the courtyard, he sped upward and through the vaulted chambers, until he found the small room, ripe with the stench of shit and vomit, stripped even of bedding. In the far corner, Arjumand saw the body of a slender, brown-haired young man sprawled on the brick floor.

Opening his Seer's eyes brought him no comfort. Not even a flicker of life remained in Evrard de Bressoux.

Where had Blanche gone? Arjumand stepped outside the hot, stinking space, searching for any traces of his daughter's Apkallu aura, but could see nothing.

Running back to the stairs, down to the arched entrance in the center of the inner wall, into the many-columned prayer hall of the mosque. There were more bodies here, and the filth that came with Franj. Even the purification fountain was fouled. No rose-colored aura. He ran, disdaining the few curious looks that came his way.

Back into the courtyard, where he ducked into the shadow of the arcade and made himself disappear. Then, he launched himself up over the walls and hovered over the camp below the walls. Where would she go? Where *could* she go?

The sight of the harbor's clear turquoise waters, just beyond the camp, caught his attention. The ships!

* * * *

When Blanche finally found a priest in the camp outside the fortress walls, she discovered he was too drunk to stand, gibbering about the imminent arrival of the Saracen forces coming to attack now that the king was dead.

She left the priest slumped in the shade of a large pavilion, wondering if she should return to the room, and then remembered Sir Gawaine, and shuddered. Poor Evrard—but hopefully, God would understand her plight and permit her husband entrance to Heaven even without Absolution. He had been a good and pious soul, though he would have been better-suited to the life of a monk, than the lord of an estate.

She crossed herself and murmured a brief prayer for the repose of his soul.

Now, she must take a care for herself, and her children. The dark shapes of the Crusader fleet, bobbing in the bright blue sea, beckoned to her.

Hurrying despite the intense midday heat, she descended the slope of the fortress hill, and crossed an expanse of tumbled stones to the ruin-strewn shore where a second camp had sprung up. There, Blanche found herself forced to cross an impromptu marketplace crowded with hot and irritable men-at-arms and squires, servants, and camp followers of a startling range of color and costume.

One of the women, although certainly not a lady, had protected herself from the stunning sunlight by means of a clever contraption: a round piece of thick silk attached to a pole, supported by smaller poles ranging outward in a circle. Under its shadow, she smiled and flirted with the men who passed by.

Blanche squinted into the blazing sunlit sky, painfully aware that she could not afford to be distracted—or noticed.

"Do you want rabbits? I have rabbits! Fine rabbits!" shouted the Crusader-turned-merchant next to her, breathing wine and onion-laced fumes into her face. His hand waved expansively at a display of gutted hares lying limply on a tattered blanket. Flies and other less familiar insects swarmed over them.

"No, thank you," she said hesitantly, wondering how he could chew with so few teeth.

"Ha'penny! Ha'penny apiece!" he wheedled.

Blanche retreated further into the market. "I'll take a farthing! Only a farthing!" he shouted after her.

She found herself lost and disoriented after only a few steps. Her view blocked by a hodge-podge of improvised sunshades, she could no longer see the sea, or even any of the ship's masts. Buyers, sellers, surcotes, armor, cloth, grains, rapidly spoiling meat, used clothing, whetstones ... she was surrounded by a sea of commerce without any landmark to guide her.

She had to find the ships! She *had* to go home to her children.

She felt a sharp tug at her precious bundle, and quick as a live and leaping hare, she leaped backwards, clutching it tightly to her chest while trying not to trip over her trailing skirts. She caught a quick glimpse of a surprised, beard-stubbed face, before she turned and ran as fast as she could. When she was sure she'd gotten away from the would-be thief, she stopped, panting. Her face felt hot and swollen under a stinging layer of perspiration as she peered around the nearest stall, hoping for a glimpse of the ships.

"Lady Blanche?"

She stifled a scream as a tall figure loomed over her with the clink of mail and a wash of fermented sweat-smell. It was Sir Gawaine, Evrard's liegeman, where she had least expected him. Tall, blond, broad-shouldered—and drunk as a Templar. Why wasn't he at the fortress? Shouldn't he have been busily looting all of the things she hadn't been able to carry away?

"Sir Gawaine," she acknowledged, giving him a small curtsy with shaking knees, and turned to escape.

A large hand closed around her upper arm. "Are you shopping?" he slurred, giving her a lopsided leer and pulling her against his side. His expression became craftier. "How is your husband, my lord de Bressoux?" His glance took in her disheveled state and the bundle she carried. He was drunk, but not stupid. "Have you heard the news?" And then he waited for her reply.

From her other side, she caught sight of Gawaine's companion, Sir Thierry, red-faced, wearing greasy leather. Taking her other arm, he shook his head and said mournfully, "The Sultan is coming!" And hiccupped.

Blanche couldn't help trying to pull away. Perhaps, if she was quick enough ... Sir Gawaine's fingers tightened. "Lady Blanche, allow me to es-escort you. Where *are* you going?"

What could she tell him? *Oh, Maman, I wish you were here!* As well to wish Evrard hadn't fallen ill, hadn't died. "My thanks, Sir Gawaine. I'm looking for the stall of the perfumers called the House of the Rose. They—they were here, just yesterday." *And who knows? They might even help me, for my mother's sake.*

His eyes lit with avarice. "My lord stinks that badly, eh?" He grinned down at her. "Well, you just come with me, and we'll get whatever you need to wrap the body."

She stifled an instinctive flinch as he released her arm and caught her around the waist, forcing herself to smile up into his broad, stubbled face. "Thank you." *Oh God, trapped!*

He strode off to the right, towing her inexorably along. Too late, she caught the glimpse of sun-gilded water and fat-bellied ships that she had sought.

"Where are we going?" asked Sir Thierry, who had a firm hold on her other arm, despite his tottering steps.

Sir Gawaine didn't bother to answer, and she could not. She was already breathless, trying to keep up with the knight's long strides, and trying not to succumb to the fear that rode her now that her nightmare was coming true: she was being abducted.

* * * *

Sir Gawaine was, if not a model of chivalry, not disgustingly lewd as he led her through the makeshift lanes of the marketplace. He did allow his hand to drop from its manacle-like grip around her waist to fondle her bottom once or twice—but discreetly, as if he were merely getting tired, and letting his palm rest on the curve of her hip.

She itched to stab his hand, and perhaps his heart, if only she dared.

But she didn't dare. He was bigger and stronger, and if she alerted him now, she might not have the chance to escape later. Better just to bide her time now, and lull him into thinking that she was too meek to run...

But his grip on her never loosened. And no rescuers appeared. Sir Thierry pressed close on her other side, listing like a ship in a high sea. No escape in that direction, not yet ... Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of a strange knight, bearded, tall, broad-shouldered ... uncannily familiar in face. In fact, he was a younger version of Uncle Michel, right down to his golden whiskers.

When she turned her head to look at him, he ducked behind a tent, as if he didn't want to be seen.

Could he be a relative? A bastard, or even, God works in mysterious ways, legitimate? Could she perhaps appeal to him for aid?

He was still following!

The stranger might be another fortune hunter, with no good in mind—but it was certain Sir Gawaine intended only ill. If she did nothing, she would lose everything, including her son's patrimony.

They had reached the boundary of the market, near the path to the hill on which the fortress stood. If she hesitated, they would soon be out of earshot ... "Help me! Help! I'm being abducted!" she shouted, pulling away from Sir Gawaine's fondling hand. She sent Sir Thierry stumbling backwards with a sharp shove, praying that the young knight would hear and respond.

And—praise God!—he did hear her, and broke into a run, his expression terrible, although he had not drawn his sword.

Sir Gawaine lunged at her, hands outstretched, grimacing in rage. She spun away desperately, and ran for her life. She didn't get far. Something heavy hit her back, shoving her forward, and she found herself face-down on thousand-year-old paving stones.

It was suddenly hard to breathe. Over the thunder of her heart and the pain burning its way from her back into her chest, she heard a wet crunch that sounded exactly like Cook breaking a chicken's neck, only much louder.

"You cur," said a low, grim voice. And then, "Blanche!"

Someone was lifting her up. It hurt, an intense and gripping pain, as if her heart and lungs were being scooped out like giblets. Her vision clouded.

"Don't die," she heard her would-be rescuer say. "Please, don't die! God's Nails!"

She must have passed into delirium, because she heard a sound like great wings beating, and Sir Thierry calling out, "Where did they go?" and "God save us! Gawaine's been crushed!"

And then she could have sworn they were flying. Was she was dying? *God, save my children.*

* * * *

Arjumand had no breath to curse. Leaving behind the murdering knight he had smashed into a pulp with a single blow from his wing, he flew faster than he ever had, all the while maintaining the glamour of invisibility.

So close! He had almost arrived in time to save her. If only his attention hadn't been on her when she started to run, instead of the knight, he might have deflected the thrown dagger before it injured her. It was cold comfort that he knew enough not to remove it before he brought her to the House's physician.

"Don't die!" he whispered again. God, but he felt a clumsy fool.

Below him, he saw Sultan al Mustansir's army riding eastward along the lakeshore, arrayed for battle. He hoped they would kill every one of the invading Franj before they

attacked Tunis and endangered the House. They could all die, and he would laugh, and drink their blood...

His daughter moaned in his arms and he realized, with horror, that he was clutching her far too tightly in his rage. Carefully, gently, he relaxed his grip, making sure he did not come close to letting her go. He had no wish to drop her into the lake, as Dominic had once dropped him above Lake Manzala.

He'd cut his own throat, first.

Every beat of his wings took him closer to Tunis, closer to the House. He treasured these moments even as he cursed his own slowness: this was the first time he had ever held his daughter in his arms. It was not supposed to be like this!

"Don't die!" he commanded, as her precious blood soaked into his sleeves. "Don't die."

* * * *

Blanche roused from a dream of flying into a nightmare of falling, a sickening swoop that made her stomach crawl into her mouth and her hair and skirts stream toward the sky. And she couldn't draw breath to scream because of a fiery stake driven into her ribs.

So this is death, she thought, just before her fall slowed, and somehow, the sky was above her and someone else's feet gently came to rest on the earth.

A shout came from the man holding her—it must be a man. He smelled of leather and wool and *roses*? Where was she? What was happening?

From somewhere nearby, another man's raised voice came. She couldn't understand the words. Were they speaking in Arabic? But the tone of angry desperation was clear. The shouting repeated, and suddenly there were people all around, small, dark-skinned people wearing loose black clothing and turbans of deep rose red.

Another sudden swoop jolted her from delusion. She was falling again—! No, she wasn't. There was a strange vision, as if the second story of a house, seen from its inner courtyard, drifted up past her into the sky. Then she was being carried into a room and placed face-down onto a bed.

With an effort, she focused her eyes. What she saw were wings, brighter by far than sunlight reflecting from snow, brighter than the sky close to the sun. Was it an angel? Did angels curse? In Flemish? Did they know her name?

"Blanche. Don't die!

Chapter Twelve

...my city has been destroyed before me. Enlil has indeed transformed my house, it has been smitten by pickaxes. On my ones coming from the south he hurled fire. Alas, my city has indeed been destroyed before me. On my ones coming from the highlands Enlil hurled flames ... "The lament for Urim," c.2.2.2 (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Arjumand stood silently during the physician's examination of Blanche. He dared to pray, having failed his sacred trust to protect her. The back of his daughter's gown was soaked with blood, and the ivory handle of a dagger protruded from the torn fabric.

He had to close his eyes, though, when Nuha, the senior physician and wizened grandmother of Master Farid, heated the slender cautery irons in a brazier, before cutting away Blanche's gown and carefully extracting the dagger.

Blanche screamed as the irons were applied to stop the bleeding, before she fell back into unconsciousness.

Arjumand started forward, only to find Nuha's wrinkled hand pressing firmly against his chest, holding him back. "Lord, calm yourself. The knife did not penetrate her spine, or her lung."

"She'll live?" Arjumand asked, just to be certain.

"If she does not take a fever from this wound, serious as it is, then, yes, she should live," Nuha replied, cautiously. He couldn't help grinning at her, and returning his smile, she continued, in a more optimistic tone: "She appears in good

health, and should recover nicely. We must stitch the wound now, so unless you wish to observe, you may go and bathe, or rest, until we are done."

Did he want to observe? With the horrible sizzle of seared flesh echoing in his ears, could he really bear to see his daughter's flesh pierced with needle and thread?

Nuha coughed delicately. "We would like to ask you, lord: who is his Franj lady? Is she one of the Lost of the House?"

Arjumand thought fast. Did they know about Blanche was the Cursed One? Had they received any messages about her? In his frenzy to locate her, he had neglected a thorough surveillance of the pigeon-post.

On the other hand, only a few within the House knew about the Cursed One's whereabouts. He checked them off on his mental list: *Cecilia. Mathilde. Philomena. Matthias de la Rose in Liege. Tirgit, obviously ...* No reports had come from Michael, or Dominic. Basil had no inkling (Arjumand had tasted his blood enough times, obtaining routine reports, to know.) Did even Sharibet share the secret? Probably. The rancid memory of the night he'd overheard her lovemaking with Cecilia made him grimace.

"Lord?" the old lady prompted.

Choosing the least untrue response, he said, "She is indeed one of the Lost. When she is well enough, I will need to test her memory." *To see who she is*, was the implicit lie.

"We'll call you when we've finished our work." Her old eyes crinkled. "You rest now, lord."

He bowed and made himself leave.

The shaded garden was cool, with a central fountain and broad-leafed trees. Roses of Sharibet's special late-blooming varieties perfumed the air. He waited as more centuries passed. At last they called him. He flew up to the second floor, disdaining stairs.

Nuha frowned at him. "You should have bathed, lord. We've just gotten her clean and the room fresh-smelling. Really!"

"Yes, of course," he said, his attention fastened on the unconscious woman on the divan. Her skin was nearly the same shade as the clean chemise they'd clothed her in. "I'll just ... Thank you. That will be all." Damn her! Why was Nuha still standing there? "Just a few moments alone..."

She looked displeased at this, but—praise all forgotten gods!—left.

He took Blanche in his arms, shocked at how light she was. The chemise she wore seemed more substantial than her body. As he worried for her, he savored the joy of holding his daughter. She was so beautiful. He brushed hair the color of ripe wheat away from her sunburned cheek. Her eyes were closed, but he remembered they were the same shade as Mathilde's eyes ... or his.

Should he drink her blood, or not? He had the chance to get to know her by the fastest, most truthful of magics.

Though he had just been planning this deed for hours and imagining all that he might see and learn, he paused, paralyzed by doubt. He could just lie and tell the kin anything he wanted. He didn't *have* to invade his daughter's mind and heart. But he *wanted* to. He had missed two decades of

knowing her. He had abrogated his responsibilities as a father, and left her at the mercy of the inimical House. He was done giving over his rights to her!

But could he really read her memories without her permission, unveiling her deepest secrets? Would she ever forgive him if he did? He didn't know her well enough to guess, and that worried him.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he bent, kissed her limp hand, and bit sharply into a slender finger.

Memory assailed him ... *The sea by Tunis is the color of flax flowers. The harbor is a huge bowl, crowned by mountains, and the shore is all ruins ... by a fresh-turned grave, in a church filled with blank-faced mourners, Evrard is the only one weeping ... she takes a jar of tincture of foxglove from the shelf ... The baby doesn't move in her arms. He's so small! He can't breathe...*

His tears ran through her hair, her grief unlocking his own.

The Sieur's fist smashes into her cheek, and she falls, feet tangled in her skirts. The stone floor beneath the layer of rushes is hard as he throws himself on top of her, fingers scrabbling at her thighs, yanking her skirts up ... The impulse to murder sought a target. Then he realized there was no need. She had protected herself. If only he had been there to protect her!

He searched earlier: ... *she exchanges espousal rings with a slender, quiet brown-haired boy of fourteen. Unknown to his mother, he has his pet ferret with him. It pokes his head out from Evrard's sleeve, and Blanche pushes it back into hiding, getting nipped for her pains. Evrard smiles cheerfully at her...*

Arjumand rocked his daughter in his arms. Even at eleven years old, she was managing the ferret, and Evrard....

On tiptoe, she tries to see past the adults around her. At first, she only hears sounds: clink, thunk, clink, thunk. Then Uncle Michel breaks through the crowd. His hair and beard shine like gold. His mantle is white, with a big red fork-armed cross. As he takes a step, she realizes what causes the clinking sound—his plain iron spurs striking the flagstones as he limps.

He drank deeper, the euphoria of her blood carrying him through the barrier of her this-life memory. He began to read the history of her past lives as the images raced past him. He had Raised and Named enough kin that he could recognize most of the cities and events she'd lived through....

Constantinople on a racing day, the crowd festooned with colored ribbons for their team ... Alexandria's book stalls ... fleeing an angry mob, flung stones raising bruises and blood ... administering syrup of poppies to a dying man in a tent filled with wounded Roman soldiers...

And then he saw something that startled him in that memory: Menelaos.

Finally, the context for Sharibet's endless image of shouting and lyre-smashing came clear. *Menelaos shouts at Sharibet. Both of them are spattered with blood. Sharibet is the midwife whose face is the last thing Blanche's past self sees before death darkens her vision...*

Oh, God. She had known Menelaos as a mortal. Been his slave. Carried his child. Died in his tent.

He searched earlier: ... *Inanna stands before a tribunal of fellow Apkallu, a prisoner bound in golden chains. She thinks: Can't they see how diminished they all are? They've been seduced by worship and blinded by arrogance, unable to see they have been cut off from powers that should rightfully be theirs. Inanna screams in frustration, and reaches out to touch the sky for balance. There, she finds the rock, big as a temple, wrapped in ice, and falling by vicious chance toward the site of their meeting. She pushes at it with all her strength, ignores the frenzied questions of others. No energy to respond! She pushes and pushes, her great wings stretched to their limits, but she cannot move it. The stone falls through the sky, tearing the air, burning it.*

"What are you doing, sister?" demands Ereshkigal, seeing only the use of her power, but not its object.

"It's falling," Inanna screams, too late. She falls too, the earth jumping and buckling as the stone collides with earth. Swamps flash into steam. Rocks boil. The sky is broken.

From the point of impact, a ring of furious energy flows outward across the land, incinerating everything it touches. She puts herself, her aura, her power between this ravaging death and her siblings, her people. And fails.

Ereshkigal sings a single shattering note, and the earth beneath her feet opens up. She leaps into this underground chamber and pulls the nearest Apkallu, Nannar, with her. "You won't get away with this!" she shrieks, before sealing her refuge behind her

Then, like a dried leaf in a bonfire, Inanna burns. Her sisters burn. Her brothers burn. Her people, their cities, burn. The world disappears, smashed like a cup.

Arjumand knew this story from the songs the kin sang at Appointing festivals. And now he knew from his daughter's memory that she had not, in fact, called down the fire from Heaven.

In the stories the kin told, the black-headed people of the land of Shinar, left with only two of their gods to protect them, had not recovered from this upheaval. In time, cities flourished again in the land between the rivers, but they were inhabited by different people, who worshipped different gods, though the names remained the same. The new gods were stone, and ivory, and brass, and nothing more than the memory of a time when gods wore flesh.

Queen of Heaven, Goddess of Love and War ... the Cursed One, the World-Destroyer. His daughter's blood held the memories of godhood that the other Apkallu had forgotten.

He sat next to his daughter, panting, terrified, elated. Then suspicion raised its head like a venomous serpent. Why had he never seen the extent of the Apkallu's former power before? How could such a thing simply be ... *forgotten*?

He raised her hand to his lips, and tasted her blood again, reaching deeper into her past.... *hanging on a hook in the halls of death, and nearly dead herself. Her sister Ereshkigal taunts: "Did you think you could steal my power? Did you think you could steal my place? You make them love you but they will love me! They will love me best."*

But, hanging on the hook, in pain, Inanna still yearns. There is some incompleteness to her knowledge. She must know. She must find out, even if she dies for it. Ninshubur brings her the water of life, the food of life, the red blood of sacrifice steeped in herbs, the gift of Ea...

