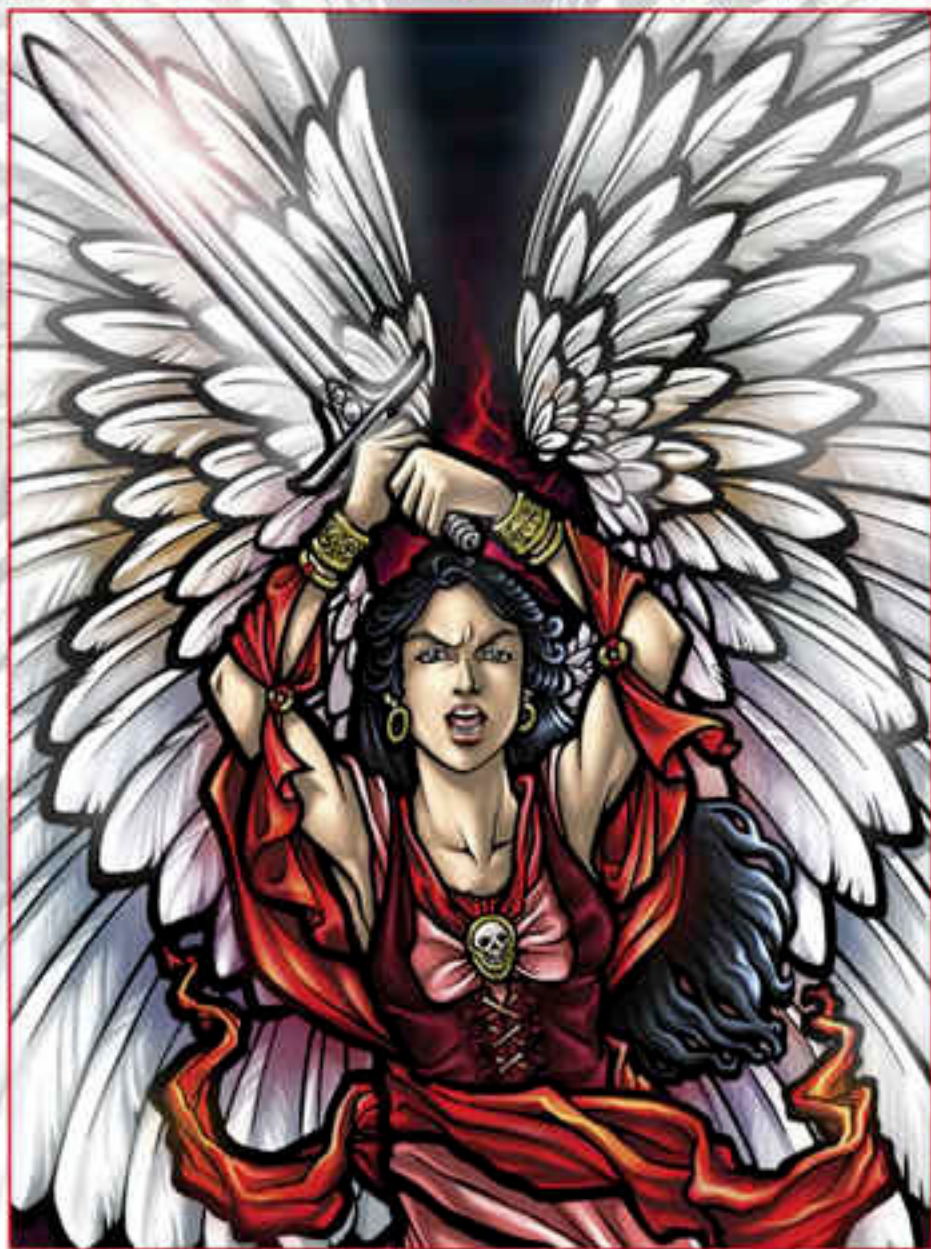


THE SHATTERED CROWN

HOUSE OF THE ROSE BOOK FIVE



MICHAELA AUGUST

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

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CONTENTS

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Previously, in the House of the Rose Series:](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

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The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
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"Time heals grief and quarrels, for we change and are no longer the same person."

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

To Kathryn Struck and Dick Claassen, for being wonderfully professional colleagues in the creative process, and for giving us the opportunity to write and finish this story. Thank you so much!

And to Giovanna BC Guimaraes, who has brought our characters to beautiful life, with wings visible not only to us, but to everyone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Previously, in the House of the Rose Series:

Glass Souls:

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 djinn 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 his 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.

House of Memory:

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.

Broken Gods:

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, 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:

As Blanche grows to womanhood, Mathilde and Dominic settle down as Protectors of the House in Venice. There, Mathilde begins a quest to cure Dominic's damaged powers as they both deal with the veiled hostility of the Venetian House, who remember Dominic's reign of terror a decade earlier. Mathilde is dogged by mysterious, severe migraines which are triggered by any mention of her daughter.

In London, Michel rejoices in the birth of his son Robert, who is another of the reborn Apkallu. His concubine Tirgit agrees to become a djinniah, and serve at Michel's side as his consort and fellow Protector. Several years pass, during which Tirgit adapts to the life of a djinniah, and baby Robert grows into a healthy toddler. Meanwhile, young Blanche is less fortunate as she comes to womanhood, and finds herself fending off the drunken sexual assaults of her father-in-law. Matters come to a head when her new sister-in-law is also raped, and Blanche takes matters into her own hands by poisoning her father-in-law.

England erupts into civil war, and Cecilia deftly turns the situation to her advantage. She convinces Michel and Tirgit that it would be safer to send young Robert far away from England. She departs for the Moorish kingdom of Granada with the young boy, much to his parents' anguish.

Somel years later, Blanche, now the mother of four sons, reluctantly joins her husband going on Crusade to North Africa with King Louis of France. On the journey, her path

crosses with Tirgit, who is on her first solo Raising and Naming progress in the south of France. Tirgit alerts Cecilia that Blanche is on the move, then continues on to the House of the Rose in Beziers, where she discovers an odd duplication of memories in a former Crusader. While investigating the anomaly, she is struck down by a headache similar to the ones afflicting Mathilde. Alarmed by her discoveries, the elders of the House summon Michel, Dominic, and Mathilde to investigate.

At first, Dominic is suspected of having tampered with the memories. He is put on trial by the elders of the House, who soon determine that the memory tampering is Cecilia's doing. Arriving in Beziers, Michel finds himself torn between his carefully-constructed life as a husband and father, and his revived feelings for Dominic, but finds himself unable to come to any resolution. Too many obstacles separate them, not the least the grudges that Cecilia has carefully fostered between them.

Meanwhile, Blanche finds herself widowed and stranded without resources in the Crusader camp outside of Tunis. She is the target of unwelcome attention from her husband's liegemen, who want to force her into marriage and claim her widow's portion and control of her late husband's estate. Her father, Arjumand, is nearby, guarding the kin of the Tunis House against the Crusaders. He intervenes to rescue Blanche from being abducted, but she is seriously wounded. Defying the laws of the House, he Transforms her, and the kin of the Tunis House react by trying to kill them both. Arjumand is

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

outlawed, and flees with a still-unconscious Blanche, taking refuge in caves well away from the city.

Despite his banishment and status as a fugitive, he is convinced that he has done the right thing, especially since the memories he glimpses in Blanche's blood reveal that Cecilia has been lying for millennia about Inanna's role in summoning a meteor that struck ancient Mesopotamia and wiped out the Sumerian civilization—and about her culpability for the Flood that wiped out the cities of the plain, the gods' first world.

When Blanche awakens from her sleep of Transformation, she and Arjumand decide to travel to Constantinople and present the case against Inanna's banishment to Sharibet.

In Beziers, the Protectors gathered there have uncovered evidence of Cecilia's lies, but not the dark secret she's been protecting. They vow to discover the truth ... but they face a second crisis when news arrives that Inanna, the Queen of Heaven and Cursed One, has returned, and that she has suborned Arjumand and destroyed the Tunis House.