And earlier: Ea, Lord of Wisdom, sits at his table, drunk on flattery, sipping beer through a straw. "I will give these mes to my daughter, Inanna. In the name of my power, in the name of my temple, I will give the divine formulae to shining Inanna, my daughter." Her minister Ninshubur, speaker of truth, stands at her back, guarding her as she eagerly accepts Ea's gifts...

And earlier: She stands upon a dais, hands bound in golden chains which do not give way against her strength. Her brothers and sisters stand before her, accusing her of—

Agony transfixed Arjumand like lightning from heaven, breaking his connection to his daughter. He fell backward to the carpeted floor as Blanche convulsed, her aura flaring until it was as red as freshly-spilled blood. She keened and went rigid, as if afflicted with the same pain that had lanced him.

A lightning strike, a second strike, and then a third lashed him with furious power, his aura drawing life from the earth and air to burn him senseless. Sheets of flame sprang up, blackening the intricate decorations of ceiling and carpet, raising blisters on Blanche's fair skin, singeing his hair and beard.

Instinctively, he gathered the fire and flung it away, just as he had when gathering the lightning he had used against the Mongols a decade ago. He stretched his wing through the

doorway of this room, through the covered walkway just outside it, and out into the open space of the central courtyard beyond. Fifteen yards, and his aura was stretched out as far as it could go. *How did Inanna touch the sky with hers?*

Flames leaped from the extended tip of his wing, rising up into the air like a djinn made of smokeless fire. *He* was made of fire, burning with pain and suffering and worry. The copper and gold flames flowed in a torrent down the edge of his wing, into the courtyard garden—and then vanished abruptly.

The pain remained, and he folded in on himself, sprawled half on the scorched divan and half on the smoking carpet. What of Blanche? Panting, he forced himself to sit up.

What he saw when he opened his Seer's eyes terrified him. His daughter's rose-red aura was flickering with shock, growing dim and insubstantial.

He checked her pulse and respiration—rapid. Her lips were turning blue and her skin was cold and clammy under the burn blisters swelling on her exposed skin. God! Was she dying? How could she be dying? She was supposed to survive the knife wound! Her heart stuttered and he knew he was losing her. *No!*

There was only one cure he knew. He began Step Six of the Transformation process, ignoring the demands of the kin who arrived with more questions than he had answers for.

Don't die!

* * * *

"Return to the immortal temple of thy body." As he spoke the last ritual invocation of the rite of Transformation, Arjumand's sigh turned into a vast yawn. He held out his hand, expecting there would be someone to put a jar of blood into it—but no jar was forthcoming.

He took a moment to stretch out his back and neck, stiff from being hunched over Blanche's body for so many hours. Weary, and in no mood for confrontation, he turned to face the elders who were waiting, stony-faced, for him: grandmother Nuha, young Master Farid, Farid's wife Houda, and Mahir, the longest-serving member of this house, with 102 on his displayed life-chip.

A glance showed they had removed most of the scorched furnishings and hung a light-proof curtain over the doorway. Oil lamps relieved some of the gloom, but the major damage done by the flames remained. With that reminder, he began to feel the pain, fierce and throbbing, where his aura swirled and seethed.

He must have grimaced, because they recoiled despite their anger. "Well?" he asked.

"Lord, what have you done?" Nuha asked.

"I have Transformed her," he snapped. "Don't you recognize the rite?" He was tired and hungry, and, difficult to admit, afraid for his daughter, and for himself.

"Lord, who is she? Did you obtain her consent? *What happened?*" Farid demanded, in a rush.

"She is Blanche de Bressoux. She was dying. I couldn't let—I don't *know* what happened. Something ... exploded in

her aura like Greek fire. We both nearly died." He felt half-dead, as it was.

They blinked. Then Mahir asked cautiously, "What is this woman's True Name? Is she a Crown of Service djinn, returned to us? Or perhaps an Apkallu?"

Arjumand didn't have the strength left to lie. He took refuge in silence, and weariness, slumping over on the divan in a faint more artful than real. Through slitted eyes he saw the elders' consternation. *Good. Let them stew.*

Sprawled next to his daughter's unconscious form, he fell into sleep.

* * * *

Arjumand woke up ravenous. He was relieved to see that Blanche's aura had revived, becoming almost unbearably bright. She was not yet a djinniah, but she would be, if she survived three days. "Don't die," he whispered to her, hoarse with thirst.

"Who is she, lord?" asked Farid, startling him. "What is her True Name?" The young Master's voice sounded as if he, too, were parched with thirst. He was sitting, cross-legged on the floor near the divan, looking as if he had been waiting for hours.

The room was pitch-dark and cool. Was it just after sunset? Nearly dawn? Arjumand couldn't tell. "I'm thirsty," he said. His thoughts were muzzy and his mouth tasted rotten. The smell of smoke and burnt hair lingered. His aura hurt, too.

"Who is she, lord?" Farid repeated, polite but persistent. "If she is an Apkallu, or a lost Crown of Service djinniah, we rejoice."

Blearily, Arjumand tried to think, tried to remember some lost djinn's name, and it couldn't be Nadira! "Gesh ... Gestinanna," he lied. Hadn't that been the name of Dumuzi's sister?

Farid trembled. "It is good to meet again!" he quavered. "Lord, we are willing to give you drink." He pushed forward a jar, sealed with the sign of the djinni, and drank from a cup of bitter-smelling tea himself as Arjumand broke the seal. The scent of myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, olive oil and calamus wafted up, along with the fragrant tang of blood. He brought the jar to his lips, but the strong spice smell repulsed him. It reminded him of the poisoned blood the Konia house had given Nadira and Kobegun...

Gently he put the jar down onto the carpet. "Farid, why do you give this drink to me?"

Farid started, and tried to leap up from his seat. Arjumand immobilized him with a hand of air, but not before he had knocked over the jar. The blood splashed onto the carpet and across the front of Farid's caftan.

"I'm not entirely stupid, you know," Arjumand snarled.

"Then why have you Transformed ... *her*?" Farid's voice had all but vanished. Sweat beaded his unlined face.

"I didn't want her to die. Why, who do you think she is?" Another hand of air gripped Farid's throat.

"We know." Farid gasped. "Nadira the Seer's son, Usama bin Jamal, fosters here. He has the Sight. He saw her aura,

the color of the House's banner. Geshtinanna, may we meet again, had an aura that was green with dark red edges."

Arjumand towed Farid closer, forcing him to kneel in the pool of blood. "Then why do you keep asking me who she is?"

"Lord! We don't know *why*."

"Farid, I'm hungry. I request sustenance."

Farid gulped and nodded. "Lord, I—I offer you—" He extended his arm.

Arjumand tugged up his sleeves to bare a supple-muscled forearm. His hand of air made sharp, parallel slashes, and Farid gasped and flinched as more blood ran, dripping into the spreading pool below. His lips were almost touching the smooth brown skin when he heard Farid's sharp intake of breath, and noticed the expression on the Master's face. Suspicious anew, he sniffed at the blood.

Sick at heart, he asked, "Have you poisoned yourself to get at me?" Before Farid could speak, he continued. "Don't bother to deny it. Does your Man of the Ax wait just outside?"

At Farid's cry, the door-curtain billowed, and a hail of arrows rained into the chamber. He spread his aura broadly as a shield and eventually the arrow barrage stopped. Hasty scrabblings, along with muttered curses, indicated retreats from door and window.

"Do you know," he said to Farid, held immobile, "your House is mistaken about Inanna's crimes. You'd better join your kin. I hope they have an antidote for you."

Farid collapsed to his knees, shuddering and sweating profusely.

Arjumand lifted Farid with his aura and shoved him out the door. Then, he sat beside the unconscious body of his daughter as the silence returned. He was hungry, but the smell of drying, poisoned blood did not appeal.

Could he live with hunger, and guard Blanche for the three days it would take for her to awaken a djinniah? Watching over her, he knew he would do anything for this woman who had been shamefully wronged and cast out in error, if not in malice. *Anything.*

* * * *

The next attack came by fire on the evening of the second day: burning brands thrust through the arched window, lighting oil-soaked wood, set at the points where timbering gave structure to the mud brick walls.

Fire was easy enough to smother, where he could reach it with his aura. It would not touch his daughter again. Farther away it grew hotter, fanned by the kin. Well, if they chose to burn down their own house, the more fools they!

He gathered up Blanche's limp body, wrapping it up like a mummy of Egypt with the bed-sheets, and tucking in the cloak-covered bundle she had carried with her. He focused his aura into a tight shield around the two of them, and held her close in his arms, waiting as fire engulfed the house, save for where he stood.

When he felt the timbers beneath him start to fail, he stepped through the curtaining flames of the doorway, knowing there would be archers. He leaped straight up, aiming for the heights of the night sky. When the pursuing

arrows reached the utmost of their bow-propelled climb, falling wayward back to earth, he leveled off, and looked down.

Far below him, the bloom of fire ate up one wing of the House of the Rose. Clamor and alarm from a great many neighbors added to the confusion. He bethought himself of a task he should have done earlier.

Descending again, he hovered over the dovecote where the messenger pigeons lived. He gathered the bits of power floating in the air. There was the metal latch, waiting for the bolt. From the air to the earth, fire flowed, roasting the pigeons before they flew to deliver the poison of their lying messages.

Crack!!

He made sure every pigeon was dead. The dovecote burned. The keeper lay sprawled. The clamor of voices within the other quadrants of the house fell silent, and only the fire roared its defiance. Then Arjumand summoned the lightning one more time, burning into the plaster of the yet-untouched roof the ancient symbol used to represent the House's djinni Protectors.

Lord of the Air, we sing your praises! Arjumand remembered the hymn. Well, they would praise him no longer, not with these four wedge-tipped strokes as his declaration of war.

Let them rue the day they first sang the damnation of Inanna, and named my daughter the Cursed One. Swiftly he rose into the night air once more, whispering to his daughter.

"Return to the temple of thy body, O wandering spirit. Do not forsake me!"

He flew east. On the shore beneath the Fortress of Carthage, the Crusader army remained encamped. Had the disease-decimated Christian forces managed to defeat the Sultan of Tunis? Well, little he cared. No man knew Arjumand there. He had no friends. The hand of the House was turned against him. In his arms, his daughter's body lay, as if dead.

Where can I go? Who will take us in?

* * * *

Ghar el Kebir, third day after the death of King Louis of France:

Blanche realized there was something wrong before she came fully awake. The painfully hard surface upon which she lay, the position of her body, the smell in the air ... all wrong. Why couldn't she sleep just a little longer? Roll over under a soft coverlet, waiting for Maman to come and kiss her awake, and make it all better.

She sighed. No Maman for her. *She* was the Maman, the care-taker, the good wife ... She tried to open her eyes, but they were gummed shut. What had happened? Where had she—In another instant, she remembered. *The Crusade. Evrard. Sir Gawaine. That beautiful young man who ducked away when I caught his eye. Pain. Falling. Darkness...*

Evrard. She waited for the sorrow of his death to overwhelm her, but all she felt at this moment was the horrible inconvenience. He had taken her away from her sons, and then died, leaving her without a protector. She thought

wistfully of her day-dream knight, her Ninshu—She had heard the name, quite clearly, in her dream, but she couldn't remember now.

The more aware she became, the stranger she felt. Light, but somehow stronger, more *alive*. She remembered the pain that had accompanied her last waking memory, but it had passed.

Cautiously, she tested limbs, fingers. Under her fingers, her head was tender and stubbled. Where had her hair gone? She kept testing: toes, calves, elbows. Shoulderblades. Wings. *Wings?*

She forced herself to think. Was she dreaming? There was her body, the same dimensions as it had ever been. Fingers. Toes. Shoulderblades ... and wings.

She felt them move. They were not solid, like a bird's wings in feather and bone, but ... they were there. She tried to flex one. Both twitched.

Then she heard a stealthy rustle nearby, a sharp intake of breath. Someone else was there!

"Blanche? Are you awake?"

Not "Lady Blanche," or even "Mistress Blanche." Who was this man addressing her so familiarly? She didn't recognize the voice.

Had Sir Gawaine managed to abduct her, after all? Alarm made her heart begin to pound, but she kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep.

"Blanche." The voice caught, as if in the grip of some great emotion.

She opened her eyes, and saw nothing but blackness darker even than a moonless night.

"Thank God! Thank whatever gods! Oh, Blanche, you're alive!"

Who was it? Why was he crying? What had happened to her? Why couldn't she see? She reached out towards the sound of that voice, more frightened now than when she had found herself at her father-in-law's mercy.

At least she had been able to see *him*, and avoid him the next time he tried to force himself on her. The unknown owner of the voice had her at his complete mercy. He could do ... *anything* to her. "Please, sir—my lord. Where am I? Am I blind?" she whispered.

"No! We're in a cave. Just a moment."

She heard a soft pop, and a candle lit itself. She looked around where she lay, now that she could see. It was a rocky cave of light-colored stone, shaped and cut in straight edges and triangular formations. Faintly, she heard the sound of waves regularly washing against a shore.

To her astonishment, holding the candle was the young man she had seen in the marketplace, but looking rather the worse for wear.

His beard was gone, making him look even younger than before. His hair had been burnt to an uneven stubble and his brown surcote was similarly scorched. He was streaked all over with dirt, blood, and soot. His face was haggard but alight with an incongruous happiness.

Who was he? Some adventurer who had found a rich prize in the Lady de Bressoux? Or...? As she stared at him she

grew more convinced that they were relatives. He resembled Uncle Michel so strongly, and her mother, too. He wore a very familiar expression, as well. She knew that twist of brows, that pinch of lips, from the little mirror Evrard had once given her. That was exactly the expression she wore when things were really bad and she didn't know what to do.

Then she realized that she was clad only in her chemise, which was stained, bloody, and singed, and that they were alone. Oh, this was bad. Very, very bad. All alone with this stranger, without a gown or even shoes anywhere in evidence. She had been abducted, only not by Sir Gawaine. Surreptitiously, she tried to feel whether there was any soreness or stickiness between her thighs. *None, the Virgin be thanked!*

Before she could ask any of her thousand questions, a paralyzing hunger clawed at her. Lady Mary, she was hungry! The candlelight was suddenly too much to bear, and she squeezed her eyes shut. She was even hungry enough to not be alarmed when she felt a warm hand slide under her shoulders, helping her sit up.

He said "Quiet; easy, sweeting." He used the endearment only Maman had ever used with her before. "Don't exert yourself. Here, here, I have your ... sustenance."

What did he mean? She smelled the faint stink of rabbit, heard an outraged squeal of pain, and thrashing, then the sound of liquid, filling a cup. His hand was still behind her back. Was someone else there, too?

He pressed the rounded shape of a cup into her palm, but she couldn't close her fingers. She was trembling too hard. Then the cup was lifted to her lips.

"Drink. There. That's a good girl."

She swallowed warm liquid, salty and delicious. Gulped it. All too soon, it was gone.

"Blanche, it's all right. I've got more for you."

Still blind, still starving, she waited impatiently through the sequence of sounds again. Bag rustling. Dying rabbit. The patter of liquid. No sound indicating another person. She felt him approach, and snatched blindly at the cup. Now she could hold it, though he continued to guide it to her lips. She drank, swallowing as if it were life itself, until the cup was empty. Wordlessly, she offered the cup for refilling, but the frantic need that had wracked her only moments ago began to subside.

He had fed her blood. And she had liked it. Her hunger assuaged, fear began to return. She looked at her captor and asked, "Why are you giving me this? What have you done to me?"

He jumped. "What have I done to—? Um..." He paused, visibly gathering his courage. "I'll tell you. The only thing I ask is that you hear me out fully."

"But what—?"

"Let me finish telling you what you need to know first," he repeated, firmly.

Whatever he was going to tell her, it promised to be very bad indeed.

"All right. What I've done is," he flushed, "I've changed you—irrevocably. The one called Gawaine stabbed you in the back, and you were going to die. So I saved you."

She remembered the blow to her back, and the pain. His explanation seemed reasonable enough, except ... why couldn't she feel an injury now? And why had he taken her into a cave and stripped her? "*Who are you?*"

"Well, where to begin? My name is Arjumand abd al Warda of the House of the Rose. Except, well..." He stopped, which was good, because she had to think.

He didn't look as if his mother had been a Saracen. He didn't sound like a Saracen, either. And he was wearing spurs and a sword. "Sir Knight, are you my Uncle Michel's son? Or my cousin Roland's?"

He coughed, just like Pieter did when he was trying to lie. "No! I'm actually, that is, my true name—" he winced at that. She wasn't sure why, "—is Roland D'Agincourt. And I'm forty-one years old, last May Day."

Roland D'Agincourt? Impossible! If he *really* was Roland D'Agincourt, then he had known Maman well. She had spent her childhood, praying every Sunday and Feast Day, every night before they went to bed for the repose of his soul. And then, in one of the last letters she had received from Maman, the news had come that he was still alive and living in the Holy Land. Was this really her cousin Roland?

She grabbed the candle and raised it, leaning forward for a better look. The wavering light showed a rosy cheek as smooth as a young clerk's beneath the soot and dirt, with a creamy complexion. No scars. No blemishes. There were no

faint lines around his eyes, or in his forehead. His lips were pleasingly full, not dried and thin. His ears were the same shape as her Uncle Michel's, too. He was clearly a relative. But why would he lie about his name and age?

"I am someone who wishes you no harm, and only good," he said, radiating sincerity. "I heard you call for help, and came to your rescue."

He must be mad. She lowered the candle, studying him, still troubled by his resemblance to Maman ... and to herself. She should make him trust her, she thought, wait for an opportunity, and then make her escape. A quick glance around revealed that her bundle was nowhere to be seen. Did she dare ask him? Had he already found the dagger rolled inside?

She cleared her throat, and lowered her eyes demurely. "Sir ... Roland. I had a bundle of belongings. Did you perhaps rescue it, too?" She ventured the shy smile that had—usually—worked on the Sieur de Bressoux, though it made her lips crack.

"Your bun—oh! Your cloak! I put it over there." Roland glanced to her left.

She heard a scrabbling sound in the shadowy depths of the cave and wondered whether there were rats, just before her bundle sailed smoothly through the air and landed in her lap. She jumped and shrieked. "You moved that without touching it!" she accused, when her breath returned.

"Yes."

She hefted the weight of cloth in shaking hands, noting a nasty burn scar ruining the wool. "Thank you for keeping this

for me," she heard herself say, as her thoughts raced. He was a sorcerer! Could she even kill a sorcerer with cold steel? How could she escape from something that could catch her with invisible hands?

Her shaking intensified. *Stay calm*, she tried to tell herself, but she was cold, so cold. And she couldn't seem to make her mouth—or any other part of her body—obey her.

"Blanche?" asked the sorcerer, in a horribly kind way. "You're unwell. I'm going to make you sleep now. You'll wake up, and feel much better."

"No—don't touch me," she managed, around chattering teeth.

"Sleep now."

She felt something brush her forehead, like the touch of cobwebs. Her eyes closed, and she slept.

Chapter Thirteen

My lady, on your acquiring the stature of heaven, maiden [Inanna], on your becoming as magnificent as the earth, on your coming forth like Utu the king and stretching your arms wide, on your walking in heaven and wearing fearsome terror, on your wearing daylight and brilliance on earth, on your walking in the mountain ranges and bringing forth beaming rays ... the black-headed people ring out in song and all the lands sing their song sweetly.—"Inanna and Ebi," c.1.3.2 (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Ghar el Kebir, third day after the death of King Louis of France:

Roland sat and chewed his thumbnail. That had gone badly. He hadn't meant to frighten her by using his hand of air. How was he going to salvage the situation when she woke again?