The Shattered Crown begins just after the end of the events in *Queen of Heaven*.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

"Now I say, [That] the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father."—*The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, 4:1-2*

Dar al-Warda, Malaga, Kingdom of Granada, Monday, 9th of the moon Thul quidah, 668 AH (June 30, AD 1270)

"Aunt Cecilia, when can I go home?" Robert asked, fingers curling around the sharp-edged traceries of the stone window screen. Though he had lived in this hot, sunny, spice-scented city since he was three years old, *home* meant England. If only he had more than faint memories of green, and rain, and a laughing golden-haired man who threw a ball and tossed him, flying, into the air.

"How many times must we discuss this?" Cecilia asked. She was so beautiful, like a statue on a Christian church come to life, and just as cold.

Outside, the courtyard was clothed in late afternoon's deep shadows. Pots of magically blooming rosebushes scented the air and muffled the noises of the busy city. He kept his gaze on the blood-red flowers, wincing when Cecilia opened his wax-covered lesson board with a clack. He tried to wait calmly until she finished correcting his painstakingly-copied verses from the Qu'ran, but his eyes began to sting with tears. He dared not rub them away. Aunt Cecilia—who was known as Sitt Rasheeda here—did not like to see him cry. Besides, he was nearly ten. Too old to cry.

"Do you remember when I told you why I brought you here?" she asked. As if he could forget, when she said it so many times. "You have a great destiny as a Protector of the House. Some day, the Cursed One will return, and to protect the kin, you must become a great warrior."

He nodded, his mouth dry. He knew exactly what her next words would be.

"You must study hard. Your Mama and Papa sent you to me for fostering, and you don't want to disappoint them—or me—do you, my Utu?"

He didn't like it when she called him Utu. That name made him uncomfortable, as if ants had crawled under his clothing to walk around on his bare skin with tiny, itchy feet. He was *Robert*. Robert FitzMichael, son of Sir Michael de Murat and Theodora de la Rose, famous Protectors of the House. Not Utu. He was certainly not Lord Rafi abd al-Warda, the blue-eyed Moorish boy he saw daily in the polished metal of his mirror, wearing long robes of embroidered muslin, fringed silk sashes, and a knitted cotton cap dyed rose-red, the color of the House.

"Of course not, Aunt Cecilia," he said dutifully, not looking up at her.

He had been homesick forever, but the sick feeling had gotten worse in the past few months. He couldn't remember what Mama and Papa looked like. Only fragmentary impressions remained: his tall golden Papa smelled of myrrh. He remembered that because a whiff of the fragrant resin from the House's workshops would bring back the safe feeling of strong arms holding him, and a deep laugh. Mama had a

soft voice, blue-green eyes, and long hair the same shade of black as his own.

Aunt Cecilia made him write letters to his parents once a month. In those carefully scrutinized missives he detailed his training with the sword, the progress of his lessons, and his trips to the harbor with Master Jaleel, who supervised the unloading of the House's ships and welcomed visiting captains and their crews. His parents wrote back faithfully, but over the last half year fear had begun to chew at his heart. Was his face as much of a blur to them as theirs was to him?

He hated that he was beginning to forget them. If he forgot, Robert FitzMichael might vanish forever, and only Lord Rafi, also known as Utu, would remain.

Quickly, he made his next case for a visit: "I can fight with a sword now! Cousin Antarah says I'm nearly as good as Jamal, even though Jamal is already sixteen. And I've worked hard at my Arabic lessons. And French, too," he added. "So, can I visit Mama and Papa in England? For just a few weeks? I promise I'll work hard at my lessons when I come back. I miss them so much!"

He was immediately sorry he'd added that last plea—he could tell from the subtle hardening of her gaze that he had undermined his goal. Only reasoned argument had any hope of convincing her. *Stupid! Stupid!* he scolded himself, as he saw her expression grow colder. She frightened him when she looked at him like that.

She sighed and smiled sweetly, but her eyes didn't warm. "My dearest Utu. *This* house is your home. You think me cruel

because I have forbidden you to return to England. But I must tell you a secret."

Her sympathetic expression made his heart pound with greater terror. It was the look grown-ups gave you just before they delivered bad news. *I'm sorry I asked to leave! Let them not be dead. Please, not dead!*

She was already speaking. "—dearest one, I have just received word from your mother that she discovered, with her own eyes, the Cursed One journeying with the crusaders of the King of France. If you leave us now ... the kin will think I'm sending you home because I failed in training you." She moved behind him, trapping him against the window, and he felt her hand heavy on his shoulder.

"Failed?" he whispered, keeping his face turned resolutely toward the window. *But I want to go home!* And home was *not* this place, because his mother and his father were not here.

"I'm so sorry," Cecilia murmured, squeezing his shoulder. "I wanted to bear this burden myself, but I can't do it alone. The kin *need* you. You are Apkallu, a mightier Protector than the House's Crown of Service djinni. Your destiny, your duty, is to stand against the Cursed One. Never forget that." She kissed his forehead, her lips a faint pressure against his skin, and drew him into her embrace. "I love you," she whispered, "like my own son. My darling Utu." She stroked his hair. "Don't cry. You're my brave boy, my shining one."

He buried his face in the smooth, rose-scented silk of her gown. He let her comfort him. But in the depths of his heart he still hated when she called him Utu.

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

* * * *

18th of the moon Muharram, 669 AH (Feast of St. Adrian,
Saturday, September 6, AD 1270)

The House was abuzz with preparations for a welcome feast. The *Rose of Yarmouth* had arrived from London this morning, carrying a cargo of costly ambergris, collected on the shores of England.

With the ship came thick packets of letters from Robert's parents. He was on his very best behavior as he offered to accompany Master Jaleel to the harbor to greet the son of the Master of the London House, Captain Thomas de la Rose.

To Robert's great dismay, Aunt Cecilia insisted on accompanying them. He was forced to endure hours of cargo inventory and negotiations for bales of silk cloth and fine red Cordoban leather. He dared not ask his questions of Captain Thomas while Cecilia was present. He had to wait for a moment when he might escape her chaperonage. But that moment never came.

That evening, the banquet held to welcome the *Rose of Yarmouth's* crew and captain provided crumbs of precious information about his parents, which Robert gobbled up like a starving beggar. He could have learned much more if Cecilia hadn't kept him close at her side, just as she always did whenever visiting kin or outsiders were entertained. Robert glanced longingly at Captain Thomas. His throat ached with holding in the questions he so desperately wanted to ask.

As platters of spiced lamb and goat made the rounds of the hall, Robert overheard snatches of talk from the kin

seated on nearby cushions. There were rumors that Louis, the French king, had fallen ill in Tunis. England was in turmoil, since many of the lords and their knights who formerly kept order had taken the cross and departed to join the King of France's latest Crusade. Even the frivolous heir to the English throne, Prince Edward, had taken the crusading oath, motivated, the kin had no doubt, by the continuing ban on tournaments imposed by his father. The exodus of the knights was having a troubling effect on law and order, leaving criminals with free rein in some counties. And yet, the House prospered: Sir Michael and Elder Sister Theodora vigorously protected the House's English properties, and since the defeat and death of the rebel Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham five years earlier, the London House had regained its position as favored perfumers to the royal court of King Henry.

Robert chewed stubbornly at the food he had no stomach for, and burned with silent resentment at Cecilia's restraining presence. He didn't care about the French king, and even the Crusade on the other side of the Mediterranean was of less interest than news of his parents' valiant defense of the House's manors and farms from outlaws. But he dared not try to turn the subject back. Aunt Cecilia would frown, and sigh.

Then Bashir, the pigeon-keeper's assistant, came running into the hall. He halted in front of the divan where Cecilia reclined, and bowed deeply as the reception hall fell silent. "Sitt Rasheeda, a bird just arrived from the Palermo House, bearing a Red message." He proffered the thin strip of curled paper with shaking fingers.

She reached out to accept it. "Why did this come *here*?" she asked, voicing Robert's unspoken question. Cousin Antarah had taught him that emergency messages were always sent to the closest House with a Protector in residence. And that would be Venice, where his Aunt Mathilde and Uncle Dominic dwelled. He had never met his aunt. He vaguely remembered Uncle Dominic from a visit to England. He was a tall, quiet, rather scary man with a stripe of white hair like a badger.

Cecilia was reading the message swiftly. Though her expression remained serene, Robert sat close enough to see her eyes dilate with shock, and to hear the hitch in her breath, not quite a gasp. Whatever the news was, it was very very bad.

She confirmed his suspicion when she stood to address the apprehensive kin, who fell completely silent. "Master Giulio reports that the Cursed One, Transformed, has appeared with the crusaders in Tunis. She destroyed the Tunis House, killing the Master and pigeon-keeper there."

The hall resounded with gasps and a rising murmur of reaction and speculation as Cecilia lowered the scarlet-edged message. "I am certain that Lord Dominic and Lady Mathilde are already on their way to avenge the harm done to the House," she said. "But the Cursed One is a fearsome opponent, so I too will leave as soon as possible."

She turned, capturing both Robert and Master Jaleel with an intense gaze. "Before I depart, we must meet in council to decide several important matters. Rafi, Master Jaleel, Mistress Hadiya, please accompany me."

Springing up from his cushion, Robert trotted obediently at her heels, overcome with shock and delight. The Cursed One, returned? His duty, and his destiny, had arrived so soon?

* * * *

On her way to the study, Cecilia's mind boiled with a hundred conflicting emotions.

Despite all her work, she doubted that, if called to duty by the House, either Michael or his sister would fight the Cursed One, clad in the flesh of Mathilde's own daughter. And as for their cousin Roland, he was supposed to have been safely tucked away in the Mongol courts in Persia! Not—

The message had contained one more line that Cecilia had not yet shared with the kin: ... *and the Protector Arjumand assisted the Cursed One*. Why had Roland Transformed the girl? Did he know that the Cursed One was his daughter? Oh, he must know, for why else would he side with her?

The galla-demons of a thousand hells devour Inanna! Why, *why* was it so easy for her to gain the fealty of those who should hate her? Even without his memories as Enlil, Roland could apparently refuse her nothing. So had it ever been, in every lifetime before Inanna's banishment.

And now Cecilia was faced with a dilemma. She needed to depart Malaga, to prevent Inanna from wreaking further havoc, but before that, she must deal with the problem of Utu. The brat was hers, now, but she dared not leave his powers unguarded in her absence. Who knew what treachery Inanna might try next, with three other Apkallu bound to her by close ties?

Cecilia reached the study, and Hadiya, unbidden, pulled the heavy door shut. The Mistress of the Malaga House's gray eyes were troubled as she took her place at her husband's side. She was not one of the local kin. Born Johanna von dem Rosenhaus, she had been sent here from Luebeck as a young woman, after her Raising and Naming.

"Master Jaleel, Mistress Hadiya," Cecilia began, choosing her words carefully. She was about to ask them to break a long-standing tradition, but the present crisis should sway them. "Let me begin by saying that I fear to leave this House without a Protector, especially in light of this troubling development."

"Who would do such a thing?" demanded Hadiya, in her German-accented Arabic. "Who would Transform the Cursed One?"

Cecilia prudently chose not to answer. Instead, she adopted a soothing tone. "I will settle the matter, believe me. But before I go, I wish to secure things here."

"How?" asked Jaleel. Unlike the blonde Hadiya, he had the dark hair and distinctive amber eyes that marked Sharibet's descendants.

She turned to Rafi. The boy, uncharacteristically, was standing silent, his eyes trained on her, quivering like a hound before a hunt. Even as a mortal, his aura outshone Jaleel and Hadiya's auras. But that was only to be expected. He was Apkallu, after all. And now it was time for him to accept his destiny. "Rafi, do you stand ready to protect the House in my absence?"

His eyes widened. "Yes! I mean, I do, Aunt Cecilia."

She paused to focus. This next part would be tricky. "Do you consent to be Transformed, and serve the House as Protector?"

Rafi hesitated, and Jaleel broke in. "Sitt Rasheeda, he's too young! We have never permitted the Transformation of those younger than sixteen!"

"Need I remind you that this is a dangerous time for the House?" she asked, with assumed calm. "We will need the strength of all the Apkallu to fight the Cursed One. I would not ask if I did not feel the need was great."

"But—"

Jaleel was not yielding, damn him! Reluctantly, Cecilia unsheathed her hidden weapon. She held out the message she had not shared fully earlier. "The Cursed One suborned Lord Arjumand."

Jaleel and Habiya gasped in horror.

Rafi merely looked apprehensive. "I want to protect the House, Aunt Cecilia," he said, breathlessly. "I agree to be Transformed."

"He's too young to give consent!" Jaleel rallied. "Only one who has been Raised and Named may grant permission for sacrifice, or Transformation, as was decided in the year of the Upheaval of the Black Land."

"But we do not Raise and Name Apkallu until after they have been Transformed," Cecilia returned, keeping her voice even. "I assure you, I have no intention of Raising Rafi, burdening him with the weight of his past lifetimes, until he is of full age. However, if we lose against the Cursed One..."

Jaleel's brown face turned the ruddy color of Cordoban leather, but he bowed his head in reluctant assent.

Smiling inwardly, she proceeded to ensure that the rest of this decision followed the traditional rules. "Do you understand what I am asking of you, Rafi? That you will bear the burden of serving the House for long decades, even centuries, while all of your friends, your teachers, your kin grow old and die?"

He nodded, solemnly. "I've been training for this. I—I consent."

Shakily, Jaleel stepped in with his part of the ritual questioning: "Do you understand that you will become a drinker of blood, forced to conceal your true nature from all except the kin? That men will name you demon if the House ever casts you out? Do you still wish this fearsome transformation? Do you accept this burden, and this gift?"

Rafi nodded again. "I accept. I want this."

He was so eager to prove how grown up he was. "Bear witness then," Cecilia announced. "That Rafi abd al-Warda, also known as Robert FitzMichael, has thrice consented to his Transformation."

All three mortals in the room bowed their heads in agreement. Now that she had obtained what she wanted, Cecilia was willing to mollify Jaleel. "I know this is a departure from tradition. But the House badly needs another Apkallu Protector *now*."

"I understand," Jaleel said. "But how could this happen? How could the Cursed One—ah, well, I am sure all will be revealed in time," he interrupted himself with a wave of his

hand. "In the meanwhile, I will make the arrangements for Lord Rafi's Transformation." He bowed deeply to both of them and left, followed by Habiya.

As soon as they were alone, Rafi said, proudly, "I'll protect the House while you're gone, Aunt Cecilia. You can count on me."

"I know," she said, touching his cheek fondly.

Ah yes, he would serve her well. And if he did not, she could at least ensure that his power did not fall into the wrong hands.

* * * *

Text of a Red message sent to all the Houses of the Rose:
Sent 9th Muharram 669 AH (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, Found & 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.

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Languedoc, Friday, September 12, AD 1270

Out of the darkness and dreams that had provided blessed surcease from pain, slowly, awareness began to return. Mathilde's first realization was that someone—either Dominic or her brother—had placed her on a bed. She smelled clean linen overlaid with the sharp scents of dried laurel leaf and

lavender, felt the softness of a pillow beneath her aching head.

And with awareness, came memory:

...The chiming of the dovecote bell echoing through the courtyard, announces the arrival of an important message ... the dim, stuffy confines of the parlor, crowded with too many anxious bodies ... Sir Jean's voice, reading the contents of the red-bordeRed message newly-arrived by pigeon ... Cecilia's curse striking like a crossbow bolt through the head...

Roland. Blanche ... Pain stirred like an asp, ready to strike again, and she hastily diverted her thoughts away from the forbidden topic of her dau—

Better to worry about Roland, and wonder what fit of insanity had possessed him to destroy the Tunis House. During their brief reunion a decade ago in Constantinople for her Appointing, she had seen the change in him. Outwardly, he remained the golden youth who had been her sweet lover, but his duties seemed to weigh on him. His smiles and carefree laughter had crystallized, as if honey had crystallized to golden gemstone.