He imagined her storming out of the cave in a blaze of scarlet and rose, hating him forever. They were miles from the nearest village, across the Gulf of Tunis from Carthage. The House would never guess where he had gone, but neither could she find shelter anywhere near.

Thank God he'd remembered in time that she'd need fresh blood. Those hares had been hard to catch, too. He'd stunned them with his hand of air to keep them fresh. While she slept, he'd better go fetch some more hares.

He would go soon...

But he couldn't bring himself to leave. He gazed at Blanche, his daughter, sleeping peacefully, her great rose-colored wings folded around her like a coverlet of twilight sky. He would reunite her with her sons ... his grandsons. He would see them safely grown to manhood. He'd spent half his life protecting a house of strangers. Now, he would be the Protector for a House of his own. He would leave behind his old identity of Arjumand abd al-Warda, and become Roland D'Agincourt once more.

If he could convince her to accept him and this new life. When she woke again, he would have another chance.

He would pay any price, suffer any pain he must, endure any trial, to ensure the survival of his daughter.

* * * *

"Blanche."

The young man's voice came softly in her ears.

Her dreams had been ... odd. Shouting at a room full of angels, drowning in a torrent of mud and salt. Her mouth certainly tasted like it.

"Blanche?"

It was the man who called himself Roland D'Agincourt. The sorcerer who looked like her. He'd put her to sleep. What had he done while...? She tensed her body, preparing to run.

"You promised you would hear me out."

Had she promised him anything? No. She would never have put her immortal soul in danger by promising anything to a sorcerer. She opened her eyes cautiously and saw that he was sitting cross-legged, blocking the exit.

"I want to tell you the benefits of your new state," he said earnestly. "You'll never grow old, and, barring mayhem, you'll never die. You can do what I can do, and move objects with a hand of air. You're stronger than any man at arms. No mortal will ever overpower you again. You have the ability to compel men to your will. You can fly."

The thought of compelling men to her will sounded good, if it worked on him. How did it work? Wait, she was being seduced! "I won't sell my soul," she declared.

His serious expression crumpled into an oddly sweet smile. "You spent a lot of time with Michel, didn't you?"

He knew her uncle well enough to compare her to him. Was he really her cousin Roland? There had been some uncanny rumors about the House of the Rose in Ypres. "How can you be as powerful as you claim? We're in a cave! And you look as if you just lost a battle. You have no hair!"

"I didn't lose. We're still alive, though they burned the house down around us."

That's what happened to her hair, and his. "What house? Where?" The questions slipped out before she could stop them. What if he thought she was growing interested in his diabolic offer?

He was already talking. "The House of the Rose in Tunis. I was their protector, but by helping you, they cast me out and tried to kill us both."

"Why? Is it because they're Saracens, and you're a Christian? But the ones who live in Liege are Christian, aren't they? And Maman said you lived with a Saracen lady." Now she was sure he was lying. His story made no sense.

"That's not the reason. You see, well ... the House of the Rose." He stopped and bit his lip. "God's Nails, this is complicated."

She waited for him to continue, thinking, *the House sells perfume and paper and pens. Why do they need a sorcerer for protection?*

"The House of the Rose offers us—drinkers of blood—shelter and sustenance in return for our protection."

Now she sat up, alarmed. "*Us?* There are more than one of you!?" Her mother had married Sir Dominic, who was also part of the House of the Rose. Hadn't Maman mentioned in a letter that his title was Protector? Did he drink her mother's blood? Was she dead? Was that why she had never written again after she married him? *Lady Mary, let it not be true!*

"Yes," he said simply. "It all started a very long time ago, and even I don't know the whole story. But the people of the House think that, well, that you're the devil. They call you the Cursed One, and use your name to scare children into good behavior."

She blinked, diverted from her anguished speculation. "Me?"

"I know. It's absurd, isn't it?" For an instant he grinned at her, in perfect complicity. "That's why they cast me out for helping you."

"Why? All I've ever done is buy paper from them! And they were always so polite. Why would a house full of sorcerers fear *me?*"

"They say that you destroyed the world—twice."

She gaped at him. "But the world is still here, all around us!"

"Well, you did this thousands of years ago."

Now she *knew* he was mad. How was she going to get away? Should she ask him for a drink of water? Or for the location of the latrine? Anything to get her out of this cave.

"Don't imagine I don't know what you're thinking," he warned.

She tensed, but he continued speaking.

"The people of the House know that souls live more than once. You did this when you lived before. When your name was Inanna."

She didn't want to believe him, but when he said the name something thrilled her like the deepest note of a lute. She didn't make the disbelieving noise she had intended. Instead she asked, "You say that they *know* that souls live more than once, and that they know who I was. How can this be?"

"One of the powers of a Protector is to see the past. I myself have seen the memories of people's lives before. I've seen ... you in those memories. And what the House knows—what they say they know—about you is a lie. And I want them to *eat* their lies." Roland's voice cracked when he said 'lie' and he spoke with great vehemence.

Was it a lie? She found it incredible that anyone would think of her in the same terms as the devil. But she *had* found it easy to kill her father-in-law. Did that make her evil? Murder was a mortal sin. She should have repented, but she had never felt guilty for what she had done. She had only been protecting herself, and Genevieve...

She glanced around, and cut short her maundering. She couldn't afford to let the sorcerer—*Roland*—distract her with his wild tales. Her past sins aside, the fact remained that she was still in a cave, in the company of a strange man, and in her underclothing.

"I don't care what they think of me," she said as calmly as she could, under the circumstances. "I give you my thanks for the aid you've rendered me, Sir Roland. Will you return my gown and release me, please?"

She hadn't really thought he would accede to her request, but she had to at least make the attempt.

He sighed heavily, "I didn't believe their tales, either, at first. Not until I saw Sir Dominic ... I'm sorry. You can't go, Blanche. Not yet."

"Please!" She hated to beg.

He shook his head, looking mournful. "You have to open your eyes and see."

"My eyes *are* open! I see you! I see this cave!"

He reached out, brushed his fingers lightly across her forehead, and suddenly, her vision was filled with a blazing light that eclipsed the feeble glow of the candle.

He *was* an angel, with great wings of light, the color of lapis and amethyst.

As she gazed upon him, confronted by his splendor of cobalt and purple, with a flame that rose above his head like a Pentecostal crown of fire, she felt again that ghostly sensation of wings flexing behind her. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw two great pinions of rose and scarlet fire, sweeping up and through the rocks behind her.

"You turned me into a sorceress?" This was a nightmare, filled with things that *almost* made sense.

"You asked me for help. And you were dying. I did the best I could." He hunched down, profoundly uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, but it can't be undone."

"And I'm your prisoner." If this was his idea of rescue, than she would have been better off trapped in a marriage with Sir Gawaine. She was certain she could have found a way to manage him, eventually.

"You're not my prisoner," he protested. "But there are things you must learn about your new nature in order to survive."

She said nothing, but he must have seen the skepticism in her expression.

"Just as you see me as a demon or sorcerer, so will others see you. You'll be hunted down and killed, and not just by the kin of the House. You have powers, but you also must drink blood to survive. Let me teach you what you need to know."

He had trapped her! But if she really had powers to equal his—she launched herself at him, raining blows with all her strength, with fists, feet, and wings. He flew backwards, stunned, and she tried to run past him.

"Blanche, stop." Invisible hands seized her, and held her arms and legs motionless.

She flung out her wings, hoping to push him away, and heard the rabbits squeal inside their bag.

Despite the bruises forming on his face, he wasn't fighting back. He only held her still. "Blanche, please."

Then she noticed the scent of blood, wafting from the bag, and saw that it was now crumpled on the other side of the cave. Her rage cooled. She had done this—used sorcery in the same way he had. He had not lied to her, not about *this*, anyway. "Have I killed them?"

He reached for the bag with his wing, brought it close, and untied it. Now, she could see how he did it, with a rope of violet light. Looking down, she saw tendrils of that same light encircling her, binding her.

Reaching into the bag with another strand of light, he handed her a limp rabbit, covered with blood. It didn't seem to be damaged itself. The rabbit that Roland took next from the bag was pulverized, leaking brains as well as blood. He made a sound of disgust and shook gobbets off the corpse.

"I didn't know I was that strong!"

"Now you do," he said, matter-of-factly. "Are you ready for your next lesson?"

"I have no choice, do I?" she replied, bitterly.

"No more than any of us did. We're all entangled with this house. Your mother, Michel, me, even my late brother Robert. You can rail against Fate all you like, but wouldn't you rather learn how to fly?"

* * * *

It was still day outside, wan light coming through a triangular opening in the cave's roof, so instead of flying, he taught her how to make her aura as sharp as a knife, or soft as a cloud. She already knew how to make it as hard as a hammer. It could grip, and be used as a bandage. Or you

could start a fire with it by squeezing air so tightly that it got very hot.

She focused on his lessons, acutely aware that she needed to learn about her changed nature. And Roland proved an excellent teacher. He answered her questions clearly and patiently, and his willingness to instruct her soothed her anger at his abduction.

Having an aura that she could move and control was just like having, at last, all the extra hands she had frequently wished for. And she could reach quite far with her invisible hands, farther than Roland could. Was she really a monster now? If she was, she was relieved to be at least as powerful a monster as he. The time would come when she might need to use her powers against him.

He encouraged her to experiment, and they spent hours practicing, until she grew too weary to lift a finger, let alone a hand of air.

"Are you hungry? I'll catch more hares for our supper," Roland offered, looking remarkably fresh.

He had used his powers nearly as much as she had—why wasn't he exhausted? She looked at him more closely, seeing once again his eerie resemblance to her. Was he...? But she put away that question. She did not want it answered, just yet.

She accepted his offer of hares, but wished she hadn't. The reality of having to bite through fur and flesh to drink from a living creature both thrilled and disgusted her. They, too, were surrounded by shifting cloaks of light, though they did not have wings. And the aura disappeared when they died,

but she felt each of their deaths warm her like a swallow of strong, sweet wine. She wanted more when the last hare was gone.

How could she face her children like this?

Roland tried to distract Blanche by explaining in tedious detail what the people of the House of the Rose usually did to catch the blood from animals and store it in special clay jars. But she didn't have jars, or herbs, or the patience to hear about them.

When the sun had set and the nearly-full moon was rising, Roland fulfilled his promise to teach her how to fly.

She took to the air like a young bird. He only had to tow her up and show her with his own wings what she should do. Within minutes she was flying on her own, soaring through the starlit night, over rocks shaped like waves tossed by the sea. She discovered how glorious it was to feel the curling power of air under invisible yet substantial wings.

"Fly only at night until I can teach you the glamour of invisibility," he advised. "Almost immortal we might be, but we are vulnerable to arrows. Now, bank."

And he showed her the three steps of banking, which she learned right off. He circled around her as she mastered the thermals rising weakly off the sun-heated rocks, ready to instantly intervene should she need him. He seemed proud beyond words when she needed no help at all.

By the time she had mastered his lessons, she had learned from his teaching that he was neither mad nor a liar.

The hours spent practicing had also given her time to think. She needed to get home to Bressoux. And to do that,

she needed him. He seemed willing to be her ally, and she had so many unanswered questions.

Yes, she would convince him to accompany her. And she would get answers.

* * * *

Back in the cave, Roland was very happy to answer her questions. She had not tried to attack him again, or to escape, as he feared she might. Once her initial rage and shock had passed, she seemed to have adapted remarkably well to her new state, better than he had done after his Transformation, at any rate.

"How soon can I set off for Liege? And will you accompany me?" she asked, surprising him.

She wanted him to stay with her. "Of course I will accompany you! As for traveling to Liege, you need to go to Constantinople first, to visit Sharibet."

"Your lady?" Blanche asked suspiciously. "Not that I wouldn't like to meet her, and see the famous city, but it's too far out of our way. Why do I need to see her?"

"Sharibet is the Mother of the House, and tells her children, the people of the House, what to do. If we can convince her that you are not, indeed, guilty of the things they claim you did, then, then all should be well."

She stared at him. "What do they say I did?"

"One thing they say is that you called down fire from heaven, and destroyed an entire kingdom, killing most of the inhabitants."

"One thing ... an entire kingdom?" She looked appalled, but rallied quickly. "You said all those things they believe are lies. You can tell her later. Or send a letter."

How she resembled his late brother Robert at his most stubborn! "A letter will not be proof. You are the proof she needs to see. We need to go in person, or we'll be hunted the length and breadth of Europe. I wish it wasn't so, but it is."

"Why am I the proof? How will my presence disprove the lies?"

"She can read the truth of the past in your blood just as I did."

"You said you can see the past. Now you say you can see it in blood? My past as Inanna, which I don't remember?"

"Yes. At death, the veil of memory falls. When you are born again, you don't remember, but the memories are there, nevertheless. We can lift that veil."

"Can you lift that veil for me now?"

"I don't think so," he said, scratching at the stubbled remains of his hair. "Cecilia always warned us that she should be the only one to Raise, that is, to return our memories. As I found out when I ... Transformed you." He wasn't ready to tell her that he had looked into her memories.

"Cecilia?"

"I believe you've met her," Roland said, grimly. "Cecilia le Byzantine."

"But she was Maman's friend. She arranged my marriage to Evrard. She's a Protector, too?" Blanche looked thoroughly confounded. "She was always so kind to me."

"She hates you." He was sorry to ruin all of her illusions about her life. "She's the Eldest of the Protectors, the most powerful of us all, above suspicion, above reproach, but also the only one who could have started the lie about you. I never trusted her. I never wanted her to know about you. Or your mother. Or Michel. But she found out anyway."

After a long silence, as if she'd spent too many years keeping her own counsel, friendless in enemy territory, she asked, "Why would she lie about me?"

"Why does anyone abuse the power they hold over others?" Roland asked her bitterly. "Perhaps she wants to keep her position, or ensure that she holds more power. But no one suspects her, besides me."

"That you know of," she countered. "If she's as powerful as you say, then I would think that anything said of her would be said in greatest secrecy."

"Which is why we need to get Sharibet and her house on our side." But, thinking about it, he wondered how Sharibet could be ignorant of the truth. After all, she had been alive and had known Inanna. Well, he wouldn't discover the answer until he could question her. He looked up at his daughter.

"Then you agree we need to go to Constantinople?"

"I don't like it, but I," she paused, the words dragged out of her, "agree we need to go. However, if Cecilia lied about me, what makes you think she didn't lie about returning the memories? I want you to try. I want to remember."

That fire had tried to consume him from the inside-out. He shuddered and rubbed at his stubbled scalp, which itched madly. "When you were injured, I looked back into your

earlier lives. Your aura set mine to burning, even though you were not yet Transformed. I would not like to risk that again, now that you are in possession of all your power. I doubt either one of us would survive."

"How do you know the burning will happen again?" She frowned, and he recognized thwarted curiosity easily the equal of Michel's.

"I don't. But I'm not willing to risk—"

She took a deep breath. "Sir Roland, when I was a child, I married Evrard because I was told to do so. All my life, I did what I was told, because I knew nothing. Because I was a girl, and powerless. But you have changed my fate forever. And you know more about me than I know myself. I want to *know*."

He didn't want to agree. He didn't want to lose her so soon, subsumed into the sum of all her lifetimes. He wanted Blanche, his daughter.

"Please. You've already changed me. I need to know. *Please*," she begged.

Seeing those shining blue eyes, Roland found himself dangerously close to yielding. How could Evrard have refused her anything? "I don't know what will happen. It could kill me. It could kill us both. I won't risk your life on it." His years of command as Protector of the House served him well now, letting him infuse his tone with firmness even as his heart broke with the necessity to say no.

Her mouth thinned, and her eyes narrowed and grew steely. For a moment he thought she might strike him, and he worried that he'd lost any hope of her cooperation, but she

took hold of her temper and quieted. "I'm famished for truth. What must I do, so that you will return my memories?"

This time, he didn't simply refuse her outright. "When you can throw fire and lightning with your aura, then I'll risk it."

"It's a bargain!" she said, eagerly. "Will you teach me how to do that?"

He shook his head, and smiled at her wryly. "I have destroyed my world for you, Blanche. For my sake, have some care of your life."

"I will. I'll be very careful. But I need to know! Now, how will we get to Constantinople? Can we take passage on a ship? Or fly with these wings? Can we fly the entire distance?"

"We can't take passage from any ships leaving from Tunis or Carthage. Agents of the House will be watching. We should fly to Sicily, and book passage there, giving false names."

"Where's Sicily from here?" she asked. "Are you certain you can find an island in the Middle Sea, at night, hundreds of miles from here?"

"I memorized a map, and I know how to steer by the stars," he told her, confidently, though in truth, he dreaded making such an extended flight over open water.

She shook her head doubtfully. "How much blood do we need, every day?"

How practical she was! "At minimum, we need two pints per day. Under stressful conditions, we could need anywhere from two to eight pints more than that."

"A quarter-gallon to two gallons per day?" She sounded astonished. It did sound like a lot, put like that...

"Yes, and drinking two pints from someone might kill him. Or her." At her fierce frown, he hurried to add, "Although, if we drank from people, we might not need a full two pints."

"Drink from people?" she asked, horrified.

"You shouldn't be drinking from people yet anyway," he hastened to explain. "Drinking from a person isn't done until your Appointing ... um ... ceremony." Damn. Another reminder that he had brought her into a broken world. Well, there was no help for it.

"Are you planning to drink from the sailors?"

He cleared his throat.

"How long will it take to sail to Constantinople from Sicily?"

"Um, five or six weeks, if the weather's good." At least she had moved away from the topic of drinking blood.

"How many sailors or passengers will be on our ship? Can we drink from someone without their noticing? Can we bring our own animals? What if we transported chickens? How much blood is in a chicken? Haven't you thought this through?" she demanded.

"Those are good questions. You are just as clever as Mathilde told me," he said, trying to sound grateful rather than harried. She had already convinced him that they should fly along the coast to Constantinople, foraging when they had to, buying supplies as they needed.

She could convince him of anything.

* * * *

During the week that Roland and Blanche spent flying eastward along the North African coast, he told her

everything he could think of about Cecilia, Sharibet, the House, and about being a djinniah. Their pace was leisurely enough that he had breath to speak, especially on the slow, swooping glides back toward earth.

On the second day of their journey, she broached the topic of Mathilde. "Is my mother dead?"

"No, of course not," he replied, bewildered. "She's a Protector of the House in Venice. We last met ten years ago, in Constantinople. I receive letters from her regularly."

Her aura paled. "My mother is a Protector? Then perhaps you can tell me," she said, and he heard the echoes of rage and abandonment in her voice. "Why has she not written me since her marriage?"

He glanced over at her, and saw that her mouth had thinned, and she appeared suddenly much older. "The House likely forbade all contact with you. It's one of their damned *rules*."

"So I'm truly an orphan, now," she said, sadly. "She abandoned me for her new life." And that was the last thing Blanche said for hours.

When she began to speak again, she told him of her life at Bressoux. He became acquainted with his four grandsons, Pieter, Reynaud, Baudouin, and Giselbert, though her stories, and looked forward to the day when he might meet them.

The journey was proceeding smoothly. The only thing that nagged him was that he had not yet formed a blood bond with her.

He wasn't sure why ... No. He was done with lies—even to himself. He knew exactly what he didn't want her to know ...

He was afraid. He had already seen how cautious she was around him, and why not? How would she feel about him if he confessed to being her real father?

Someday, he would have to tell her about himself and Mathilde. She needed to know before they met Sharibet. But tonight, she was singing like an angel as she flew, the tune a favorite lullaby he remembered from his own youth in Artois. Had she sung this to her sons?

Tonight, he would listen to Blanche sing. Tomorrow, he would decide how to tell her...