But for him to side with ... with *that person* ... and to injure and kill the kin he had sworn to protect ... A new pain sprang up, this time in the region of her heart.

"Mathilde? Are you awake?" The deep, quiet voice was her husband Dominic's.

She forced her eyes open but kept her mental shields firmly in place. The bedroom was dim—someone had closed the shutters—but fiery sparkles of afternoon light forced themselves through cracks between wood and stone window

frame. Her skull felt as thin and fragile as eggshell. If she allowed another djinn in, it might shatter.

"God be thanked," Michael said, somewhere off to her left. Her brother's anxious concern battered at the doors of their newly-established blood-bond.

Then she smelled the familiar scent of blood and oranges. Dominic's hand came behind her neck, lifting her. The cool rim of a cup pressed against her lips. Mathilde drank greedily, feeling the terrible throbbing in her head recede with each swallow of the preserved blood. When she had gulped down two large cupfuls, she found herself sufficiently restored to sit up without her consort's help, and to take notice of her company.

Besides Michael and Dominic, there was Michael's consort Tirgit—*I must remember to call the girl Theodora*—and golden-eyed Lady Alais, the mistress of this rose-farm.

"Tilde." Michael wore an expression she remembered well: he had, after all, once been a preceptor of the Templars. "Are you recovered? We must talk."

Mathilde nodded, pain subsiding to a mere worm crawling through her temples.

Her husband glanced at her brother, and she saw unspoken communication flash between them. It was the exchange of warriors who were long-familiar allies. "A war on two fronts presents a challenge," Michael said aloud, for the benefit of the others in the room.

Two fronts? thought Mathilde, an instant before she remembered: Cecilia and her wanton tampering with the minds and memories of the djinni must also be dealt with. "I

don't want to fight them, either of them," she whispered, tears stinging. *I don't want to fight at all.*

Dominic said, "We must discover what memories Cecilia wants so desperately to conceal from us. It is likely the more dangerous course, since she has already placed geases in us that force us to fight ourselves, before we can begin to oppose her. I suggest that we deal with—with the Cursed One, first." He searched Mathilde's face for a sign that Cecilia's cruel geas to keep her thoughts from ... that person was about to strike her down again.

But Mathilde had become practiced in diverting attention from the source of her pain. "I think we should not discuss this until Sir Jean can join us. We may not have time to convene another council of elders, but we should include the Raised and Named kin of this House, at least, in our deliberations."

Michael nodded. "Summon your husband, Mistress," he commanded Alais.

"Lord," she acknowledged, with a deep curtsy, and left.

Michael took Tirgit's hand and went with her to the chamber's door. "Rest, Tilde. I will summon you to the parlor when we are ready to proceed."

Tirgit said shyly, "I hope you feel much better, soon." Then they departed.

Dominic settled himself on the edge of their bed and reached out to smooth her hair tenderly.

It was tempting to yield to weakness, to let him and Michael bear this burden. *If it comes to battle, can I raise a sword against my own flesh and blood?* She raised her chin

and met his gaze squarely. "If we can't find a peaceful resolution ... I am a Protector of the House. As you have taught me, Dominic."

His expression remained as controlled as ever, but she had lived with him long enough to read his relief in the slight softening of his lips. She raised a hand, noticing how it trembled, and drew him close. He yielded, his eyes closing in anticipation of her kiss.

"I am your consort, your helpmeet," she whispered against his lips. "And I will do my duty, at your side."

"I know," he murmured, his lips brushing hers in a kiss as soft and sweet as he always gave, with tenderness and devotion, but very little passion.

* * * *

As village church bells rang Vespers in the distance, Mathilde came shakily down the narrow stairs to the hot and stuffy great hall. Sweaty and more than a little dizzy, wishing for some breath of air, she stood waiting in the company of her husband, her brother, and his consort, for the kin to finish assembling.

When everyone had arrived, Sir Jean de Pezenas, Master of this House of the Rose though he had been Found and returned after his Raising and Naming, said bluntly to their djinni Protectors, "We are afraid. And I most of all, for I know more."

In the short time since Mathilde's arrival here, she had come to rely on Sir Jean's good sense and humor. To see his tanned and weather-worn features now pinched and grim

made his announcement all the more serious. Jean's wife, Lady Alais, who bore the stamp of her direct descent from Sharibet, clung to his hand, and nodded. The rest of the Raised and Named adults from the estate—some twenty members of the kin, who served as gardeners, perfumers, grooms, and housemaids—likewise showed their agreement.

A wiry man, introducing himself as the head gardener, spoke up. "Lords, lady, elder sister," he addressed the djinni, looking at each of them in turn. "My name is Philippe, True Name Sisi Ki-an, remember me! Can you tell us how the Cursed One was made a djinniah again? Is she coming here? Will we have to—" he swallowed visibly, and Mathilde could see perspiration gleaming with an oily sheen on his brow, "*fight* her?"

Looking every inch the proud knight, Michael answered for the gathered djinni. "On our oaths as your Protectors, we know nothing of the Cursed One's return, but we will certainly guard you should the Cursed One attack. However, we were summoned here to unravel a different mystery discovered by Elder Sister Theodora."

He outlined what Tirgit and Mathilde had discovered: that Cecilia, contrary to all the oaths and covenants of Apkallu to the House regarding Raising and Naming, had altered his memories.

Mathilde took a deep draught of blood from her goblet, hoping to chase away the lingering remnants of her earlier headache. The kin watched one another uneasily as the import of Michael's words sank in. They began to whisper worriedly: "...but how can we let her Raise and Name us, if

she's going to change our memories?" "Didn't know the djinni could *do* that!" "Is that why Elder Sister Theodora canceled the Raising and Naming ceremony last week?"

Mathilde took another sip of the blood in her goblet, and grimaced. It was already starting to congeal in the heat. That didn't bother her so much as the words that her husband had spoken earlier: *A war on two fronts presents a challenge.*

A challenge, she thought, bitterly. *Will they force me to take up the sword and seek my dau—that person's—life and Roland's life, too?* And what of Cecilia, her sweet-faced good-sister, who had sat at Mathilde's bedside nursing her through terrible bouts of the consumption that had slowly been devouring her before Michael had Transformed her? Even knowing how masterfully Cecilia had meddled with her own memories, so that she could not even think of—of *that person*—without being punished by a savage headache, could Mathilde really raise a sword against the woman she had considered her friend? Who had been her sister Ereshkigal in other lifetimes?

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, she thought, and forced her attention back to the business at hand.

"What do you propose we do, Lord Michael?" Sir Jean was asking.

"First, I would like to request that Dominic be released from house arrest so that he may carry out his duties as Protector."

Michael looked at her expectantly, and with an effort, Mathilde marshalled her lagging thoughts.

"I agree," she said, as crisply as if she hadn't been maundering about Cecilia's betrayal, and then, because everyone seemed to be expecting more, she added, "What I discovered in searching Dominic's and Michael's memories is definitive proof that Cecilia was responsible for the tampering. It was not, and could not have been Dominic's fault. Or Michael's, or Tirgit's, for that matter."

A she expected, that set off another round of frightened whispers.

Lady Alais exchanged a swift glance with her husband, then gave a regal nod. "That would be acceptable to us. We shall send messages to the Beziers House and all of our neighboring estates advising of Lord Dominic's release. The elders will want to know more, of course; if we could request a detailed report of your findings to follow by messenger, Lady Mathilde?"

"I'll write it for you in the morning," Mathilde promised, though she wanted nothing more than to crawl into her bed and sleep for days. Her long flight from Ragusa had left her deeply fatigued in body, and the news she had received had wearied her soul.

"And what of Cecilia?" Dominic asked, his calm deep voice a soothing counterpoint to the anxiety radiating from the assembled kin.

"I—I suppose we should send messages about that as well," Alais said, weakly. "But it will cause a lot of trouble. Are you absolutely *certain* that Lady Cecilia is responsible?" That last came out as a rather shaky appeal.

Mathilde knew the woman was still reeling from the revelation that Cecilia, considered for millennia as the House's chief Protector, had violated all their trust: to guard and return, undamaged, the past-life memories of kin and Protectors alike. It had been easier for everyone to believe that Dominic, the Child-killer, had committed this crime in his mad pursuit of Michael. Even Mathilde, who loved and trusted her husband, was well aware of the near-madness that drove him to his sins. She knew how deep Dominic's feelings ran for Michael, who had been his beloved wife Honoria in his most recent past life, and lover and consort for far longer.

"Of course we trust Lady Mathilde's findings. It just that ... well, the Eldest..." added Sir Jean, flushed now (though it might have been the heat inside the sealed hall), "Nevertheless, we shall send out Red messages about Lady Cecilia's alleged crimes to every Master within pigeon range, and forbid her to perform any Raisings or Namings until such time as she answers these charges to a council of elders."

"Speaking of guilt and innocence," Lady Alais said, shooting Dominic a black look. "What of Lord Michael's consent to his Transformation? Is not Lord Dominic guilty of—"

"The issue was whether Dominic had tampered with my brother's memories during his Raising and Naming," Mathilde interrupted. Both Dominic and Michael had gone tense at Alais's words, and Mathilde was determined not to allow Alais to distract them from the real threat. "He has been found innocent of tampering. As to whether consent was properly obtained, I believe that it should be left to Michael to decide

whether he wants to pursue the issue with the council of elders, or settle the matter privately with Dominic."

—And what, exactly, *do* you intend to do?—Mathilde asked him, taking advantage of their newly-established blood bond to speak privately, mind-to-mind. Would Michael yield to his knightly upbringing, and battle Dominic to satisfy his outraged honor? And if so, who would win? Michael was the more powerful djinn, but he could be driven by emotion. And Dominic was a clever warrior, even with his aura still injured from the massacre at Beziers nearly three-quarters of a century past.

Would she lose both of them?

Michael didn't answer for long moment, and Mathilde saw shadows threading through the bright golden aura-wings that surrounded him. "I would prefer to resolve the issue myself," Michael said, quickly, giving Dominic an unreadable look.

Well, that's more promising than an outraged call for immediate vengeance, Mathilde thought.

Dominic bent his dark head. "I will abide by Michael's decision, whatever it may be," her husband said, sounding appropriately humble. He took her hand, both receiving and offering comfort from his palm pressed against hers.

"Furthermore," Dominic continued. "I wish to offer my apologies for Transforming Michael without his consent. It was never my intent to harm one who is so dear to me. I was relieved to hear that my attempt to Raise and Name Michael was not what injured his memories and crippled his ability to recall his past lives."

"Nevertheless, you have committed a grave trespass against the laws of the House and the djinni," Sir Jean said.

"Further investigation is required," Mathilde said, before the tide could turn too far in the direction of condemning her husband. "I am convinced that all these events revolve around whatever it is that Cecilia is trying to conceal from us. If Michael and Dominic agree, I will taste their blood again, and look deeper into the events surrounding my brother's Transformation."

Dominic's grip tightened, and she felt his wordless pulse of gratitude through their link. Tenderness, respect, affection.... it was better than nothing, but she would never be his soulmate the way that Honoria, his previous incarnation, had been. Honoria, who was now her brother. How strange was fate!

"Now I wish to address the greater threat—the Cursed One." Michael said.

"Yes, of course," said Sir Jean, shifting his weight uncomfortably. The kin fell silent, awaiting their Protector's announcement with open anxiety.

Mathilde felt anxious, too. What course of action would he recommend against his cousin and his niece?

"Here is what we know of the Cursed One, thanks to Lord Arjumand's regular correspondence to Lady Mathilde," Dominic said, in response to a silent prompt from Michael. "Lady Cecilia arranged an honorable marriage for the Cursed One to Evrard, the heir of Bressoux, an estate which lies less than an hour's ride from the city of Liege. She bore one stillborn child and four healthy sons before leaving Bressoux

to accompany her husband and his liege men on Crusade. After this point, we have only the bare facts from yesterday's pigeon post. She must have arrived in Carthage with the French fleet, and somehow met and suborned Lord Arjumand. He Transformed her, and together they destroyed the Tunis House, and killed some of the kin. We do not currently know the Cursed One's whereabouts, or her plans."

Michael nodded and took up the thread. "But we do know that she left her children behind at Bressoux," he said, and Mathilde's heart constricted. "I propose that we send Lord Dominic to fetch them here. My sister wishes to assure herself of her grandchildren's safety, of course—" He flashed Mathilde a wolfish grin.

Mathilde swallowed instinctive outrage at the thought of holding *that person's* children hostage, and forced herself to examine her brother's plan logically. It had a great deal of merit. She would be able to meet the boys and ensure their safety. It was a time-honored custom to hold hostages to guarantee the terms of a treaty. If it became necessary to negotiate with *that person*, the children might prove useful in establishing compliance with any sort of agreement that they reached.

"It's a sensible plan," Dominic murmured with approval.

Well he might, Mathilde thought crossly, since it sounded like something he had thought of. Had he been the one to suggest it to Michael?

"Lord, do you mean to lure the Cursed One *here*?" Sir Jean protested.

"And do you really think that Lord Dominic should be the one—I mean, the children..." Alais added, looking greensick.

"My husband would never—" Mathilde began, at the same time that Tirgit said: "I would trust Lord Dominic with *my* son—" Dominic appeared unperturbed at Alais's unsubtle reminder of his sins in Venice, when he had been searching for Honoria and blind to the auras that would have aided his quest.

Michael raised his voice and overrode them. "I place my full faith in Dominic in this matter. And Lady Mathilde will, of course, be accompanying him."

—I will?—Mathilde shot him.

He winked at her.—Better you than anyone.—

"But—" Lady Alais wasn't ready to surrender quite yet.

Understanding Michael's plan in an instant, Mathilde said, "I will accompany my consort to Bressoux, since it will arouse less suspicion if their grandmother arrives in the company of her husband. I am certain we can ... *convince* the boys' aunt and uncle to surrender custody to us." If verbal persuasion failed, there was always the Voice of Coercion to work her will.

Dominic added, "With four children, we will need two djinni to transport them safely and speedily to Villerose-sur-Orb. We must fly. It is too risky and too slow to travel overland."

"And once you bring the Cursed One's children here, you will stay to—to care for them?" Sir Jean asked. "To protect us in case she comes?"

"Of course," Mathilde said. Dominic echoed her.

"While we're on the topic of hostages," Michael said. "I leave for Malaga tomorrow evening. I am determined to fetch my son out of Cecilia's power with all possible haste."

Alais swayed, clutching her husband's arm for support. "Lord," she said, in a choked voice. "Do you truly mean not only to attract the attention of the Cursed One to our house, but also to move openly against Lady Cecilia? Is that a good idea?"

Michael's aura blazed, and his mouth compressed to a thin line. "Would you be asking this if Cecilia were holding *your* son in her power, a power she has been proven to have misused?"

"N-no, lord." Alais sank into a deep curtsey, and her voice faded to a scratchy whisper. "Forgive me, lord."

Sir Jean radiated disapproval, but he did not speak.

"Very well," Michael declared. "It's decided. Lord Dominic, Lady Mathilde, and I will depart soon—tomorrow evening, I would think—and we will bring with us as many Red messages as we can carry, to warn all the Masters of all the Houses in Europe, if possible. We can send pigeons from every House where we stop, and should return within a fortnight. Elder Sister Theodora will stay here to serve as your Protector."

No one voiced a protest, but, glancing around the room, Mathilde saw that her worries were clearly shared by the rest of the kin. They were right to be concerned. This peaceful rose farm might become the first battlefield in a civil war between Apkallu.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

"And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, [even] me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept."