Chapter Fourteen

And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever.—*1 Kings 12:7*

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Friday, August 29, AD 1270:

Two days after Dominic's arrival in Beziers, the hastily-gathered council of elders convened in the gloom of the estate's wine-cave. The space originally cleared for the Raising and Naming ceremony had been filled with chairs for the inquiry, and a tall writing desk had been hastily fetched from the counting-room at the manor house, along with an inkwell, pens, and parchment for recording the proceedings.

As Dominic entered the shadowy space, symbolically escorted by Tirgit, whose aura was muddy with misery, he found Sir Jean de Pezenas already there, standing next to an empty rack of wooden shelves upon which was propped a heavy double-headed weapon. Sir Jean was turning its oilcloth cover over and over in his hands. The middle-aged knight was deeply distressed at taking the role of Man of the Ax. But, as Sharibet was fond of saying, the one on trial was not the only one being tested.

"Lord," he said as he caught sight of Dominic. He hastily tucked the cover onto a shelf and bowed low, clasping his hands at his waist respectfully.

Dominic took heart and nodded back, although it might put Sir Jean more at risk if everyone else here was already his enemy.

A handsome Byzantine chair of wood inlaid with gold wire and ivory had been set facing the other chairs. There was even a cushion, Dominic noted. Perhaps the council really *did* mean to give him a fair hearing. He seated himself and took an attitude of polite attention.

Tirgit, as his official guard, took up a place just behind him. She put a light, shaking hand on his shoulder.

"Tirgit, child," he said, looking back, and she jumped a little. Even after two days, she had difficulty meeting his gaze. Her normally pretty face was hollow-eyed from lack of sleep. "You should take a chair. This is will likely take some time."

He had attended many other councils during his time as Protector—some to discuss shifts in political climate, others to defend against war or invasion. But no matter the cause, the kin never decided anything in haste. They would likely be shut beneath this hill for hours, held captive like the guests of the fairies in the old tales.

"Y—yes, lord," she whispered, and obediently fetched one of the chairs, dragging it across the hard-packed dirt floor with a protesting scrape.

When she had seated herself, he reached out and took her hand, as much to comfort her as himself. "I'm sorry, lord," she said, as she had said so many times already.

He shook his head, surrounded by the ghosts of old vintages and spilled rosewater. What was done, was done.

The evidence certainly appeared damning to him. How much worse must it look to the council?

Then the others entered. First came Lady Alais, who went to stand behind the writing desk, and immediately examined the pens there. Then came the Masters and Mistresses of the three other rose farms in the area (most of whom had been already been at Villeroose-sur-Orb for the Raising and Naming of their children, nephews, and nieces): Berengar and his wife Hyacinthe of Villeroose-sur-Azille, a young couple in their twenties; Fabrice and his wife Bibiane of Villeroose-sur-Agout, who were in their thirties; and Amadeus de la Rose and his wife Columba of the Villeroose d'Fleury, in their forties but vigorous. And finally, hobbling a little after the horseback ride from the city, came elderly Master Guibert. He was a widower and therefore accompanied by Trader Jakob von dem Rosenhaus as the required tenth elder. Trader Jakob was a sun-browened man in his prime.

When everyone had been seated, the heavy, metal-bound oaken doors were firmly shut, leaving only the golden glow of the olive-oil lamps to battle the shadows.

Master Guibert rose from his chair and cleared his throat. "Lord Dominic, Elder Sister Theodora, and brothers and sisters of the kin," he said, in the ancient language of the House. "As elders of the House, we are gathered here today in the presence of our Protectors to discuss matters of grave importance to our kin and holdings. I confirm that we are ten in number, and declare that any matters discussed in this convocation shall be held under a sacred pledge of silence. The decision we reach today shall bind all of the kin, so I urge

each of you to open your hearts and memories, and work for the good of all. With these words, I begin our proceedings." He paused, and looked at Sir Jean. "Utusagila-who-was will begin by telling us of a most troubling incident."

Dominic studied the faces of the assembled elders as Sir Jean summarized Tirgit's discovery of the duplicated memories, and described the geas which had affected both djinni. Alais's quill scratched furiously across parchment as she recorded the proceedings

Their reactions were predictable: shock, concern, and one accusing stare from Alais's brother, Amadeus de la Rose. He rose to his feet to speak first. "I would like to hear from Elder Sister Theodora on this matter."

Guibert nodded. "Elder sister, if you please?"

Dominic didn't need to open his link to Tirgit to sense her reluctance. She stood, obediently, and recited the same tale she had told him on the day he arrived.

Amadeus cleared his throat. "And do I understand correctly, elder sister, that you have also seen this duplicated memory through the blood bond with your consort Lord Michael, whose True Name is Ea?"

Tirgit nodded. "Yes, Master Amadeus. That's how I realized that Sir Jean had the very same memory."

"I see." Amadeus licked his lips, and looked around at his kin.

Dominic wondered what he was going to say next.
Probably nothing to help my cause.

"Thank you." Amadeus continued. "Elder sister, at the time of Lord Michael's Transformation, you were in attendance to Lady Cecilia as her handmaid?"

"Yes," Tirgit said warily.

"And you were in Lord Dominic's company as well, during that time?" Amadeus shot a quick look at Alais. She kept her gaze on her papers, though, and missed whatever signal he was trying send her.

"Yes."

Dominic leaned forward a little. What was Amadeus getting at?

"I believe everyone in this room is familiar with the reports sent to Mother Sharibet by Simon dalle Rose, True Name Hathor-hotep, known as Simon Minor, Master of the House in Venice, and his mother, Maryam dalle Rose, True Name Bil-La-Dugga, regarding Lord Dominic's purchase and subsequent murder of numerous slave children in Venice, in the Christian year 1259?"

There were nods all around, and Dominic suppressed a sigh. *Utterly predictable*. Having reminded the council that the Child-killer sat before them, it would now be easy for Alais and Amadeus to cast him as the villain in the matter of the duplicated memories. And they might even be correct. If the council should condemn him, he wanted to know in his own heart whether he was truly guilty of trying to hide a forced Transformation. It didn't feel like the truth, to him.

But Amadeus surprised him with his next question. "Lord Dominic, would you tell us why you killed those children?"

"I was looking for the Lost," Dominic replied. "The injuries I suffered in Beziers—" *which some of you witnessed*—"had blinded my Seer's Eyes, and only by tasting blood could I determine whether a soul belonged to us." He considered whether to continue, and then added: "Once I determined that they were not of the House, since they were under the age of consent, I needed to ensure their silence."

"Couldn't you have spoken to them in the Voice of Coercion, also known as casting a geas, to ensure they remained silent?"

"My injuries also prevented me from reliably using that power."

Amadeus pretended to consider this for a moment. "Why were the children you killed all underage? Were you looking for any of our Lost, or for one soul in particular?"

So that was his tactic! *That bastard*. "I was seeking the reincarnation of Michael de La Roche-en-Ardenne, whose True Name is Ea, who had been reported dead."

Tirgit began to sit down again. Amadeus stopped her. "Elder sister, if you please, I have a few more questions for you. Thank you, Lord Dominic."

Dominic inclined his head the barest fraction required for courtesy. He could predict where Amadeus intended to lead the rest of the council.

"Elder sister, is it true that Lord Dominic abandoned his post in Venice and unexpectedly joined you and Lady Cecilia in Ypres in April of 1260?"

"Yes." Tirgit seemed determined to provide as little cooperation as she could, and Amadeus was growing visibly irritated.

"Why were you and Lady Cecilia in Ypres?"

Tirgit swallowed, and replied in a low voice: "We had received word from Mother Sharibet that Sir Michael was alive, after all, and Lady Cecilia wished to meet him and see if he might be persuaded to join the House."

"And why was Lord Dominic not with you?" Alais interjected.

Tirgit bit her lip. "Because—" She stopped.

"Yes, elder sister?" Amadeus prompted.

"Because Lady Cecilia felt that Lord Dominic might—might take it amiss if the report proved false, or if Sir Michael declined to join the House. She wanted to be certain before raising Lord Dominic's hopes."

"I see," Amadeus said with dangerous gentleness. "But Lord Dominic heard, anyway. How did that occur?"

"I—I wrote to him."

The council reacted to that news with surprise, and not a little anger.

"Why did you do that, elder sister?"

Squaring her shoulders, she said, "I knew how much Lord Dominic loved his former consort, Lady Honoria, who went to the Underworld, as you know, during the massacre in Beziers. Lady Cecilia confirmed to me that Sir Michael de La Roche-en-Ardenne was indeed Honoria, reborn. Lady Cecilia was not having much success in obtaining Sir Michael's favor to join the House. I thought ... I thought ... that Lord Dominic might

have better success. And that he deserved to know that Ea had returned."

"I see. And what happened, then?"

"Lord Dominic came to Ypres, but lived secluded for weeks while Lady Cecilia continued to persuade Sir Michael. When she failed, Lord Dominic argued with her about what to do next." Tirgit hunched slightly and held her elbows.

"Sir Michael had already refused her invitation." It was not a question.

"Lord Dominic thought he might be able to change Sir Michael's mind," Tirgit said.

"And you witnessed what happened next? Tell us, elder sister."

Tirgit threw Dominic a desperate glance. "Lord Dominic went to the Templars by night, and fetched Sir Michael."

"Fetched?" Amadeus's brows rose with exaggerated incredulity. "Don't you mean *abducted*?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there," Tirgit said, coldly. "Anyway, Lord Dominic and Lady Cecilia tried one more time to persuade Sir Michael."

"And did you witness Sir Michael's consent?"

"No, I—No." Tirgit clutched her head. "It hurts. No. No!"

She folded in on herself, and to Dominic's horror, crumpled to the ground.

The geas! He threw himself out of his chair and fell to his knees at her side. "Tirgit!" He lifted her limp body into his arms, and in that moment knew that he was innocent of placing a geas in her. He would never have occasioned her such pain. He would never willingly break his oath to the

House: *I will be tender, and faithful, and treat you with a father's care!* Quickly he gathered her into his arms and checked her pulse, her eyes, and the color of her aura.

"Elder sister!" The wine-cave erupted in confusion for a few moments, then Sir Jean took charge of the situation. He ordered Alais to fetch the tisane that had helped Dominic before.

Alais left the cave without protest, and Dominic tended Tirgit.

She did not quite lose consciousness, but her eyes drooped and her head relaxed against his shoulder. Dominic stroked her face, her forehead, and her temples. He strengthened her aura with his own, despite the pain to him. Her breathing slowed gradually from ragged gasps as he murmured to her.

By the time Alais returned with a steaming beaker of the aromatic tisane, Tirgit was able to sit upright again. After she swallowed several cups of the medicine, and assured the council that she was capable of continuing, although she was pale as linen, the questioning resumed.

This time, Dominic noted that the looks directed his way were much more unfriendly. They clearly wanted to blame him for what had just happened. This whole matter of geases reeked of Cecilia, though he would be hard-pressed to prove it if the council agreed with Amadeus's condemnation.

Amadeus directed his questions to him. "Lord Dominic, can you tell us what happened after you *fetch*ed Sir Michael?"

"As Elder Sister Tir—Theodora said, he refused us, at first, though Cecilia and I tried our best to persuade him. Then Cecilia ordered me to execute him, because he feared us as

sorcerers, and I..." How could he possibly distill the frantic events of that night into a coherent explanation? He could only remember his determination not to lose Michael again. "...I thought that there might yet be hope. As Cecilia and I argued, Sir Michael broke the geas of immobility with which I tried to bind him, and he escaped—"

Amadeus interrupted hotly. "You said that you did not have the power to speak the Word of Coercion! You lied to us!"

Dominic waited coolly for the elders' outraged comments to subside. "As I said, he broke the geas." He shrugged at Amadeus's irate questions as to how that could have happened. When Amadeus paused for breath, he asked, "Shall I continue recounting the events of that night?"

"Yes, yes," Amadeus huffed.

"I pursued Michael, captured him, and offered him one last chance to give informed consent. I offered to Raise and Name him, and ... and..." Dominic frowned, feeling the headache starting to lance through his forehead again. "He did consent, but somehow, during his escape, he was mortally injured. I was forced to Transform him immediately." He rubbed his head, willing away the pain, and concentrated on thinking of other things. It worked—the throbbing receded.

"And you've seen Sir Jean's memories for yourself? Do they duplicate your recollection of Lord Michael's consent?"

"They are the same memories. Sir Jean's, of course, are the original. I can't explain how Michael comes to have the same memory," Dominic said flatly. "But I can tell you all this—it's not in my nature to hide the truth, and then weave a

geas around it. I don't think I could alter memories, not only in myself but in others, even now. And then to set a geas around those alterations—my skills as an Apkallu lie in other areas."

Amadeus frowned. "But if not you, then who could have done this?"

The question was clearly rhetorical, but Dominic met his amber gaze squarely, ignoring the malice that tarnished his aura. "There was another Apkallu present for all these events."

"Are you accusing Lady Cecilia of these misdeeds?" Amadeus was not only shocked, he was baffled.

"You should consider her possible role," Dominic replied. To his surprise, he heard Tirgit's voice add shakily. "I know her well, and I believe she may have intervened in an attempt to try and save both Lord Michael and Lord Dominic."

"But why would she go to such lengths?" Amadeus didn't try to hide his skepticism. He focused his attention back on Dominic.

Once again, Tirgit answered. "She was much troubled by the loss of so many Protectors in the Grand Massacre. There were only three Apkallu left in that time." Tirgit paused, then added, "And I believe that she was the only one who could have set the geas on *my* memories of that night. I was constantly in her company, and Lord Dominic could not have done such a thing to me without her consent."

Debate erupted among the elders, and Dominic caught fragments of the questions and protests being thrown about: "—has never broken the laws—" "—kidnapped a Templar, for

God's sake!" "Remember how she used to make herself invisible and—" "—but elder sister spent years traveling with them—" "Lord Menelaos never lied—" "—obsessed with Sir Michael—" "—she always frightened me."

Help came from an unexpected quarter. Master Guibert, who had been absorbing the proceedings in silence, struggled to his feet, assisted by Trader Jakob's hand under his elbow. The cave fell silent as the others noticed him, and gave him their attention.

"I can attest that as Queen of the Underworld, Lady Cecilia can craft dreams and illusions better than any other Apkallu," Guibert said, quietly. "I myself often observed her ability to do so, before the fire fell from heaven."

"But don't you think Lord Dominic is just trying to shift blame for his transgressions?" Alais said, heatedly. "We have never seen any evidence that Lady Cecilia has broken our laws or betrayed our trust. Whereas Lord Dominic—"

"Alais, enough!" Sir Jean said, sharply, and she fell silent. "Lord Dominic has never, to anyone's knowledge, broken the laws of the House or harmed any of the kin, or he would have met the Man of the Ax long since. And he is here, now, in good faith to hear and abide by our decision."

It was good to be defended, but Dominic still resented the necessity.

Guibert nodded slowly. "You have all raised important points. However, I believe we are being diverted from the real issue: the question in my mind is not whether Lord Dominic broke the laws of the House in Transforming Lord Michael, or whether Lady Cecilia would have been willing to cover up

such a transgression in order to save two Apkallu." He paused to ensure that he had the full attention of the council. "Our real problem is that *someone* has tampered with sacrosanct memory. If this is possible, then how can we ever trust the djinni to perform a proper Raising and Naming again?"

Well, this was an interesting turn of events! Dominic wondered what questions they would ask him next. But Guibert surprised him once more.

Addressing the council, he said, "Unless anyone here has further questions to ask Lord Dominic or Elder Sister Theodora, I suggest that we now discuss what decision to make in this matter. Are we all in agreement?"

Dominic saw Fabrice, Berengar, Alais, and the others exchange looks, but no one protested. Amadeus's wife Columba was the first to offer a tentative "*An-na*," the House's 'aye,' and others followed in ragged chorus.

Alais put down her quill, and Sir Jean, bowing in Dominic's direction, said, "Lord, elder sister, if you would kindly withdraw while we come to a decision?"

So, he was to stand meekly outside the doors like a beggar and wait for them to decide whether or not Sir Jean would chop off his head? Rage moved through his veins like molten gold. He had once been a god. He could smite them all in a matter of seconds, these mortals, he thought distantly. He wouldn't even need a weapon. His aura alone...

"Lord!" The hand squeezing his arm—painfully—was Tirgit's. Her terrified expression made him wondered what she had seen in his face, or his aura. At her fright, the swift tide of his anger receded. *This is the life I chose*, he reminded

himself. *And these are the oaths I swore. I must submit myself.*

"Come, Tirgit," he said, moving her hand from his forearm to the curve of his elbow. And like the tamed god he was, he led her outside to await news of his fate.

* * * *

As Dominic sat on a stone bench outside the great oaken doors, Tirgit let him put his arm around her. She huddled close to his side, and he could feel anxiety rippling through her aura, shaking her bones. It humbled him that she cared for him so strongly, even knowing the things he had done.

What was taking the elders so long? Dominic released a deep breath, and then another, willing himself to calm. Soon enough, they would summon him, and then more than likely, the Man of the Ax would be called upon to do his duty.

It might even be better this way. He was a broken djinn, and had been one since the Grand Massacre. If he passed through the gates of Death and Life, perhaps he could be reborn as female again, and thus able to return to his place as Ea's consort. Maybe his aura would be healed, too.

But what if the elders decided to punish him by declaring him Forgotten for seven generations? He might never be found again...

He couldn't stand was the thought of never seeing Michael again. Hearing his deep voice. Seeing the radiance of his rare smile. Even if they never joined in body, blood, or aura again, just to know that Michael existed somewhere that was not *unknown* ... He could bear the pain of loneliness. He could

bear the sorrow of separation. He could bear any humiliation, deserved or not. He wanted to *live*.

He sat quietly, taking comfort in Tirgit's warmth against his side, until the doors creaked open again at last.

Invited into the dim cave, he and Tirgit stood listening to Alais's recapitulation of the elders' decision-making while Sir Jean stood holding the great ax, the crescent curve of the blade shining evilly in the lamplight. Dominic forced himself to stand quietly as the decision was rendered, but it was difficult to pay attention to Alais's words with that ax winking at him.

"...given that we have found sufficient doubt as to what may have happened in the matter of Lord Michael's Transformation, and the alteration of memory, we hereby render the following decision," she said, and paused.

Would they make him kneel first, Dominic wondered, or simply cut him down as he stood? Sir Jean was a trained knight. He could probably swing the ax with sufficient force to—

"—and Lord Dominic will therefore be confined the djinni's quarters at this house until the truth of this matter can be ascertained. We furthermore forbid him to perform any Transformations, or to Raise or Name any mortal or djinni. He is also forbidden to initiate a blood bond with any djinn or mortal—"

Dominic's morbid speculations on the nature of his impending execution vanished as Alais's words penetrated his thoughts. What? They were going to let him live? A sweeping rush of relief, as exquisitely pleasurable as the taste of human blood, swept through him, weakening his knees.

"...Any further decisions on this matter are postponed until Lady Mathilde arrives to continue the investigation."

He swayed, and felt Tirgit's arm loop around his waist, supporting him.

"This may be the gravest crisis to face the kin since the Cursed One called the fire down from heaven. We feel that any hasty course of action would only bring harm to the House," Alais concluded.

They were looking at him expectantly. Did they want his thanks? Dominic struggled to gather his wits. "What of Cecilia?" he asked. "Will she be summoned as well?"

No one answered him. Feet shuffled, and no one met his eye. Finally, Guibert spoke. "We have decided to wait for Lady Mathilde's findings before notifying any of the other Houses ... or other djinni. It would behoove us to find some real evidence before we widen our investigation."

Plausible enough, thought Dominic sardonically. He strongly suspected that they all feared the Eldest and were reluctant to draw her wrath unless they were absolutely certain they could lay a misdeed at her door.

"And so do you, Lord Dominic, Ninshubur-who-was, submit yourself to our decision and agree to our terms?" Alais asked.