—*Book of Genesis, 27:38*

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Languedoc, Saturday, September 13, AD 1270

"That's the last of them," Michael said with grim satisfaction the next day, as he put down his quill and massaged ink-stained fingers. It was three hours before sunset, and he was eager to depart once night came. The flight down the Spanish coast to Malaga would be grueling, but he wanted to catch Cecilia by surprise, so that, at the end of it, he could hold his son again. "Mathilde will countersign these after she and Alais finish brewing more of that infernal potion."

"Despite the taste, it does help with the geas headaches," Dominic said mildly.

He looked as tired as Michael felt. The two of them had stayed up almost all night planning strategies for dealing with Cecilia and the Cursed One. Michael regretted bringing the conflict to Sir Jean's hearth and home, but both he and Dominic had agreed that of all the local Houses of the Rose, Villeroze-sur-Orb was the most defensible and was also situated comfortably away from any cities or villages. If need be, the djinni could fight using their powers, without fear of discovery by outsiders.

Michael studied the other djinn. Dominic stood at the other writing table, bent over his furiously-scratching pen, striving to finish his share of the messages shortly to be sent out via pigeon-post to every House of the Rose throughout Europe and North Africa. His dark hair was marred by a broad white streak, legacy of his injury in Beziers sixty years ago. Even with the miraculous healing ability of djinni, he was still crippled from that dreadful day. Would he ever be fully healed in this life?

Not that Michael could, or would, do anything to dishonor the bonds each of them now shared with their respective consorts, but ... it still hurt him to see Dominic in pain, no matter what else he had done.

He focused on the slender stack of red-edged paper ribbons balanced on the slanted surface of the desk in front of him as hot golden sunlight and the dusty smells of late afternoon poured in through the opened windows of the parlor. Each of them bore the same text, as agreed to by the kin.

Dominic finished writing, sanded the ink to help dry it, and straightened up, rolling his broad shoulders. His gray eyes rested on Michael with a thoughtful expression.

They had carefully avoided speaking of anything personal since Mathilde's revelation that Dominic had indeed Transformed Michael without his consent. The news about the Cursed One, arriving hard on the heels of Mathilde's report and the resulting crisis had allowed him to avoid thinking too much about what he should do with that truth.

What did he want from Dominic? Aside from his shattered oaths to the Templars, becoming a djinn had brought Michael only benefits: his crippled leg healed, his true identity as Ea restored to him, and the opportunity to indulge in his appetite for knowledge. In none of these things had Dominic harmed him. Only Michael's sense of honor had been injured by his assumption that he had forsworn his sacred vows, but he hadn't done that. The memory had been constructed by Cecilia. It wasn't true. And Dominic's action had in fact saved him, against his will, from a lonely, frustrated life of self-denial and unnecessary suffering, especially now that news had come that King Louis's Crusade had failed. And the Saracens, under the aggressive Egyptian Sultan Baybars al Bundukdari, had taken back so much territory already in the Holy Land, and sworn to take it all. What use would Templars be without their mission?

What to do? He certainly did not want to subject Dominic to another trial before the council of elders. Spilling blood in a duel could not unmake the past.

And he did not want to. If Dominic had not found him and Transformed him, Michael would never have met and married Tirgit, and never have had the joy of a son to love. A son, he reminded himself, with whom he would soon be reunited.

Dominic seemed to sense his thoughts. With swift strides he crossed the parlor, kneeling, to Michael's astonishment, at his feet.

"I meant what I said earlier," he said in a low voice. "I never wanted to bring you harm. I—I love you. Male, female, god, goddess, king, queen, or knight, I have *a/ways* loved

you. That I did force your consent, and that the reason *why* is hidden from me—" His voice shook.

A third course lies open to you, Brother Michael, Honoria spoke in his mind, her tone less acerbic than usual.

Brother Michael? Her reference to his Templar title startled him.

You were raised a Christian, as I was.

Did she mean him to surrender himself to the knights who still sought him for his unwilling desertion from the Order? What would that solve?

What's the end of that prayer you like so much? Her impatience was back in full force.

Then Michael understood. How blind had he been, not to see this way before? And yet ... and yet ... It felt like the correct thing to do. The *only* thing to do.

He placed his right hand on Dominic's head, as if administering a blessing. "I believe you when you said you repent of your actions, and I forgive you for your trespasses against me, Dominic."

Forgive. The word hung between them, written in the hot light spilling through the windows. Then Dominic's shoulders shook, and a choked sound escaped him.

As Dominic struggled to control his emotions, Michael stood quiet, strangely peaceful. *Forgiveness. A different path, though it is neither part of the laws of the House nor the way of the djinni.*

"Time alters everything save the bonds we share together," Dominic said, showing no inclination to rise from his kneeling position. Tears tracked down his cheeks. "I am

most heartily sorry for the grievous wrong I did you. Your forgiveness is—is..." He sat back on his heels, overcome.

"I know," Michael said, his hand still resting on Dominic's head. "Get up. Be free of this burden. We have much left to do."

Very slowly, Dominic stood, wiping his face and straightening his robe, shrugging as if he were, indeed, releasing a weight from his shoulders.

When the other djinn regained his composure, Michael said, "Let us hope that Mathilde can find the answer to why Cecilia wrought such an elaborate lie about that night. In the meanwhile, I wish you and my sister a safe journey and a safe return from Bressoux."

"I wish you the same," Dominic said. He closed the short distance between them, placing a warm, chaste kiss on Michael's mouth.

He did not press further. Michael had made his feelings regarding Dominic's obsessive love plain, with Tirgit and Mathilde under the same roof—but Michael felt lighter, as if he had thrown off his own old burden of pain and guilt.

* * * *

An hour later, in the room he shared with his consort, Michael finished belting his three-quarter length tunic.

"My lord, please take me with you," Tirgit said, her voice nearly inaudible behind the curtain of dark hair that concealed her face. Her head was bent, all her attention seemingly fixed on the pair of leather boots she held out to him.

Her aura was brighter and larger than it had been right after her Transformation, but it would be decades before her wings grew enough to enable her to fly. If she accompanied him, he would have to carry her on the long flight south to the Kingdom of Granada, and then bear a double burden on the return trip.

"Tirgit, mine own sweetheart. You know I cannot."

She helped him put the boots on, and after, he crooked an affectionate finger under her pointed chin, tipping her face up to his. Her changeable blue-green eyes, striking against her black brows, were red-rimmed with weeping and sleeplessness.

"The kin want a Protector here, in case there's trouble while we're gone." He did not have to mention the Cursed One—or Cecilia. Tirgit had taken the news of Cecilia's betrayal to heart. The Eldest had been her goddess, foster-mother, and before their marriage—Michael winced internally—occasional lover.

"I know," Tirgit said. A fresh batch of tears welled up and trickled from the corner of her eyes. "I only wish for us to be a real family."

"I do, too," he said, firmly putting any thought of Dominic from his mind. He bent and kissed away her tears, tasting warm salt. "I promise I'll be back within a fortnight, and Mathilde and Dominic should return by then as well. I'm certain they'll need help with the children. Blanche has four sons, all under the age of ten. Once Robert arrives, this house will be a lively place indeed."

That won him a tremulous smile. "He'll enjoy meeting his cousins."

Michael nodded. "I'm sure of it."

He patted his belt pouch, hearing the clink of coin and the satisfying rustle of parchment. On his return journey with Robert, he would stop at every House of the Rose along the way to distribute the warnings about Cecilia, and to assure the kin that their Protectors stood ready to deal with the Cursed One and the renegade Arjumand.

Renegade ... It stilled boggled him that his cousin Roland, his own boyhood protector, would have defected to the Cursed One.

You know why he did, Honoria whispered.

He had never believed her suspicions that his sister and Roland had shared an adulterous relationship, that Roland had left Mathilde with child before going on Crusade. It was still unbelievable, though Mathilde had confessed the truth, and Roland's actions seemed to prove it.

He plucked his cloak off its peg, and slung it jauntily over one shoulder. "Give me a kiss, sweetheart, and escort me to the roof. You'll be holding our son in your arms by the next full moon."