Dominic gave them a brief bow. "I swore to protect the House. If you feel you now need protection *from* me, then I will oblige you."

"I thank you," Alais began to say, but she stopped when an unexpected pounding on the door echoed through the chamber.

Everyone froze. Who would dare interrupt a council, except for the gravest emergency?

Then the doors to the wine-cave gave a protesting creak, and swung open slowly, admitting a blaze of afternoon light. Jean pushed to his feet, reaching for the ax. "Who dares interrupt our council?" he called.

Dominic, blinking against the unexpected wash of brightness, saw great golden wings, and knew, even before a deep voice replied.

"I am called Michael de Murat, True Name Ea, come to witness this council as a Protector of the House." Michael strode into the cave, leaving the doors open behind him, and surveyed the scene. His blue eyes locked with Dominic's gaze and his purposeful stride checked, driving a blade through Dominic's unprepared heart. Damn him, for being here without warning!

Dominic held his breath. He felt the pressure of Michael's mind against his, seeking answers, but his word given, Dominic kept his link securely closed. *No blood-bond.*

Then Michael turned his furious attention to the rest of the council. "What have you done?" His great wings were outstretched, filling the cave with gold and scarlet flame.

"Lord Michael," Master Guibert said to him. "Your arrival is a most fortunate event for this council."

Michael stared blankly at him for an uncomfortable time. "Master ... Guibert," he said at last. "Again I ask, what is going on here?"

"We have called this council to discuss, among other things, the circumstances of your Transformation, as well as

your Raising and Naming. We suspect that these may have been done improperly, and without your consent."

"Why now?" Whatever Michael had been expecting, it was obviously not the revival of these questions, a decade after the fact, and in this place. "And why not simply ask me yourselves?"

"Because, lord," Tirgit said, stepping forward. "I have discovered that our memories of that day—yours, mine, and Lord Dominic's—have been altered."

"Altered. Is such a thing even possible?"

Dominic, watching closely, bedazzled by Michael's presence, saw all the thoughts going through his beloved's mind. Perhaps he had not forsworn his oaths to the Templars, after all. Perhaps he had been overcome by force, and not betrayed his precious sense of honor. If he had a false memory...

Before Dominic could speak, or spring up to stop him, Michael strained to remember. His Raising mark flickered, and he reeled back, as if struck by a mace. Then he doubled over, moaning.

"Another instance of the geas," Dominic heard someone say, as he rushed to lower Michael into a chair. He was gasping raggedly, consumed by pain.

"Beloved, breathe. Slowly now," Dominic commanded, hands on his shoulders, rubbing soothing circles on his back.

"Lord, I'm here. The same thing happened to us, when we tried to remember," Tirgit said, kneeling by the chair. Her hands clutched Michael's. "The council thinks that Lord Dominic is responsible, but I don't believe them."

And Dominic had absolutely no doubt about it anymore, either. *This is Cecilia's doing.*

The only question remaining was, why?

* * * *

Michael woke in a large, gauze-draped bed, his head reverberating with pain. Tirgit was sitting on the edge of the bed, but she was speaking with someone.

Dominic. He was here, at Michael's bedside.

Honorias was filled with helpless joy at their beloved's proximity. Dominic looked gray and wan, the skin under his eyes bruised with weariness that resonated with his own.

"It's unjust," Tirgit said, plaintively. "They've forbidden you to leave these rooms, accused you of doing all of—of *this*, but I know you would *never* have—"

"I welcome the investigation," Dominic said quietly. "I've been greatly troubled by 'all this.' I doubt that I tampered with your memories, even if I was willing to disregard the laws of consent to satisfy my own selfish desires."

Michael remembered what Tirgit had told him, just before he collapsed at the council. If not Dominic, then who could have tampered—?

Cecilia! Honorias's voice sounded as shocked as he felt.

Michael rubbed his face, which was thickly stubbled. His eyes felt red and raw from too many hours spent traveling, and too little sleep.

"Lord Michael!" Tirgit squeaked. "You're awake. Do you need anything? I have blood for you."

"Sweetheart," Michael said, as soon as his fast was broken. "I came as soon as I could after I got your letter, but the pirates were ... difficult."

"Your arrival was very timely," Dominic said. "Though I regret you suffer from the same geas that we are inflicted with, your demonstration of its power may have saved my life." He looked better now. More rested. More certain of himself. *He almost looks like Menelaos again.*

"What geas?" he asked, the first of a thousand questions.

After Dominic and Tirgit briefed him on the evidence they had amassed so far, he agreed with Honoria's instant assessment. Cecilia was the only Apkallu with the strength to create these deceptive memories. But what did Cecilia feel she had to gain in return for so much effort, so many transgressions against the law of the House? The return of two lost Apkallu to the House? Yet she had not intervened when he had tried to kill Dominic just after his awakening after his Transformation, and she had been adamantly against the return of Ninharsag. What had she tried to do? Or what was she trying to hide?

"We told the council that she was the only one capable of setting a geas like that, but we have no proof. And what if they don't believe you—believe us?" Tirgit's glare was as fierce as a wildcat protecting its cubs. "I won't let them execute you, Lord Dominic. I'll protect you."

Her words might have been laughable—a mere Crown of Service djinniah offering to protect an Apkallu—but Dominic was clearly touched by her sincerity.

Michael dragged his hand through his tangled hair, trying to avoid watching the sentiment his consort was displaying toward his beloved. If Dominic had not actually obtained Michael's consent to join the House, then his oath to the Templars had not been broken. He was not a coward. He had been overpowered by magic. What had he told Tirgit? *There's no shame in having fallen in battle.* The weight of years of self-hatred fell away from him like broken chains.

Michael felt himself come alive. He had not yielded dishonorably.

"I wonder what Cecilia—or whichever of us set that geas—was trying to hide," he said, interrupting Tirgit's further promises of loyalty, "If Dominic did forcibly Transform me, then there was probably some compelling reason for it. It seems inconceivable for him to simply flout the laws of the House—his presence at the council today is proof of that."

Some of his buoyancy dissipated. "I think we should look at those memories again." He yawned widely.

"You need more sleep after your travails, lord, and so do we," said Tirgit.

Dominic gave Michael a wry smile that warmed his heart with its unaffected companionship. "Do as my daughter commands."

Tirgit's smile at his endearment brightened the whole room. "We had better stock up on that awful tisane before we commence."

* * * *

Tirgit watched over Michael all morning. He was slept soundly as the day crept towards noon with breathless heat.

From her bedside watch she heard the Raising and Naming guests departing from the courtyard. Amidst the sounds of mule-carts being loaded with crates of linens, disassembled trestle-tables, and boxes of dishes packed in straw, came the sounds of passionate speculation as to why the Raising and Naming ceremony had been canceled, as well as why both Lord Dominic and Lord Michael had arrived and a council of elders had been convened.

The most common theory, Tirgit discovered, was that Crusaders were on their way to Beziers, ready to repeat the events of the Grand Massacre. She wished she could tell her kin the truth, and allay their fears of invasion and bloodshed, but the council had strictly forbidden any disclosure until Lady Mathilde arrived and conducted her investigation. Even Mother Sharibet was not to be informed, although Alais had vigorously protested that restriction.

As the hours crawled by, and the steady stream of departures died down to the last echoing clatter of iron-rimmed wheels against the stone pavement, Tirgit tried to distract herself from the steadily growing lump of sick tension in her belly. She wasn't ready to talk about Lyon yet, and dreaded that Michael would press her for details. Instead, she fretted about the kin. Would the families that had gathered here in anticipation of a joyous feast and the welcoming of souls returned to full memory, now spend the next days and weeks waiting anxiously for the sounds of destrier hooves and the rumble of siege engines?

She kept busy by copying Lady Alais's tisane recipe for Joan. When she had finished with pen and ink, and Michael still showed no sign of stirring, she accepted Alais's generous offer to help brew a goodly quantity in preparation for what lay ahead. And then she offered Lord Dominic a variety of refreshments, all of which he refused, bent over his book as he patiently waited out his confinement.

By late afternoon, when the summer heat hung over the house in a veil of dust and flies, and Sir Jean's family had retreated to the cool dimness within the manor's thick stone walls, Tirgit had run out of chores, and Michael had not yet awakened. She fled the parlor for a while, and occupied herself by browsing through the single shelf of books in Sir Jean's office that comprised the estate's library. There were more volumes here than even many monasteries possessed, but she found it a poor collection after having lived with Michael, who had amassed enough books to require floor-to-ceiling shelves in the parlor of their Westminster house. Although, she thought with some homesickness, he generally kept the books in untidy heaps, wherever he happened to leave them when he was done.

She went back upstairs to the parlor, cradling a huge and lavishly illustrated edition of *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. There, she found Dominic standing by the window, watching the apprentices sweep the scattered straw and globes of newly-deposited dung from the courtyard.

"Lord Dominic, I thought you might want to—"

In the blink of an eye, he was before her, hands resting on her shoulders. She jumped, even though she should have

been accustomed by now to the unearthly speed with which the Apkallu could move.

"Tirgit, child," came his deep, calm voice. "Stop. This is not your fault."

"I know," she said, feeling small and helpless, like the little girl she had once been, sent to stand in front of customers and await their pleasure. "But—" The words she had been intending to say turned to dust in her mouth. She hugged the huge, leather-bound volume to her chest.

"How do you think I've felt, all these years, seeing Michael's difficulty in using his powers, or even in remembering his past selves, believing that *I* did this to him? He's not whole. He never fully joined with his past selves." His sigh brought tears to her eyes. "Honor *speaks* to him, as if she were a separate person, living in his head. She's even spoken to me..."

"I've seen it, in his blood," Tirgit said. "It feels..." She frowned, trying to capture her impression in words. "As if something in him has been severed."

"That's an interesting way of putting it," Michael said unexpectedly from the bed.

Tirgit whirled around, and saw that while he remained somewhat rumpled and unshaven, the worst of the fatigue had vanished from his eyes and face. He allowed her to burn off her nervous energy by plying him with a jug of preserved blood, hot water, a razor, and a clean shirt and braies borrowed from the kin. She shaved him, letting her fingers linger on the familiar, beloved planes of his face, then helped him dress.

Finally, she fetched Sir Jean and Lady Alais as witnesses, so that Lord Dominic might not be accused later on of violating the council's prohibition.

Michael rolled back his sleeves and Tirgit prepared herself, taking deep breaths and trying to dispel the tension that had been humming through her all day. She was willing to face another blinding headache if it meant helping her loved ones.

"Theodora," Michael said, "would you examine my memories from a few days before to a few days after my Transformation? If there was tampering, it probably occurred then." He told Sir Jean, "I would like her to examine Lord Dominic's memories of those days, as well, if it doesn't contravene the council's decision."

"I—ah—don't think it will be problem if you are here, and Elder Sister Theodora initiates the contact," Sir Jean said, slightly flustered. "After all, we need to discover the truth."

"So heard and witnessed," Dominic said, formally.

Michael nodded to Tirgit, giving her permission to proceed. So she took his arm, and raised his fingers to her lips.

As always, swimming in the sea of Michael's memories was a turbulent experience. Instead of a smoothly-flowing stream of experience, his head was filled with the buffeting currents of his various lifetimes. It was hard to locate the particular set of memories that he had requested.

There was Honoria's meeting with her previous self, Eugenia, Chief Perfumer of the Constantinople House. With an effort, Tirgit turned away from that happy memory and continued seeking the memories from his present lifetime that didn't look quite right. Finally she finally found the current

from the night he had been Transformed. Without looking too deeply (for she did not yet want to risk a crippling headache), she followed it through the path of his post-Transformation.

In the twilight realm between sleep and waking, Michael dreams of angels. Though his low bed is hard, a shimmering golden coverlet covers him like woven sunbeams. For the first time in a decade, his leg doesn't hurt. There are no candles in the stone-walled chamber, yet the room itself is bright as noon.

Lady Cecilia stands next to his bed, her face as grave and sweet as the Virgin's. Immense wings of iridescent moonlight sweep around and above her, and she raises a dagger made of silver and fire.. "Ea, beloved," she says in the old tongue that only the Apkallu know. "Menelaos has completely botched your Transformation, but I will try to heal you."...

He screams. He is falling, and he has no wings. "I am sorry, my brother," Cecilia whispers. "I tried my best for you..." Blessed darkness eases his utter confusion.

There was the moment ... The memory appeared coherent and yet contained that counterfeit quality that she recognized now. There was something beneath the shimmer of those falsified memories ... something she could almost see...

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

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

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

Darkness spread from the shining dagger embedded in his forehead.

The geas seized Michael through their bond. Then pain lashed out at them like a fiery sword, and cast her out from the blood link like the angel driving Eve from the garden.

But she had found the clue. That image of Cecilia raising the dagger ... Why would Cecilia need to use an aura-dagger to *heal*? And if Cecilia had tried to heal Michael, then why try to protect the memory from close examination with a geas?

* * * *

This time, she didn't entirely lose consciousness from the pain, though the geas sent Michael to his knees, retching. When he was done heaving, she remained kneeling on the floor with him, too weak to rise. "Lord Michael was right..." she panted. "The memories of how Lady Cecilia attempted to heal him are false. I saw—I saw one true thing. A dagger of light—" She swayed, and felt Dominic's hands catch and support her.

"But if Lady Cecilia is really responsible for this ... why?" Alais said. "Why would she want to hide Lord Dominic's misdeeds—*possible* misdeeds," she corrected herself.

"There are too many answers to speculate," Michael answered firmly, though he was looking white and drained. "We must wait for my sister Mathilde, Ninharsag-who-was, who is the most proficient in this type of healing after Cecilia.

She's the only one I don't have a current blood bond with. She'll be able to sift these memories without harm to either of us."

Dominic frowned at this. "Then we must wait."

* * * *

Friday, August 30, AD 1270:

Mathilde was in Ragusa, across the Adriatic Sea from Venice, and in the middle of conducting a Raising and Naming ceremony when the message arrived. She didn't let it disrupt the occasion, but afterward she spent a great deal of thought trying to puzzle out what it meant. On the one hand, it bore the imprint of a council of elders, which meant it was truly urgent. On the other hand...

Why had *she* been summoned? Beziers lay within the area assigned to Michael and Tirgit, and even if they were otherwise occupied, Dominic had been traveling west on his own round of Raisings and Namings. Surely, it would have been easier to summon him, even if the kin did not particularly like him. Even Cecilia, cloistered as she was in the Kingdom of Granada, would have arrived in Languedoc more quickly than Mathilde, who would be forced to cross the greenish waters of the Adriatic before going over the Italian peninsula, and hence down the long curve of the coast to Beziers.

And the wording of the summons had been uninformative, to say the least.

Of course she set out with all haste, taking only the merest provisions, and counting on her broad wings to carry her halfway across the face of Europe.

* * * *

Flying under the stars all the hours of the night, alone and out of communication with her husband or any of the other djinni, she had ample time to think, but try as she might, she could not form any credible guesses.

She was not the only one puzzled by her message. Each of the Houses that she used as a waystation on her arduous flight west was abuzz with anxious speculation at her unexpected arrival. King Louis's latest Crusade was the chief suspect, yet there had been no reports of damage to the House's properties, nor bloodshed. Some feared a new Mongol attack, but, again, there was no word or confirmation.

In Genoa, resting for two days before she could go on, she learned that Dominic had also been summoned to Beziers, and her confusion deepened. Why were they *both* needed? Was there another Crusade beginning in Toulouse? All the Cathars had been bloodily eliminated by the Church's new Inquisition. Had the House come under suspicion from that body?

She had too much time to think, and too few facts to think with. She only hoped that she would not be forced to take up arms in defense of the House. She had been a Protector for nearly a decade now, but her consortship with Dominic had shielded her from the necessity to wreak vengeance in the way of djinni. She was a healer by nature, even if her most

ambitious project, the healing of Dominic's damaged aura, seemed successful only in inflicting great pain.

Trying to think of Dominic brought her only pain, and the memory of pain. All her efforts had been worth nothing. His aura showed little improvement from the time when she had started working with him. Even the few times they'd left Venice together and obtained willing sources of small amounts of human blood had not made any noticeable difference. Her marriage was as much a sham as ever. Dominic felt affection and even some desire for her, but his love was wholly focused on her brother.

She felt a failure. Everything she had touched these past ten years had turned to dust. She had abandoned her daughter—*no, I must not think of that*, she thought, as the first warning pulse of pain drove through her eye.

What cannot be mended must be borne.

Chapter Fifteen

Confess [your] faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed ... —*The General Epistle of James*, 5:16

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Monday, September 1, AD 1270:

"Michael, 'ware!" Dominic's sword whistled past Michael's unhelmeted head as he ducked with his superhuman reflexes. Even so, he barely missed losing an ear.

You seem preoccupied, Dominic continued, mind-to-mind, as he parried Michael's counterattack with his borrowed shield. *Do you want to stop?*

No! snarled Michael. After almost three days of confinement at the estate, with nothing but unanswered questions and Dominic's continual presence, he *needed* this, needed the relief brought by the burn of muscles and the rasp of dusty air in his throat, needed the focus of blade against blade. He needed the distraction from his circling thoughts, which had been plodding like a mule harnessed to a millstone, grinding grist to powder. Although Dominic was under house arrest, Michel had offered to guarantee his good behavior, and Sir Jean had permitted them to take exercise in the courtyard.

The watching kin gasped and murmured. Their sparring practice in the courtyard had drawn an audience of everyone who wasn't out working the fields—maids, perfumers, stableboys, couriers, the irrigation engineer, and even Sir Jean and Lady Alais.

As Dominic's sword sliced past his head—again—he parried with a clanging slide of steel. He had been doing entirely too much thinking lately. His nightmares of being raped and subjugated had returned with a vengeance, and he wondered what Mathilde would find when—if—she was able to restore the memories that Tirgit had claimed were falsified. Had Dominic really Transformed him without his consent?

No! cried Honoria inside of his head. *He would never—*
He would if he had good reason to, Michael answered her. But what could it be, this reason powerful enough to incite Cecilia to try and conceal the truth? He extended his foot and brought his sword overhead and down with all his strength in a vicious headcut. Dominic only saved himself by using his hand of air to brace his parrying sword—cheating, of course. But Michael didn't really want to kill him. Did he? Neither of them wore armor or helmet, since Sir Jean was a head shorter than either djinn and anything he loaned them would have to be extensively altered by an armorer.

They disengaged for a short rest. Then Dominic asked, "Ready?"

Michael nodded, glad of a respite from his fruitless brooding, and Dominic came at him in a flurry of blows.

* ... Michael?* God's Bones, he had nearly let Dominic remove a limb this time! He *had* to concentrate! But his mind would not leave the track it was on. As the days had passed, Michael found himself softening towards the other djinn. Dominic seemed so lonely, and his pleasure in Michael's company was so genuine ... It was a dreadful mess, and one that Michael could see no way out of. Even if Mathilde could

recover the true memories of that day, it would bring ill news. Either Dominic had committed a dreadful crime, or Cecilia had. Michael growled, countered the next thrust by turning aside Dominic's blade with his own, and swept low, aiming for the other djinn's knees.

The onlookers gasped, and one of the maids actually gave a smothered shriek. Dominic leaped high into the air, jumping over the arc of the Michael's blade with catlike grace. *You seem troubled.*

God's Bones, was that bastard *smirking* at him?

Our lover and our friend, Honoria said softly. *We miss him. Look out!*

Michael's arms ached, parrying Dominic's blows. Even now, he hoped the exertion masked his telltale blush. Despite any rational arguments he made himself, that he no longer wanted Dominic the way that Honoria had wanted him, he felt what she did: he wanted to climb inside the layers of Dominic's clothing that separated them, to feel that smooth skin and those hard muscles underneath moving against his own skin, to make Dominic shudder and gasp in the way that Honoria remembered so well...

Even if he raped our mind? Honoria asked bluntly. *If he did such a thing, we would kill him. You know we've done that before.*

I can't believe it. It doesn't make any sense, Michel replied.

They continued to circle, exchanging thrusts and parries, but Dominic must have noticed his blush for what it was. His

smirk was now unmistakable. *You can't blame yourself anymore.*

Honorias doing her best to convince me, Michael replied, sourly.

Instead of the expected triumph, what came through their link next was Dominics concern. *I wish you wouldn't talk about her as if she were a stranger.* He followed up with a strong overhand blow.

Michael felt the impact vibrate through the bones of his arm and shoulder, all the way down to his feet. *But she *is* a stranger. We even argue, frequently.*

I've never understood that. Now, it was Dominics turn to go on the defensive as Michael launched a series of quick blows, his sword moving in a tight figure-eight pattern. *You *are* Honorias.*

Michael, who had to live with her near-constant presence and acerbic commentary inside his head, sent the mental equivalent of a shrug. He didn't really want to argue with Dominic about this, but at the same time, it was a safer conversation than the subject of whether he wanted Dominic as a lover.

What about your other past selves? Do they talk to you, too?

 The image that accompanied Dominics next flurry of blows was that of Lord Ea in his Garment of Divine Kingship, his beard elaborately braided with gold and lapis lazuli beads. It was no coincidence that Dominic evoked the lifetime when Ea had first loved Ninshubur, the Queen of the East.

They are mere shadows, compared to Honorias presence. Michael parried Dominics attack, not with his

sword, but by flinging out his left arm and attempting to knock the other djinn from his feet with his hand of air.

And will you allow yourself to be persuaded by your past selves? Dominic asked, nimbly avoiding the hand of air as it swung at his face.

Michael stumbled, and barely managed to recover himself. In another instant, Dominic's hand of air snaked behind him, sweeping him off his feet entirely.

As he landed flat on the paving stones, cushioned by his own aura from injury, he heard the crowd of onlookers shouting their approval for an entertaining fight.

Why does he always win?

Honorio got the last word in. *Because you let him.*

* * * *

Days crept by as the three Protectors awaited Mathilde's arrival, slow and hot and filled with the maddening buzz of cicadas. To his surprise, Dominic found his imprisonment in the djinni's quarters less onerous than he had been fearing, because he had Michael and Tirgit to keep him company.

The King's latest Crusade had departed weeks ago for North Africa, where it was now Arjumand's problem to deal with. The three Protectors found themselves seeking work to do, and welcomed the opportunity to assist with the accounting and correspondence. Michael and Tirgit made a few short trips to the riverside docks at Beziers, escorting the shipments of the attar of roses distilled from this year's crop.

In the hours of leisure there were games of chess, riddles, and conversation. How many years had it been since Dominic

had spent an evening relaxed in the presence of friends, discussing Aristotle or current politics? He had not seen Michael since Tirgit's Appointing six years earlier, but that visit had been as strained as the one during her Transformation. Tirgit had become well-read in her years as Michael's consort, her observations spiced by her own varied personal experiences, and Michael's keen mind was a joy to debate with.

Temporarily freed of his responsibilities as a Protector, Dominic rested and enjoyed the company of the two souls dearest to him in this lifetime. He had not realized how weary he had become, burdened down with the resentment of the Venetian kin and his own painful failures, both as Mathilde's husband and as her patient.

But he could not relax, not completely. There was something else that Michael's presence provided: hope, that embedded itself in Dominic's heart like a spiked weapon every time he caught Michael studying him. Was it really longing that Dominic saw there ... or was it just what he *wanted* to see there?

Likewise with Michael's little gestures—the brush of his hand against Dominic's; his smile, as heartbreakingly beautiful as it had been when they first met in Michael's youth; and that laugh, *Honorio's* laugh, low and a little husky and shared just between the two of them. Those moments contradicted Michael's overall wariness and restraint, and made it clear to Dominic that Michael was at war with himself.

But even he could not guess who the victor would be. And in the meantime, he could only nourish painful hope, and use

every ounce of his willpower not to act on the subtle encouragement he was being given.

* * * *

Friday September 12, AD 1270:

Michael was less certain of his feelings towards Dominic as the week passed. He found his determination to maintain a distance between them melting away under the warmth of their reestablished friendship. Dominic seemed so lonely, and his pleasure in Michael's company was so genuine...

It shouldn't have been a surprise, not really, when Michael found himself delighted when Dominic entered the parlor of the djinni's suite. They were alone—Tirgit had ridden out to Beziers the day before to visit with some of her kinswomen. Michael was engaged in the somewhat tedious task of composing a letter to a Genovese shipbuilder regarding a new vessel under contract, and he welcomed the distraction, especially when he noticed the chessboard tucked under Dominic's arm.

I'm sure we can beat him today, Honoria said, happily. *I just remembered a strategy that might work.* Michael smiled at Dominic. "I'm almost finished here."

Instead of returning Michael's smile, Dominic froze. The urbane mask vanished, and raw longing replaced it. Michael's breath caught at the sight. His gaze locked with Dominic's for a long moment while Honoria clamored to comfort her husband.

Then an immense, irresistible force from within lifted him up and out of his chair. Michael found himself entirely too

close to Dominic, yielding to his embrace, to those strong arms pulling him closer, to that warm mouth moving hungrily against his. He heard himself make a sound of pure longing, returning Dominic's kiss with equal fervor. *God's Bones, I've missed this!* He wasn't certain whether he had thought this, or Honoria, or both, and somehow, it no longer seemed to matter.

His hands moved into Dominic's thick hair, curving possessively around the curve of his skull, drawing him closer. He forgot about Tirgit, about Mathilde. He forgot that he had convinced himself that he no longer wanted Dominic the way that Honoria had. There was only the taste of Dominic, faintly smoky, and the joy of being cherished. His hands dropped to Dominic's shoulders, pulling him closer as Michael took control of the kiss, deepening it. He wanted *more...*

The excited shouts of the children stationed to watch the road brought Michael back to awareness. He had to stop this now, he thought, but Dominic's mouth had moved to his throat, his sharp teeth touching the sensitive flesh there, not-quite-biting in a way that made Michael arch against him helplessly.

Blessed Virgin, it would be so easy to yield, he thought. All he would have to do would be ... *nothing*. Dominic would...

The instant he thought that, he realized that Dominic had heard him, too, through the link that had involuntarily opened between them.

Then hard hands were pushing him away, and Michael was bereft of all contact with that wonderful mouth. He felt cold

despite the summer heat, and the chill only worsened when Dominic's shields went up.

He saw unguarded anguish in the other djinn's expression—an anguish that he felt in his own chest—and then Dominic's face fell back into its usual mask of saturnine impassivity.

"I'm—" he began to apologize.

Fool, said Honoria.

Dominic's gray eyes narrowed. "Don't," he said, harshly. "Don't do this to me." He rubbed his face, as if wiping away invisible tears. "Do you want me? Because if you do, you must come to me willingly."

I want you. But the words refused to push themselves past the tightening in Michael's throat.... *Ninshubur's fingers dig into his hipbones, leaving bruises, but he doesn't care about the pain, because the mouth enclosing him is hot and tight, and his lover's tongue is flicking against him in the most delightfully wicked way...*

"I can't see a way of..." Michel's face grew hot as he equivocated, "coming to you that wouldn't hurt Tirgit or Mathilde. It would be dishonorable to enter into an adulterous relationship, 'way of the djinni' or not."

"Has it ever occurred to you," Dominic replied, sharply, "that your sense of honor has brought us both nothing but unhappiness in this lifetime?"

"I can't change who I am," Michel said stiffly, all-too-aware of Honoria's anger smoldering in the back of his mind.

"Very well," Dominic said, softly. "I can't live like this any more." He swallowed visibly. "If you come to me, I will

welcome you with open arms, but I will not—I *refuse* to give you any more excuses to push me away."

Michael stared at him in desolate silence, robbed of breath and words. *I can't. I can't...*

Then Dominic looked past him, and through the window to the courtyard. "Mathilde is here," he said, as guilt rose in Michael's throat and choked him.

* * * *

The mystery of her summoning deepened when Mathilde arrived in Beziers, and found it peaceful. The kin were hospitable but just as uninformative as all the other places where she'd stopped to sleep and eat. The only new pieces of information she got from them were that there had been no bloodshed that they knew of, and the location of Villeroze-sur-Orb.

When she awoke from the exhausted sleep that followed her strenuous flight, it was broad daylight outside. Unwilling to break the prohibition against using djinni powers where outsiders might notice them, she had to travel by mule, escorted by the stableboy and a maid from the Beziers House, for the hours it took to reach the rose farm.

She found her confusion replaced by a slow-burning annoyance that ignited as she rode up the olive-lined path from the road. Her back hurt, her buttocks were bruised from riding this heavy-footed beast, her head throbbed with fatigue, and her wings were aching with that insubstantial, maddening pain of overextended powers. She had been traveling for over a week, driving herself to exhaustion, and

for what? In the breathless afternoon heat, she could hear children laughing and shouting at play. The air smelled clean, there were workers moving among the neat rows of rosebushes draped over the hillsides, and everything seemed peaceful and prosperous.

She spurred her mule forward, ahead of her escort, and rode smartly into the courtyard.

Dominic was waiting for her there, and, to her astonishment, so were Michael and Tirgit, along with several of the kin. Michael was troubled, she thought, his aura-wings blazing with some strong emotion, and Dominic, standing a little behind him, was also incandescent.

Now *that* might be the sign of some real trouble, she thought crossly, as she reined in her mule. Or it could be just the latest manifestation of Dominic's seemingly-hopeless pursuit of her brother. She would know soon enough.

A hearty, sun-browed native of this country in his fifties stepped forward, and bowed to her in the way of the kin. "Lady Mathilde, welcome to Villerose-sur-Orb. We are glad you arrived safely. I am Sir Jean de Pezenas, master of this farm. My True Name is Utusagila. It is good to meet again!"

She gave him a nod without dismounting. "It is good to meet again, Sir Jean." Her gaze swept around to the other djinni gathered in the courtyard, hoping for some hint of the crisis that required *four* Protectors, but they had all closed their links to her. "I was expecting fire and brimstone and calamity, at the very least, given the urgency of your summons."

She had intended for her tone to be light, but concern sharpened it. Luckily, Sir Jean appeared to take no offense.

"I hope you are not too disappointed, lady," Sir Jean said with grim humor, "for we can oblige you only as far as calamity. If you'll come inside, I will offer you some refreshment."

"And answers?" He helped her dismount, steadying her with strong, impersonal hands around her waist when she staggered a little.

He nodded.

* * * *

Sir Jean and Lady Alais escorted her into the second-floor parlor that had been set aside for the djinni's use. It was a clean, bright room, the stone walls plastered and covered with frescoes of lush landscapes filled with deer and all manner of birds. Extra chairs and refreshments were brought in by housemaids who were burning with curiosity, and then the door was shut, leaving them in privacy.

"Are you certain that you're feeling well enough to discuss this?" Michael asked. "You could rest."

Mathilde appreciated his concern, but let Dominic help her into one of the cushioned chairs. She found it lowering that her consort looked better than he had for years under her care. Whatever calamity had occurred seemed to be doing him good.

She held her questions while they told her an involved and almost interminable tale of geases and tampered memories. When they finally stopped speaking, she asked, "These

headaches—you've all had them when examining this particular set of memories? And another djinn experiences the same pain through a blood bond?"

"Yes," Michael answered, followed by Dominic and Tirgit.

"All right," she said. "Michael, you and I have no blood bond. Let me see those memories."

Michael promptly put his hand in hers. She bit his finger, tasting his blood for the first time.... *fingers dig into his hipbones, leaving bruises ...* Ha! As she'd expected.

Then she got down to business, and eventually found: *He couldn't move, couldn't flinch as her dagger pierced his forehead, insubstantial, painless, ruinous. Cecilia's sweet, implacable command rang in his mind. *Sleep.* Darkness spread from the shining dagger embedded in his forehead ... And in that darkness, *Pain says: forgetfulness. Pain says: I block your memories. Look anywhere else but here. There's too much pain to remember. Death is pain. Pain is death. Don't look.**

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

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

There was a flat quality to the memory, just as Tirgit had said. She dug deeper:

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

"I'm sorry," the sorcerer says. "But I couldn't let you go. I'm going to unveil your memories now. Whether you will it or not, I am the Opener of the Way."

Michael redoubles his frenzied efforts, but Dominic's grip is too strong to break. "Why didn't you kill Roland," he pants. "The way you killed the others? Why did you spare us?"

"Because you belong to us." Dominic kisses Michael's bearded cheek. "I want you to love me as you once did. As I love you."

"Begone, Satan. I renounce you ... and all your works!"

Dominic lands and wraps Michael in wings of light. "Remember me. Remember everything." His teeth touch Michael's throat...

She closed her eyes, feeling old and incredibly weary. "I regret to inform you that Dominic did indeed forcibly Raise and Name you, Michael. He did not obtain your consent." She waited through the next period of shock and denial that affected everyone in the parlor. Only Dominic sat quietly, waiting.

"I have also seen the geas that Cecilia set to make you forget."

Michael flinched. "Can you tell why these things were done?"

"Not now," she said. "I need some time to rest. And something to drink, first."

* * * *

Sir Jean looked wretched, as if his world were crumbling. Michael felt the same way. Inside his head, Honoria was wild with grief. *Why would he do that to us, our beloved and our friend?* He felt numb. He should have been relieved to discover that he had indeed kept to his vows, but there was ... nothing. Perhaps he would feel something presently.

"Mathilde," said Dominic into the sudden silence. "Your headaches ... when did they start?"

Her head came up and she focused on him. "After I was Raised and Named."

"Lord Dominic accompanied you to Constantinople, did he not?" Alais asked, stiffly. She offered a goblet of blood mixed with the juice of oranges.

Mathilde took it and drank deeply. "Are you accusing him of tampering with my memories?"

Alais raised her chin. Her heart was beating loudly enough for Michael to hear it. "He was there with you."

What? Hadn't it been enough for Dominic to change Michael's destiny? Had he also meddled with Mathilde's memories? And yet, Michael and Honoria both wanted to believe that there had been some good reason for Dominic's actions that night, some justification beyond blind obsession. Menelaos had never done anything without good cause...

Logic prevailed. Michael asked, "If it was Cecilia who tampered with me and with Dominic, why would Dominic tamper with Mathilde?"

"Your headaches are only triggered by word of your daughter," Dominic said to Mathilde. Then he spoke to the

others. "I thought at first that she was somehow turning her powers against herself, in punishment for having abandoned Blanche for the duties of a Protector. Now it seems another geas may be involved, but it makes no sense."

Mathilde raised her hand, and rubbed at her brow. "The headache goes away if I don't think about her."

"I don't understand." Michael said. Dominic, Sir Jean, and Lady Alais nodded agreement. He noticed that Mathilde's face had gone pale. "Why would Cecilia want to prevent Mathilde from thinking about her daughter?"

"Cecilia wanted to sever Mathilde's ties to Blanche, because—because Blanche is the Cursed One," Tirgit said, almost inaudibly. She hunched over, as if trying to protect herself from a beating.

"What?" Michael shouted. "How can this be?" This was why his niece was Forgotten?

"Inanna," Dominic murmured, as if his heart were breaking.

Honorina began quoting the old epic of Enki to Michael.
Inanna, you heap up human heads like piles of dust, you sow heads like seed ... you destroy what should not be destroyed; you create what should not be created.

My Blanche is cursed Inanna, the goddess of love and war? Michel thought. *I don't believe it.*

"The Cursed One is Lady Mathilde's daughter?" Sir Jean rasped in unintended echo, taking his wife's hand.

"I wonder..." Alais pursed her lips. Her fingers tightened around her husband's hand. "We have long believed that so many of kin are reborn into the House because souls are

drawn to those they love. Could it be that this principle works for those they hate, as well? Could the soul of Inanna have returned to us seeking revenge?"

"No," Mathilde protested without looking up. Dominic was stooped over her, cradling her in his arms and his wings. "There was no evil in her, I swear it!"

"Who knew?" Michael demanded. "Which of you knew Blanche's True Name?"

"O-only a few, lord," quavered Tirgit, refusing to meet his eyes.

"*You* knew?" He was angrier than he had been in years, intoxicated by the rage gathering in his veins. His aura burned, as if it yearned to smite and destroy.

Tirgit stared up at him, blue-green eyes wide and tearful. "Lady Cecilia said it was for your own good not to know."

"And you were able to keep this from me in our blood-bond?" Michael said with slow menace.

Tirgit tried to shrink back, and was stopped by the chair's rigid skeleton. "I—I didn't want to upset you."

"How were you able to do this?" Michael growled, his fingers twitching. He had a sudden flash of how his palm would feel, connecting with her cheek, and his fingers twitched.

Tirgit flinched. "Lady Cecilia taught me, when we were on the Silk Road. I would share blood with her at—at night when she had her bad dreams. So I could comfort her."

His rage receded, leaving behind shame like a sea-wrack strewn on a beach. She wasn't to blame, he told himself. Not

if Cecilia had ordered her to keep silent. "Who else knows?" Michael asked, again.

"Mathilde, Mother Sharibet, Grandmother Philomena—she's the elder at the Constantinople House, Lady Cecilia, and Matthias, Master of the Liege House. He was ordered to send regular reports on her." Tirgit stopped speaking for a moment, as if thinking, then added, "And me, of course, because I met Blanche in Ypres and wanted to become friends with her. Lady Cecilia warned me away, for—for my own good," she concluded, uncertainly.

"Roland knows, also," Mathilde said, her voice muffled. "I had to tell him."

So, Honoria's suspicion about Blanche's true parentage was proved correct, after all. Why else would their handsome cousin have had to take the cross so urgently, all those years ago? "Blanche is his child, isn't she?" he asked his sister. His sweet, adulterous sister.

Mathilde nodded, and Michael felt an absurd sense of disappointment. He should have guessed, and yet, he had thought better of both of them.

"Is there anything else that Cecilia ordered you to keep from me, *for my own good*?" Michael asked Tirgit aloud, infusing those last words with deep bitterness.

Tirgit shook her head, covering her face with her hands, and Michael relented. "So, what we have here is evidence that a geas was placed upon the memories of my Transformation to keep us from examining them too closely," he said. "And Mathilde is also suffering under a geas, which

dates from her visit to Constantinople, and which seems to have been placed by either Cecilia or Dominic."

Mathilde spoke up again, her words slow and thick with pain. "Dominic never knew about ... I never told him. He had no reason to place a geas on me."

"If Cecilia substituted Sir Jean's memories for Michael's real memories of that night," said Dominic, "how is it that Sir Jean, the possessor of the original memories, was allowed to live? *I* would have done away with him," he said, with matter-of-fact ruthlessness.

"As to that," said Sir Jean, leaning forward a little. "There *were* a number of attacks against me while I was Master of the House in Acre. Poisoned sweetmeats at one banquet—it's a fortunate thing that I don't like marzipan much." His attempt at humor fell flat, so he continued more prosaically: "There was an attempted knifing just after Mass a few weeks later," Jean continued, rubbing his left side, "I always blamed the D'Orias—rival Genovese merchants—because our House was allied with the Venetians."

"Now that you mention it, the attempts on your life didn't start until after Lord Michael's Transformation," Alais interjected. She subsided with an unhappy sigh. "I hope our vengeance against Giorgio D'Oria and his family was not misdirected."

"Oh, we had plenty of other wrongs to lay at their door, my dear," Sir Jean assured her.