* * * *

In the djinni's suite on the second floor, Mathilde gazed out the small window, putting off her next action while twilight stained the sky the color of glowing charcoal. There was a breeze, but it bore no hint of coolness. Instead it roasted her like a heated draft from an ancient hypocaust.

When the clouds lost their lurid hue and faded to a uniform gray, she reluctantly donned a woolen gown, more suitable to autumn than to this summer heat. The warm clothing would be comfortable once she and Dominic began their journey north, but right now she felt like a bird being baked into a pastry shell, slowly cooking in her own juices.

"Lady, will you be taking the cloak, as well?" asked Elise, the inquisitive maid who had been assigned to attend both Mathilde and Tirgit.

Mathilde studied the heavy drape of brown wool trimmed with squirrel, and shuddered. More likely than not, it would be raining when they reached the north. She would be grateful for the extra warmth when they crossed the mountains that lay between this place and Bressoux, but what she wanted right now was a cool bath and a gown made from thin handkerchief linen.

Along with the cloak, she had to don thick knitted hosen underneath her gown, though the very thought seemed to draw forth a wave of prickling perspiration. Perhaps she could just pack them? And carry them ... Her aura-wings began to ache with a not-quite-substantial throb, anticipating the pain that would come after a long flight.

It was six hundred or more miles north and east to Liege, with no time to rest until they had brought the children safely south to Villeroze-sur-Orb. Luckily Dominic would be with her. She could rely on his strength if hers failed.

As if summoned by her thought, he entered the bedchamber. To her astonishment, he gave her a genuine smile, his gray eyes shining with—Was that *happiness*?

His radiance left her wrestling down jealousy. "You've spoken with Michael." She knew her brother would never betray her or his own honor, so it was foolish to resent the fact that Dominic rarely smiled like that for her. Even after ten years of marriage and consortship, she still wished she could be the recipient of such eternal devotion.

Elise paused in braiding Mathilde's hair, her face averted, her ears cocked.

—Well, this conversation will be common knowledge amongst the kin within an hour,—she said, mind-to-mind.—Duel or trial?—Neither of those possibilities seemed likely as a cause for joy.

—Neither,—he sent. His smile deepened until an elusive, seldom-seen dimple appeared in his right cheek. "I am *forgiven*."—And I don't care who knows.—

Mathilde restrained the urge to gape. *Forgiven? Trust my brother to do the unexpected!*

His smile dimmed. "I have a boon to ask of you."

"Michael's forgiveness is not enough for you?" she guessed.

He gave a nod. "Will you look into my memories again? I need to know what Cecilia was trying to hide."

"And I always thought Michael was the font of insatiable curiosity," she murmured. It was easier to jest, than to face what they could not speak of.

Her husband's lips quirked.

Was he amused? Sympathetic? It was her turn to speak. "I agree—we need to know. Can it wait until after we've retrieved the children and returned here? I don't want to risk

being struck down by a geas before we depart." *Or seeing what's in your heart...*

"That's reasonable," he agreed, and reached for his cloak, which was hanging alongside hers on a wooden peg. Then he opened the great carved chest that stood at the foot of the bed, and extracted his own flying clothes—thick woolen leggings like her own, and a long quilted jerkin. "Sir Jean is already waiting in the courtyard to bid us farewell."

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Malaga, Kingdom of Granada, Saturday,
26th of the moon Muharram, 669 AH (September 13, AD
1270)

Three days after waking from his Transformation, the most frightening, most exhilarating event of his life, Robert stood in the reception hall under the assessing gazes of Aunt Cecilia, Master Jaleel, Mistress Habiya, and Cousin Antarah, his tutor. He strained to solidify his great green wings of light, but they refused to coalesce, and passed through the target without making it so much as quiver. Thus had it been at twenty paces, then fifteen, then ten ... He knew that he *should* be able to lift the gilded metal platter from the table that stood five steps away, but ... With each command from Cecilia to move closer to the table, he felt his shame increase.

There was something wrong with him. Moving objects with his aura should be easy, the easiest of all the things a djinn could do, from every story Aunt Cecilia had ever told him. But *doing* it felt like he was trying to summon forth powers that were securely locked away. In fact, he could almost feel the

solidity of bands imprisoning something within his chest, something that yearned and strained for freedom. He knew if he could just try a little harder, his power—his *real* power—would break those bands and...

The platter stayed put, no matter how frantically he lashed it with his wing. He gulped air into his burning lungs, and felt the cool tickle of sweat on his face, the back of his neck. *Why can't I do this?*

"Move closer," said Cecilia, patiently. But Robert saw the dismay in Master Jaleel's face.

Robert stepped closer. Now he could have simply reached out with his physical hand to move it. He gathered his aura, fighting the unnatural sluggishness, and tried again

This time the platter moved, sliding a hands-breadth to the left. Robert stopped, panting, but triumphant. *It moved! I did it!*

Cousin Antarah's next words were crushing. "So, he's no more powerful than a Crown of Service djinn?" Master Jaleel's younger brother, he was an unflappably calm and quietly rigorous teacher, and Robert had always had to work very hard to garner his approval during their lessons.

Cecilia quickly stepped to Robert's side, and put her arm around him, showing her support. It didn't help. He wanted to be strong! He was trying so hard!

"The fault is probably mine," she said quietly. "It appears I made an error in Transforming Lord Rafi so young." She sighed, drawing him closer, and Robert felt her great silver aura-wings surrounding him, like the touch of the finest muslin draperies, nearly transparent and as ephemeral as

cobwebs. "I only wanted to protect the House..." She bowed her head, regret radiating from every line of her posture.

Robert felt even worse. They had all been counting on him. He had failed the House ... and Aunt Cecilia.

"But Lord Marcus was able to call down lightning when he was but eleven, and still mortal," Master Jaleel protested.

Robert cringed. What would his parents think of him when they heard that he couldn't even solidify his aura? He had been practicing every day since he woke from his Transformation! It wasn't fair! He felt so strong, so alive ... and so sure that this *should* come easily to him.

And now they were all disappointed with him. What was he doing wrong?

Robert glanced up, and what he saw startled him. For an instant, Cecilia smirked, her expression hidden from the others by the long veil covering her hair. She looked like ... like she was *happy* he was crippled. And then the expression vanished, and he wondered if he had imagined it. After all, why would she be *pleased* that he'd woken up without his full powers?

* * * *

That night Cecilia departed for Italy, where she guessed the Cursed One would go first. The kin speculated endlessly as to how the confrontation would play out. The next day started with Robert's usual instruction in swordplay just after the pre-dawn Fajr call to prayer.

Cousin Khalil was an experienced warrior, and served as the chief of the baggage train guards for overland shipments

to other cities in the Kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, and Granada. When he was home, he taught the older boys how to wield various weapons. He worked Robert hard that morning, until his arms burned with strain and his knees were shaky, finally giving reluctant words of praise when Robert managed to parry every blow. Robert treasured those a few words, sweet as honey balm over the sting of his failure to properly employ his aura.

If he couldn't use his aura the same way that Aunt Cecilia could, then he would become the most famous swordsman in the kingdom of Granada, and protect the kin of the House with the power of his blade. He could do that. He was physically stronger than any of the other boys now, and most of the grown men.

Just before the evening meal, Robert and Cousin Antarah were both summoned to Master Jaleel's study. Wondering what the Master wanted, Robert followed in Antarah's wake, head raised high, conscious that he was Protector of the House, and glad the other children saw him being summoned into an official House council session with the adults. The one thing he hadn't expected about becoming a djinn was that he could no longer eat with his age-mates. They were in the House, but not of it yet, and so not allowed to know—officially—what he ate now. What he drank, he reminded himself. He didn't mind the blood, really. It was just lonely to eat by himself...

He had barely settled onto one of the large floor cushions when Jaleel said: "We've been discussing your plight, Lord Rafi, and we wonder if perhaps Lady Cecilia didn't deliberately

... that is to say, your powers..." Jaleel pulled nervously at the colored thread of his embroidered sleeves. Robert had long ago come to the conclusion that Master Jaleel *liked* to worry, but he seemed even more agitated tonight than usual.