Mathilde swayed a little in her chair. Dominic put a steadying hand on her shoulder, and she reached to place her hand on top of his. "Lady Cecilia is responsible for the

geases," she said, her voice reduced to a thin whisper. "She was the only one with a credible motive, the opportunity to weave them, and the skill to do so. After all, Ereshkigal was the one who originally discovered how to breach the gates of death, and how to lift the veil of past-life memories. It stands to reason that she can also manipulate those memories." She bowed her aching head. "I wish it was not so. I trusted her."

"We all did," Michael said. "Now we have to make her answer for her deeds."

Tirgit gasped, and Michel saw her press her hands to her mouth. He understood his consort's distress—after all, Cecilia had been her protector, her foster-mother, and her goddess. But when she spoke, her words made Michel's heart sink. "Our son," she wailed. "She's got Robert. What should we do now?"

"We could fly there and steal Robert from the Malaga House—" he said immediately, boiling with the need to do *something*, to be more than Cecilia's pawn.

But before he could expound on his plan, Dominic interrupted. "Tirgit, daughter," he said gently from his place at Mathilde's side. "The only thing we *can* do at this point is to use Mathilde's skills to uncover whatever it is that Cecilia tried to hide. What we discover will determine our next course of action."

"And," added Sir Jean, "It will also determine the fate of the House. That we may have been living in falsehood and deception—it's unthinkable, and it will cause great turmoil. You can see now why the council of elders required such strict secrecy from us."

"I will do my utmost to uncover the truth," Mathilde promised.

How many more truths can I bear, before they poison me? thought Michel.

* * * *

Tirgit waited alone in the room she had been sharing with Lord Michael. Her clothes, her cosmetics, and the small packet of correspondence she had collected on her progress lay packed for travel by the door. She had been weeping for the last hour. Now she sat, pretending to be composed, waiting for her lord to come and deliver his judgment.

She had sinned against him, so many times. Now all her sins and secrets had been bared—or almost all.

It was growing dark when she heard his footsteps approach their door. His door. She had no right to call it hers any longer. Her hands twisted into knots in her skirt. She forced them to relax, and hopped off the edge of the bed to stand respectfully. She clasped her hands at her waist and bowed as he entered.

"What—? Tirgit?" At least he wasn't shouting at her already.

From the deepest angle of her bow, she forced herself to say in the old language of the House, "Lord, I have trespassed against your favor. I await your judgment."

He didn't answer right away. Her hopes fell, and her body began to shake as she held her bow, her forehead nearly touching her knees.

Then he sighed, sounding sad and tired. "Rise, younger sister."

She squeezed her eyes shut to dam her fresh tears, and obeyed. He looked the same as he sounded. Weary. Grieving.

A tear slipped from her eye despite her promises to herself.

"Cecilia told you not to speak. How could you disobey her? How can I reproach you for obedience?"

"That's—that's not all I kept from you, lord."

Michael stared, his face unreadable. "Robert's not my son?"

Shocked, she looked at him squarely. "How can you ask me that? Of course Robert is yours. I had not lain with any man but you since Lord Dominic Found me!" Then she bit her lip. "But the one I did lay with..."

"Also enjoined you from speaking about it. Cecilia?"

She nodded, shamefaced. "I would not have kept it from you. I was glad to offer her comfort in any way she wished, She and Lord Dominic saved my life. It was my honor to serve her. But she felt..."

"I didn't need to know?"

"She felt," Tirgit gathered her courage, "that since your Raising and Naming was ... imperfect, that it would bring you less pain and confusion if you didn't have to—"

"Face the fact that while I was sleeping with you both, you were sleeping with each other?"

"Not while," she said. "But, before."

"I stand corrected." He rubbed his forehead. "Have we any drink here?"

"Yes, lord!" She scurried to bring him a freshly sealed jar, and stood waiting to serve him further.

"You drink, too, Tirgit," he said with far more kindness than she expected. It made her want to weep again. She got another jar for herself, and broke the seal only after he broke his. They drank, and he made her sit next to him on the bed.

"Is there anything else you need to tell me? You wrote me about Lyon."

She hiccupped in dread. "I don't—I don't know why he died. I thought I was doing just as I ought, and that it was happening because he was a first-lifer—but when he *died*—"

Michael put his arm around her, to calm her shaking.

"I felt—" She clung to him. "My lord. Now know why so few djinni survive the ax. I wanted—I *want* to feel that way again. His death—" her voice dropped to a whisper, "was the sweetest food of all. I didn't know what was happening. But I wanted it to never stop. How can I face the kin, knowing that—"

"You want to eat them? Welcome to the life of the djinni, Tirgit. I tried to shelter you from this knowledge for as long as I could. I'm sorry you learned it all alone. But you have kept your promises to the kin. You have not taken any blood not willingly given. You have done well."

She gulped. "But I drank Sir Jean's blood in the way of djinni. I didn't mean to, but ... he was more than willing and once I realized what he thought I meant, he would have been insulted if I had not ... My lord, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Michael stared, looking amazed and a bit disgusted. "Slow down. You lay with *Sir Jean*?"

"I didn't mean to! It was a misunderstanding, but if I hadn't, I might not ever have found the memory. Please forgive me. I stand ready to accept your judgment."

"Ah, Tirgit," Michael said, rocking back and forth. "Here is my judgment. You are a queen among djinni and I am not worthy of you."

She sighed. "You don't need to say that. I know you don't love me. How can you, when Lord Dominic is so ... so..."

"Tirgit. You are my consort. I do ... love Lord Dominic," Michael coughed, as if he'd only just realized what he'd said. "I miss Menelaos. But we can't..."

"I don't mind if you want to spend time with him, and..."

"I mind! He's married to my sister!"

"Only in the way of the world." She dared to lean closer to him. "If she didn't mind, and I didn't mind..."

His posture stiffened. "It would still be wrong."

"My lord," she sighed. "Then may I stay with you?"

"Of course!" He looped his arm around her waist.

She relaxed, and put her head on his shoulder. "Then when can we go fetch Robert? I want him back. I want him to be safe."

"As soon as we can, sweetheart. I want him back, too."

She played with the curling hair at his nape. "Will you lie with me, in the way of djinni, lord?"

"I will, mine own sweetheart, if you will call me Michael."

"Michael," she breathed. And then they were too busy to talk.

* * * *

The deep tolling of the dovecote bell echoed through the courtyard, announcing the arrival of an important message. He and Tirgit dressed hastily, and followed the crowd of onlookers into Villeroze-sur-Orb's great hall to hear the news.

The red-bordered ribbon of paper bore a message as brief as it was shocking:

Sent 9th Muharram AH 669 (August 28, AD 1270) from Nuha, True Name Sa-Taltal, Grandmother of Tunis House to all the kin of the Rose. Forward instantly. The Cursed One, True Name Inanna, Transformed. Protector Arjumand, True Name Enlil, suborned and cast out. Tunis House destroyed. Master Farid, True Name Shul-zi, and bird-keeper Ismail, True Name Ismat, murdered. Extreme danger. Execute both renegades on sight.

In the dim, stuffy confines of the parlor, crowded with too many anxious bodies, Michael tried to absorb the entirety of the news as the last echoes of Sir Jean's voice fell into the hushed kin ... *Blanche, a djinniah? Roland, cast out and under sentence of death? Why would he destroy what he had sworn to protect?*

He heard Mathilde's choked cry, and saw her crumple. *The geas!* He lunged forward, ready to catch her, but Dominic, standing at her side, swept her up in his arms.

All around him, Michael heard the rising murmur of horrified speculation. "Is *she* coming here?" "Why else would four Protectors be waiting here?" "How long have they known?" "Why didn't they tell us?"

Accusing stares turned his way, but Michael was too preoccupied with his sister's state to give them much heed. Her face was dead white against the blue of Dominic's tunic, and her aura fluttered as if she were dying.

"Lord?" Lady Alais caught his sleeve.

"I knew nothing of this," he snapped, shaking her off. Forestalling further questions, he followed Dominic out of the hall. Behind him, he could hear Tirgit, conciliatory as ever, trying to offer explanations to the kin without revealing the truth about the memory tampering.

She was so skilled in balancing on that knife-edge of obeying edicts and keeping secrets while still appearing guileless. She would prosper as a djinniah, thought Michael without bitterness, and remain his consort for a long time to come.

As he followed in Dominic's wake, Michael knew they had to hasten in finding whatever it was that Cecilia had wanted to badly to conceal. All too soon, he might be called upon to take up arms not only against Cecilia, their hidden enemy, but also against Arjumand, who had once been like an older brother to him. And Blanche, his beloved niece, was also Dominic's oldest friend.

Queen of Heaven, already you divide us.

Chapter Sixteen

Holy [Inanna] spoke to the minister Isimud: "How could my father have changed what he said to me? How could he have altered his promise as far as I am concerned? How could he have discredited his important words to me? Was it falsehood that my father said to me, did he speak falsely to me?"—"Inanna and Enki," c.1.3.1, (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Saturday, September 13, AD 1270:

They made it all the way to Konia before Roland was ready establish a blood bond with Blanche and tell her his secret.

Arjumand abd al Warda was well-known in this town, and the House here might be keeping watch for them in the city inns. But they couldn't watch all of the caravanserais. Lodging in one should be safe enough.

Blanche had learned all he could teach her about controlling her aura, calling lightning, and channeling flame. She had equaled or surpassed his skills so quickly that she was living proof that the Apkallu had not been diminished by time alone, and his old suspicions returned.

The blood bond, despite his reservations, was vital to their success. It would be easier if Blanche spoke fluent Arabic, Turkish, and Greek. To learn those lessons, she would need to share his memories.

He was almost ready. He paid for a reasonably clean room. Bought a lamb for their supper. Chatted idly until she went to sleep. He knew he was just putting it off out of fear. She

would see everything—everything in his blood that he didn't want her to see. His pettiness. His mistakes. Sharibet ... Mathilde...

But squeamishness and embarrassment had no weight against the coming confrontation. Blanche must be armed with every truth. There was no more room for lies, even if she hated him afterwards.

He let his worries go for a while, watching her sleep. He cherished these moments, which might be the last he ever spent with her if she took his revelations amiss, or if their planned meeting with Sharibet failed its purpose. He waited, and watched. One night could last forever.

* * * *

Blanche woke to the golden glow of a single oil lamp. That was plenty of light to see Cousin Roland reclining on thick pillows, beautifully embroidered in reds and blues in a repeating, angular motif. He was watching her with wistful longing, but dropped his gaze as soon as he noticed her regard.

It was not, thank God, the same kind of longing her father-in-law had shown, nor had Roland said or done a single unseemly thing during the time they had spent together, or she would never have stayed with him. She asked, "Is it time?"

He nodded. "This is the way that Apkallu speak, mind-to-mind. I will taste your blood, and you will taste mine. It will allow you to learn what you need to know—languages, customs, anything I know." He squirmed, and stopped

himself. "Also ... I don't want you to be surprised by anything that Sharibet might reveal."

She slipped into the silence of his next breath, speaking aloud her own worst fear, the thought that had been troubling her this past fortnight. "That you're not merely my cousin?" She had started speaking before she had fully decided to, but once she was embarked on it, she kept on going. "That you're ... perhaps ... my father?"

His mouth tightened, and his gaze dropped. But he met her eyes levelly, only an instant later. "Yes," he said simply. "I loved your mother very much. But she was married..."

Blanche felt dizzy, as if the tiled floor of the caravanserai had cracked open. "So, she *was* an adulteress! Maman—" she heard her voice break, "I didn't want to believe it, when first I thought it because she was always so *good*, and she always spoke so affectionately of Papa. But Maman sinned with you, and betrayed him!"

Blanche's jaw muscles knotted with the effort it took to control her dismay. Even if she had suspected it, the truth still hurt. *Maman!*

"I'm sorry." Roland bowed his head. "I loved her," he said again. His gaze grew distant, as if he stared into the past, or at memories too painful to touch. "I always wanted to claim you as my own. I always wished to be your father. When I learned of your relationship to the House, I suborned their watchers to ensure I always knew what happened to you."

Ah, she thought. The visiting merchants, with their pins and their inks and their papers. They always seemed so interested in me—now I know why.

"I hated the law that constrained me from contacting you," Roland said. "When your husband fell ill, I knew you would need aid, so I came. I couldn't help myself."

"And turned me into a monster," she said bitterly, and saw him flinch.

"I never meant to—" He stopped, obviously fighting for control, his hands clenched into fists. "We're not monsters, Blanche, unless we choose to be. We're just ... fallen gods."

The lamplight gilded his face, and the cloth of his turban. He looked as lost as she felt, and his expression reminded her that for her sake, he had exiled himself from his home among the people of the Rose. Pity stirred in her, and she amended, "Not monsters, then. I apologize, but the shock of this news..." She studied him, trying to imagine her mother at an age younger than Blanche was now, kissing this beautiful young man.

It felt both horribly wrong, and horribly plausible.

"Papa—my mother's husband—" her breath hitched despite her best efforts. "No, I *will* call him Papa, for Maman always said he was a good and loving father to me when I was a babe, even if your blood gave me life. I'm glad he never knew the truth."

"And what of me?" Roland asked, softly. "Do you hate me, now? Will—will you leave me? I would understand if you decided to have nothing further to do with me."

Did she want to part ways with him? Blanche closed her eyes, thinking about it. He had taught her much since they met, but there was so much left to learn. He was a good man—she had seen that much in his words and actions. And

she did not want to make her way home alone. "My own hands are not entirely clean," she confessed. "As you will no doubt see, shortly. I think it would be best if I acknowledged you as a cousin. We do look to be the same age, after all."

"Thank you." His smile was dazzling. "Oh, thank you, Blanche, dearest daughter!"

If he smiled like that at Maman ... She fixed him with a look, waiting for him to begin the sharing of blood, and frowned when he continued to hesitate. "I will stay with you *unless* you renege on your promises," she added.

He gave a huffing laugh. "I'm nerving myself up to it."

"I can see that. What must we do?"

"Many djinni initiate this bond in the act of love." He hurried to add, "It is not necessary to do it that way."

"I'm relieved to hear it."

"Give me your hand. I'll bite your finger, then you bite mine."

"Is that all? No magic words? No potions?"

His mouth twitched. "The blood is the magic. It is the potion."

She held out her hand, glad it wasn't trembling grossly. "I promise you," she said solemnly, "whatever you see in my blood, whatever I see in yours, I will remain your ... friend." She had said it mostly to ensure his cooperation, but realized it was true.

He blinked, as if holding back tears. "Blanche," he groaned.

She held out her hand to him again. "Quickly, before I change my mind."

He grasped her wrist. His hands were soft, his fingers had very few scars, but his previously neat fingernails were dirty and ragged from their journey.

She left her hand limp in his grasp. His lips touched her ring finger. His teeth stung for a moment. She felt him pull on the wound, like a baby suckling. He trembled all over, and she wondered what he was seeing. Would she have any secrets left, after this?

He held her arm so tightly that she worried he would never let go. But he did let go, dropping her hand abruptly, leaning back against the stone wall. He licked her finger clean.

Now it was her turn. She held out her hand for his, and he laid his hand in hers, palm up, fingers loose. She bent over it, wondering how it would taste. She could tell the difference between blood from lambs and hares, kids and chickens. What would the blood of an Apkallu be like?

What secrets would she learn? And did she really want to know them or not? She smiled inwardly at that thought. Of course she wanted to know!

She drew his finger to her lips, kissed it gently, felt the rest of his fingers tremble against her cheek, and she bit down. The blood welled into her mouth immediately, sweet as peaches warmed in summer sunshine. She swallowed it, a mouthful only, and spasmed with—pain? Delight? Sexual fulfillment? She couldn't tell.

In her mind, in her soul, a bond formed. There was mass to it, though it had no weight at all. The texture was like the fur of a purring cat, or a mantle of downy feathers. She savored joy. She had been so lonely...

And then within her mind, as if before her eyes, she saw the pictures form. *Sharibet, small and naked, rising above him in the act of love, saying "Oh, yes, you're mine," as he gasps, subsiding. He's so tired he can't open his eyes. He feels her breath, her kisses, cool against his neck. "Forever?" he whispers, on the edge of the gulf of sleep.*

And then, without any transition, another scene: *A spacious square room with brass urns of unusual shape, high windows screened with an intricate grille, and even more intricately decorated ceiling, one straight chair, and cushions on the floor. A man sits beside Roland, his bare forearm held in Roland's two shaking hands. "Now bite," commands the man.*

She made that memory stop going forward, and examined it more closely. There was something about that bare-armed man ... Roland's memory supplied his name: *Dominic*. Or was it Menelaos? It was confusing, so she studied what she could see: every part of his silk-clad, barefoot body was perfectly proportioned yet subtly out of kilter. A white stripe ran dramatically through his black hair from his slight widow's peak along the centerline of his skull. The memory of pain seemed etched into his eyes, which were gray as stormclouds. His half-curved smile, if deepened, would develop an indentation beside his mouth into a full dimple. If he ever truly smiled.

So, who was that man, who stirred feelings that were not memories, but ever-present aches that had never left her, since forever?

Soft skin, warm against his lips, is a delicious shock. "Now bite," commands the man. Obediently, Roland's newly-sharp teeth pierce that softness. The first salty drops well up. The taste is like smoke, fragrant and bitter at the same time. And the images, as in Sharibet's blood, are appalling: A gray-eyed little boy, examining his serious reflection in a bronze mirror. A line of cavalry, in unfamiliar armor and riding without stirrups, charges with silver-shining spears, shouting "Alexandros!" ... A brown-haired woman lies dead on a blood-soaked pallet as another woman—Sharibet—says: "She has gone to the Underworld, and taken the baby with her."

She knew him. She knew who he was, this grey-eyed warrior, and her heart broke from the weight of her loneliness. This was her knight, her friend, her Nin—her Ninsh—

Ninshubur. Roland's voice echoed in her mind.

Ninshubur is his True Name.

Oh, yes! It was as if she had always known that, always known him. Always trusted him. Always missed him. Her right arm. Her shield. Her friend.

She took Roland's memories of him for her own: *Abu. Father. Umm. Mother. Word after word with its meaning. Pronunciation. Sentences. How to address a woman. Two women ... Scrap by scrap, an entire edifice of knowledge, each piece accompanied by a discrete memory of when he had first learned the word and understood its concept.*

Suddenly there was another shift. *Another room, dim, cool, filled with flowers. Cecilia's radiant wings fill the chamber almost to its height. "It is good to meet again," she*

says "I remember you, Lost one. You are now Found. You are Apkallu, and my kinsman. I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?" His knees knock, but this is his only chance. "Lady, I will not." Her face restrains rage under the calm sweetness of its habitual expression.

And another room: red walls and an ancient smell, full of the brightness of Apkallu wings and tapestried pillows. Roland sees Cecilia's aura change shape, becoming a great sword formed of silver light, darting toward him. Reacting quickly, he raises his wings to block her, but she is strong. Incredibly strong, and blue fire sparks along the edge of his aura as he flies backwards, landing on his back, the impact muffled and cushioned by thick carpet. Quick as a pouncing leopard, she's on him, and it is all he can do to keep that sword—now shrunk to the size of a dagger—from plunging into his forehead. "Is this your precious tradition?" he growls. "What of my consent! Or are your desires above the laws that bind us?"

She followed more traces of memory. There, in Roland's memory, but buried, unknown to him: Marcus's memories. Huddling in a burned-out shell of apartment flats, his sister's frightened face easing as she sleeps, returning to its pinched, worried expression as she awakens from a dream ... And later, in a room painted red, with a high window letting in breezes from the garden, Marcus and Sharibet share a dance of intertwined limbs, fevered endearments, caresses and thoughts felt as one...

She raced through those memories, the knowledge of old Greek and archaic Latin flowing into her along with Marcus's

memories; Sharibet's memories; Dominic's memories; and a dozen other djinni who shared blood with Roland. She stopped, shocked and spellbound, when she saw what Roland had seen in Kobegun's memories: *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 ...* She recognized herself in Kobegun's memory, though she was different, dark-haired and brown-skinned, wearing a crown of golden leaves and carnelian blossoms.

Energized, she scoured Roland's memories for more traces of herself. And she found them: *"It's falling," she says, dazed. She falls too, feeling the earth jump and buckle as the stone collides with earth...*

"It's falling!" she said again. She felt herself spiraling down, sucked into the memory of death.

"No, no, Blanche, don't!" Roland cried out, by mind and voice. "Come back to me. Come out of there! Open your eyes. Look at me! Feel my touch!" The soft caress of his aura touched her face, neck, arms, sides, legs, and wings. "Come back! Don't die!"

She opened her eyes, feeling sleepy and sick, and safe, all at the same time.

"Praise God!" he whispered. "What did you see?"

Wonderful things. Terrible things, she answered, too tired to open her mouth and speak. Sleep—overwhelmed with all she had just seen and experienced second-hand, she

craved the solace of sleep. *Will it be like this, from now on?
We have to share every thought, every experience?*

Just one more lesson: how to close the link between us.
And he showed her how to do it without speaking.

* * * *

Roland slept for an hour or so, resting for the next ordeal.
He woke before Blanche did, in predawn darkness. Outside, in
the town, the call to Fajr prayers was being proclaimed, and
the guests of the caravanserai rustled into their personal
prayers, or snored.

Blanche came awake all at once, sitting up. "Now? Now
you'll return my memories?"

"Well, um," he said. "Actually ... no."

She didn't answer right away, but the warmth of the room
drained away until only a cold, angry chill remained. "You
promised. You said 'When you can throw fire and lightning
with your aura, then I'll risk it.' I can do those things now!"

"But you almost died last night from a memory of dying!
There's more going on here than we know. I'm sorry."

She turned her back on him. "You don't know that would
happen. If I had all my memories, all my powers..."

"You remain vulnerable to death. I won't do it."

"Then I will," she said, driving spikes of frozen terror
through him. "I learned how to do this from your memories."

Opening his Seer's Eyes, he saw her hand of air, red as
blood, aim for the Raising and Naming mark above her
forehead. Instantly he reached for her with his physical hands
and body, arm wrestling with her hands of air, trying to

protect her mark. *Fool!* he sent to her. *You can't Raise and Name yourself!*

How do you know? she responded, squirming in body and aura, creating more hands from her own substance, fighting him off, and reaching again for her mark. *Just because it hasn't been done, doesn't mean it *can't* be done!*

No, no no! He lay atop her, pinning her with his weight. In terror for her, he held her down, hissing aloud now, "Stop! Stop! Stop it! Don't do this! Please don't do this!"

But she kept fighting, writhing. He couldn't make her stop. She wouldn't listen to him, but she wasn't trying to get at her mark anymore. She was trying to kill him!

He let her pummel him, scratch and claw, burn him, and raise lightning against him. He took and absorbed the pain she caused. He only wanted her to be quiet, and safe, but she was wild with rage and grief, her face wet with tears.

She screamed at him, and pushed with all her strength. He wouldn't, couldn't budge, not until she stopped. "Blanche, hush, now, hush. Rest easy. Stop."

At some point her inarticulate cries changed to definite words. "Get off me! Get off!" Her blue eyes were still wild, but fearful now, rather than angry. "*Please.*"

Roland remembered what he had seen in her memories, and cursed himself for reminding her of ... that. And what else could she be thinking of, when he lay across her, restraining her? He rose cautiously to his knees, keeping one hand of air around her mark for protection. "Will you rest now? Will you stop this?"

"All right." Her aura was boiling with strong emotion.

He rolled away, exhausted, torn between conflicting desires and fear that she might have lied, and would resume her effort anyway. But some minutes passed, and she did not.

"Why did you stop me?" Her voice was ragged.

It hurt him to hear her so defeated, but he knew she would not have survived the attempt. When he told her so, she laughed wildly.

"You can't know until you try!"

"I can't let you die from the test! Give over!"

She aimed to hit him one more time and he pinned her hand of air to the carpet, angry himself now, and willing to cause her pain, if she would only learn this lesson. "Don't test me again on this," he warned. "I'm not going to let you kill yourself."

"You would rather leave me defenseless when we go up against Sharibet and her House?" she asked, dully.

"You're bigger and stronger than she is," he replied. "And I'll be with you."

"But I want to *know!*" she wailed.

"I understand, I do," he said. "But first, I have to talk to Sharibet. We'll head for Constantinople at sunset, and fly there overnight. Will I have to guard you, or can I get more sleep?"

"You can sleep," she said, sighing. She rolled over, curling in upon herself. "I've slept enough."

He hated the sound of tears in her voice. But she still spoke. She still breathed. It was enough.

Chapter Seventeen

...when [Inanna] has entered the abzu and Eridug, offer her butter cake to eat. Let her be served cool refreshing water. Pour beer for her, in front of the Lions' Gate, make her feel as if she is in her girlfriend's house ... "Inanna and Enki," c.1.3.1, (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

Saturday, September 13, AD 1270:

The flight from Konia to Constantinople, though both of them made their best speed, was leisurely compared to his frantic pursuit of Kobegun and Nadira nearly a decade ago. While they flew, Roland made Blanche practice her mind-shields and mind-to-mind communications at different volumes and distances. She was an expert flyer by now, a shimmering rose-colored star in the heavenly firmament. Or perhaps a planet, since she was actually moving...

He damned Sharibet for having taught him too much. And having no patience for nonsense, so that he could not even entertain nonsense in the privacy of his own thoughts anymore.

Well, soon he would see whether Sharibet's opinion would carry any weight with him ever again.

* * * *

It was the last hour before dawn. There was a storm boiling over the Black Sea to the north as they slanted down through the cool upper air towards the Queen of Cities. Roland felt as well as saw the lightning flashes illuminating

distant, towering clouds, giving the impression of giant servants, lighting candles that flickered immediately out. The city blinked into view as the bolts struck from cloud to cloud. There were the enormous Imperial buildings—then they were gone. The churches, somewhat refurbished in the last ten years since Michael Paleologus had retaken the city from the Franks, glinted gold and bright. Then they disappeared into the dark swathes of ruination from past tragic ages.

When we get there, how will you introduce me? Blanche asked at last.

I think it's too dangerous to come with me. Will you stay there until I call you? He pointed down toward the Hagia Sophia crouching in the darkness, its bulk mocked by the perfection of its domes. There was a flat edge of square roof around the highest and largest dome. A continuous, faintly glowing path of windows transmitted the radiance of Presence lamps within.

No! Her anger boiled through their blood-bond.

He waited, circling around the huge church.

You can't exclude me! she protested. *I need to see this woman who's been blackening my name, to see why she's been telling these lies about me.*

I only want to protect you.

Then help me to protect myself.

Come with me for a moment. He alighted on the church's the roof.

As Blanche set down, she joked, "Too bad they don't have gargoyles here. I could pretend to be one."

He thought, but did not say, *You're too pretty to be a gargoyle*. His idyll was over. They had to go. But his feet stayed planted on the little patch of roof. He couldn't leave yet. He had one more thing to say.

He took Blanche's hands into his own, cold fingers. "Blanche, my dearest daughter. I know this might go without saying, but I—can't go without saying it." God's Nails, his voice was shaking. What a fool he was! "Whatever happens, whatever has happened, I want you to know that I love you. I have only ever wanted your happiness.

"Being able to know you, and spend time with you, even for this brief span of days, has been ... the happiest time of my life." He coughed. "I'm sorry—no, actually I don't know that I'm sorry for having dragged you back into the miserable affairs of this House, but I am glad—so glad—to have known you. I think, though I don't precisely remember, that I have missed you for a very long time. And I mean to make it possible for you to regain your place amongst us, to heal the wounds that—"

"Stop," she said. "You're getting maudlin." She smiled, though tears shone in her eyes. "Let's go see if she knew, or not."

They stepped off the edge of the roof and flew down toward the House of the Rose.

* * * *

The air was chilly and damp but it was not yet raining here. With her Seer's Eyes, Blanche saw a glow coming from the city. There must be so many people here! Even though

she could see no individual aura, shining in the dark, the presence of so many lives, plant, animal, and human, gave this area its own eerie illumination.

She tested her mental shields. They were firmly in place.

Roland swooped toward the courtyard of a big old building, hovered a moment, then stepped down into a third-story loggia. She followed him, her heart beating hard. He turned right and started walking. She hurried after, through a doorway, down a flight of stairs, until they came to another door. Sleeping before the door on a mat was a honey-skinned young man.

Sleep! Roland commanded, sweeping a violet-edged wing over the man's head. The young man's breathing deepened. Roland tried the latch, but it was locked. His aura penetrated the door, and it opened without a sound. They slipped into the chamber within.

An overpowering scent of roses assaulted her nose, fortunately not a stench of old, dead, roses. That had been the odor around the royal pavilion, the first and only time she had been presented to the King of France.

"Sharibet, wake up," he whispered as he bent over her low couch.

Watching from behind Roland, in the light of his aura, and hers, Blanche saw that the tiny woman was beautiful of face and figure, but she drooled in her sleep just like anybody else.

Sharibet's eyelids twitched. She opened her eyes and touched Roland's face. "*Mon coeur*, what did you do to your

hair?" And then she stiffened and tried to pull away as she came further awake. "What are you doing here?"

Roland pinned her down with his aura, imprisoning her.

Sharibet's gaze shot to Blanche, and then to the door.

"What have you done with Georgio?"

"He's unharmed. I'm not quite the fool you think me."

"I never thought you a fool. Merely willfully blind."

Sharibet's voice was cold. "Why have you brought *her* here?"

"We have a few questions for you, Sharibet, my dear," he said calmly.

Sharibet's eyes opened wide. "Ask away. I do not promise to answer ... anything."

"I know what your promises are worth, sweet Sharibet."

Again that calm tone, so different from the slightly awkward, rushed way he often spoke to Blanche. *He's angry*, she thought. *That's three times he's used her name.*

"I've read the memories in her blood," Roland was saying. "And her memories differ from the accounts given by the House. Can you explain this?"

"Without knowing what differences you saw? Of course not!"

"Then let me show you." He opened the bridge between his mind and Sharibet's, and included Blanche in the link, showing the truth from Inanna's memories of the giant rock that smashed the world. And then Roland shared a memory that was new to Blanche, although she recognized its ownership: it was her own, like a tapestry once-woven, its colors faded now.... *She stands within an underground room, tiled in blue and mother-of-pearl, hands bound in golden*

chains. All save one of her brothers and sisters stand before her. Only Ereshkigal is not present.

"Inanna, you have been charged with bestowing divinity upon men, of sharing our sacred fire. What say you?" cries Utu.

She 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!"

Enlil, 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!" A boom in the distance sounds like the back of the world, breaking. The earth shakes, the walls heave, and bricks rain down. As she feels her city shatter, Inanna's anger burns. *How can you do this? I created you all!*

Pain spoke, saying: *forgetfulness*. It said: *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.*

With a start, Blanche realized that fire had sprung up everywhere; within, without, surrounding them. Sharibet flared like an oil lamp, her silken coverlet smoldering, her wiry hair crinkling and knotting. She hissed like boiling water

as Roland covered her aura with his, drawing the flame into himself, driving it away...

The exercises Roland had made Blanche practice during their flight came back to her in a rush. Extending her aura to its limit, focusing the flame at the very tips of her fingers of air, refusing to die or go into shock from the pain ... In another breath, the flames died. Pain lessened, and in a few breaths, she had calmed sufficiently to see how Roland was doing.

Roland was even more soot-streaked and smudged than before. He held Sharibet in his arms like a pale golden doll. The short stubble on his head was a layer of black soot, leaving him bald once more. His lips moved, but no sound emerged from them.

The chamber reeked of smoke. A jar by Sharibet's couch had burst from the heat, and burned, cooked blood dripped in a jellied mess.

Sharibet hiccupped against Roland's scorched chest. *What have you done? Oh, Lady, what have you done?*

Is she speaking to me? wondered Blanche. But no, Sharibet was weeping while Roland held her tenderly.

What do you mean? Blanche asked, without pity, through the link she shared with Roland. *Do you know what just happened? What was it? Who did it to us?*

Ereshkigal. Sharibet's mental voice whispered. *She laid this geas. It is why only she may raise and name Apkallu.*

I was certain you were deep in her counsel, and warded against this danger, said Roland.

*Apparently not so deep. Even I ... * The depth of betrayal in that short speech shocked Blanche. She turned away to give Sharibet a moment of private grief, and to ensure that no one waited outside the door to this opulent room, now much the worse for wear.

But Roland pressed for more. *Did you know? Sharibet, did you know the lies you told?*

I never saw or heard what happened in the Council hall of Inanna's city on the plain, said Sharibet. *I was with my lady, on the clifftop. When the dam broke, I heard it crack, I heard her scream. She said, later, that it was Inanna's doing. I believed her then. I was far from Ur, in Nippur, when the Fire from Heaven fell. I was keeping your temple there, the Ekur, the Mountain House ... * Sharibet sniffled. *When the gods died then, and my children as their priests died too, the new priests usurped our power. My lady and I formed the House anew, and began our covenants with the Apkallu, our gods, reborn. I believed her explanation. What need had she to lie? But not a week ago I received an alarming report from Alais, Mistress of the farm in Villerose-sur-Orb, near Beziers, relating a charge of tampering with memory regarding the Transformation, by force, of Michael de La Roche-en-Ardenne. It now seems true, that she has broken our covenant to keep the memories inviolate.* She wept again, briefly.

Then you believe Inanna's innocence! Roland said.

Never that, Sharibet replied, cynically. *You would not remember, but I was there, before the Flood. I knew the gods

of old. Innocence was never in a one of you. Nor mercy. Only hunger, partially appeased. And curiosity.*

But she's done nothing to the House since then. She's been Forgotten not seven generations, but more than seven times seven generations of penance for a deed she's not even guilty of! I want her reinstated, her name cleared of its curse. Roland's breath came hard. *Tell your children to lift their ban. Restore Inanna's shattered crown.*

I can't.

*Why not? You say your House is founded on truth. You've seen the lie. *Why not?**

The enmity is Ereshkigal's. I cannot mend her heart. She's the one who has taught generations of my children to hate and fear Inanna's name. I dare not go against her power.

Roland sagged, leaning his cheek against her scorched hair. *I counted on your help.*

Can you stay neutral? Blanche interjected, remembering her mother's skills at bargaining. *Will you call off your dogs? Or leash them so we may travel freely? I have children, too. I want them to live. Give us time to reach them, shelter and sustenance at Houses along the route, and a cease-fire till we can confront Ereshkigal and make her answer for her crimes.*

No shelter! No sustenance! Sharibet responded. *You have harmed the House in Tunis by burning it to the ground. My children there are homeless now, their Master and their pigeon-keeper dead.*

Farid poisoned himself in his attempt to kill me, Roland said. *They set the fire themselves.*

Nevertheless, they acted per the law. 'Whosoever aids...'

From the corridor outside the room footsteps pattered and stopped. Blanche rushed to the door, opened it quickly, carried the one outside into the room, one hand of air over thin, aged lips. The woman was old, wrinkled as a crumpled sheet, white hair loose as fog down to her waist.

"Philomena!" Roland said.

Blanche loosened her hand of air.

"Lord Arjumand!" said the old woman. "What have you done! They say you've taken up with—" The old woman stared at Blanche, who was holding her with hands of air. "The Cursed One!"

Blanche showed her teeth. The old lady was courageous. She showed hers back. And spoke: "I couldn't sleep, and then smelled smoke! No one else came by to check? Mother Sharibet? Are you all right?"

Blanche would have laughed, to hear the crone call the seeming-girl "Mother." But she'd seen the stair-stepped temple, too. Ekur, the Mountain House, Sharibet's memory from millennia ago...

"I'm well enough, Philomena. Alive, which is a blessing, tonight."

"Has the Cursed One harmed you?"

Brave old lady! "I've done nothing, mother," Blanche spoke up for herself. "My hair is singed, too."

"So it is. But why?"

"The great ones fight amongst themselves like stallions in springtime," said Sharibet. "Our gods are on the brink of civil

war, and these two wish me to stay neutral. What's your advice?"

"May every war pass by our House! Let them fight, so long as they do so outside our walls, and cause no harm. Let those who harm the House pay our penalty."

"Simple advice, not so simply followed. You," Sharibet spoke to Blanche. "I promise nothing of benefit to you, until your cause is proved. But I will 'call off my dogs' as you so gently call it. No one shall hunt you down. Your children shall be safe from me and mine. But for this gift, I need a boon in turn." She broke off speech, and said more mind-to-mind.

What I want most is in your power to give. You'll know, when you've been Raised and Named, how to create Apkallu. I want that honor, and that crown. Say yes, and my neutrality is bought.

At Roland's startled move, Blanche paused before agreeing. *That's a steep price for the little you offer us,* she said instead. *We might starve before we win, or find ourselves declaring blood of innocents fair game. I would not want that on my conscience now, however black you say it used to be. Will you order your Houses between here and Liege to place a cache of blood-filled jars upon their roofs each night? We won't disturb anyone, and they'll never know who stopped and drank. As for reward, if ever I learn this secret, and can honorably grant you what you wish, I'll do so. Let all who can, share in the power. Deal?*

Philomena watched, frustrated at their silent speech. Roland's face, more guarded, showed misgiving as well as

pride. *Creating Apkallu is a skill I never heard that Inanna knew.*

It was the fire of the gods that Inanna gave to Ninshubur. It's a perilous fact to know. Ereshkigal wished it to be kept secret, Sharibet replied. *I only know it is possible to create Apkallu because it was known before the Flood. So, even if there is no honor in it, my price is firm.* Her face was set.

What should I do? The thought of weary, hungry miles between here and her children swayed Blanche—but how could any deed done without honor profit them? How could they succeed at all if Sharibet refused her help? There was no other choice. *Neutrality of your house and food for us, and in return, when I know how, I'll create for you an Apkallu crown,* she stated.

"Deal," said Sharibet. "I give my word."

"Deal," responded Blanche, offering her hand.

Sharibet shook hands, and nodded, regal as a queen who had survived the sacking of her palace. "Philomena, please have jars of drink brought to the roof for our departing guests. Then send the master of the pigeons to see me in my office. And at first light arrange to have my quarters cleaned."

"Yes, mother," Philomena said. She stared hard at Blanche, as if trying to discover the answer to a question.

She had her hand upon the door when Sharibet warned, "Nothing of tonight's visit is to be spoken, Philomena."

"Of course, Mother Sharibet," the old woman agreed. She gave Roland a look that spoke of disappointment and betrayal, then scurried out.

Blanche turned again to Sharibet. "I thank you for your courtesy tonight. I am here, not on my own account, but because of Roland's wish to see me and your House reconciled. I think—he should have private speech with you. I'll wait by the door."

She closed her link to Roland and tried very hard not to listen, then, to murmurs and quiet kisses.

By the time Philomena returned to report the jars had been set out, all their goodbyes had been spoken and sealed. As they left, Sharibet caught Roland's hand, and kissed his burned cheek. She did not look at Blanche, nor bid her farewell.

They returned to the loggia, and flew up to the deserted roof. As agreed, sealed clay jars sat waiting. Roland showed her how to break the seal, and after a cautious sniff at the contents, he encouraged her to drink. There was an odd symbol on the jar's curved lip. Eight slender petals, with a curious hook on four.

"That is your sign, your banner, Inanna's rosette." said Roland. "The god who delivers judgment."

They drank their fill, until the first rain traveling from the sea arrived in cold sheets. They flew up into the turbulent air, where the cold, clean rain would wash away her tears.

Blanche shivered. How soon would she arrive home? How soon would her war with the Queen of the Underworld begin?

~The End~

Queen of Heaven [House of the Rose Book Four]
by Michaela August

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