"There are good reasons for waiting until a boy can grow a beard before Transforming him," murmured Cousin Antarah. His dark gaze rested on Robert, assessing him.

Robert swallowed down sudden nausea. He was Protector of the House, this House, wasn't he? But still ... "I'll protect you if the C-cursed One comes here," he said, hating the fact that he stumbled over his vow. "Cousin Khalil said I had—"

Shocked, Habiya said, "Lord Rafi, it is we who must protect *you*. Sitt Rasheeda named you our Protector, but you're only a child!" She stopped herself, hand to her lips.

"How can we ensure his safety?" Antarah asked, reasonably enough.

There was a long silence. Habiya stared intently at the diamond-patterned rug. Jaleel stared at Robert. Should he say something? He wasn't sure what.

Then Master Jaleel cleared his throat. "We cannot ensure the young lord's safety." The lamplight shone on the dark planes of his face and the ridged frown on his forehead. "And he cannot ... that is..." He smiled apologetically at Robert. "It seems that the most prudent course of action in Sitt Rasheeda's absence is to send you to your parents."

"His parents," breathed Habiya, and her sudden smile was almost blinding.

"They, at least, have a chance of protecting him properly," Antarah agreed.

After all this time, after years of homesickness and begging Aunt Cecilia ... Robert wanted to agree so badly that the words tasted like steel and oranges in his throat. But what emerged was, "I can't leave."

"What?"

"I'm your Protector," Robert said, stubbornly. "I can't just ... run away."

"Apkallu or not, you're a nine-year-old boy," Jaleel said, firmly.

Robert had thought he'd be only too happy to have a djinn—even one as weak as himself—stay.

"We are the adults. We have been Raised and Named. It is our duty to protect you until you're old enough to remember," Habiya added. She smiled, and touched his cheek with maternal affection. "I'm sure that Lord Michael and Elder Sister Theodora long to see you."

Antarah said. "We're lucky that the final shipment of leather from Cordoba hasn't arrived yet. Captain Thomas is still in port. He can take you back to London as soon as it's received and loaded. No time to waste!" He rubbed his hands together, pleased with his brother's solution.

"But..." said Robert. Oh, he wanted to see his parents again. But he was a Protector. He had *promised*...

"You can protect us better by leaving than by staying," Master Jaleel said harshly. Then he softened. "When you're older, and in possession of your full powers, then we will rejoice in your return, Lord Rafi."

Mistress Habiya nodded solemnly. "Go, and let your father finish your training," she urged. "Don't forget to write to us."

Robert sighed. "I—I'll miss you. All of you." And it was even true. He had wanted to go home for such a long time, but he would miss Mistress Habiya, and Cousin Antarah, and even Master Jaleel, with his complaints and his fussing.

Antarah rose, and put a large, warm hand on Robert's shoulder. "I will help you pack."

* * * *

Dar al-Warda, Malaga, Kingdom of Granada, Tuesday, 28th of the moon Muharram, 669 AH (Feast of St. Edith, September 16, AD 1270)

Somehow, Habiya's practical questions about how many clean shirts Robert should bring on his journey, and whether he needed to pack his winter cloak, and what gifts might be appropriate to send along to the kin London, had seeped into Robert's dreams. He was scrabbling around in his half-remembered rooms in London, frantically chasing after mice with the beaks of birds that must be packed in his trunk for the journey....

"Lord, wake up. Lord Rafi, you must wake up!"

Someone was shaking him, and it was enough to disrupt the dream. Robert groaned, opened his eyes, and lunged out of bed with a sudden jolt of apprehension. Had he overslept? Was the *Rose of Yarmouth* about to sail without him? Confused, he noticed it was still dark in his chamber. The ship wasn't due to sail until the hour of Dhuhr, the midday call to prayer.

Cousin Antarah was standing next to his bed, holding a lamp.

Robert blinked at the too-bright light. His eyes felt gritty, and his thoughts moved like thick honey. Oh, wait. If they were waking him up in the middle of the night, then ... "Is something wrong?" Now he heard the sound of running feet moving about in the house and—faintly—the clash of metalware from the kitchens, but there was no smell of smoke. No one was yelling. Why—?

"Lord, I am sorry to wake you," replied Cousin Antarah. Tired and rumped, it seemed as if he, too, had been woken out of a sound sleep. "Lord Michael, your father, is here!"

Papa's here? The news was so unexpected that Robert simply marvelled. Then pure joy took over. His father had come for him! He was going home at last!

"Here, I'll help you dress..." Antarah hung the lamp carefully on the room's lamp stand, and fetched the clothing that had been laid out on the divan.

Still dazed with sleep, Robert allowed Cousin Antarah to dress him in a clean cotton shirt and his new robe, which was a practical shade of brown, with wide embroidered bands on the sleeves. His outfit was completed with slippers and crocheted-cotton cap for his head.

Robert followed Antarah out of his room and across the starlit courtyard to the reception hall. It was brightly-lit, the patterns from the carved window-screens spreading over the courtyard's flagstones like gilded carpets. As he trotted in his tutor's wake, he felt his initial joy and anticipation turn to apprehension when he remembered what a failure he had proved as an Apkallu.

He couldn't perform the simplest tasks using the Hand of Air without intense and exhausting effort. And flying ... well, flying had been ruled entirely out of the question by Master Jaleel. Robert had been looking forward to the day when he could soar alongside the gulls and terns he saw daily swooping over the docks.

At the entrance to the reception hall, Robert halted, overcome. Sir Michael de Murat, a glass goblet of blood clutched in one hand, stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by kin, and deep in conversation with Master Jaleel and Captain Thomas.

Robert stared. His memories, vague as they were, hadn't lied. Papa was every bit as tall and handsome as memory reported, and he was surrounded by the same golden glory that had dazzled Robert when he was young.

Cousin Antarah seemed just as impressed. He, too, had come to a halt, and was gazing upon the tall knight with wonder. "Lord Ea, remember me, your servant Ur-sang!" he murmured, in a voice scarcely loud enough to be heard above the babble of the rest of the voices in the stuffy chamber.

Everyone was upset and his father looked grave. Robert swallowed, hard. He should go make his greetings. He would ... just as soon as he managed to swallow enough spit to keep from croaking like a raven when he spoke.

Then Captain Thomas caught sight of Robert and Antarah, and waved them forward. Of course, everyone else turned to look at them, too.

Robert only had eyes for his father, on whose face joy quickly turned to disbelief, then anger. Great golden wings

spread out, filling nearly the entire chamber, and glowed sullen blood-red at the tips as Papa's blue eyes pierced Robert like a lance.

Robert stumbled a little on the thick carpets, but he managed to bow in the Frankish style as he'd been taught. He opened his mouth, and words flowed out, words he hoped were a proper greeting in *langue d'oil*, but his awareness had narrowed down to that angry, *disappointed* gaze. It was just as Aunt Cecilia had predicted. He drew in his wings, trying to hide their pallid weakness. He stared down at his slippared feet, and the geometric gold-and-red patterns of the carpet. "I'm sorry," he whispered. To his horror, his vision began to blur, just as if he was still a child. He tried to stop away the tears, but they kept coming, so he kept his head resolutely bowed.

And then strong arms were around him, lifting him up, and he was surrounded by the smell of sweat, wool, and faintly, resinous myrrh.

"Robert," said a deep voice. "My son, it is so good to meet again." He felt a kiss on his cheek, and then his father said, in a softer voice, "Don't cry, Robert. Please, don't cry."

"I'm sorry!" Robert burst out, his voice muffled because his face was pressed into his father's neck. "I'm sorry. I *want* to be stronger. I've been trying..."

"There's nothing to be sorry for, my son." Was Papa's voice shaking? "Your mother and I have both missed you very much." He didn't release Robert from his embrace as he addressed the others in a whiplash voice. "What has

happened here? Who has done this to my son? *And why was I not told?*"

"L-lord," Jaleel quavered. "Lord, forgive us. We did not know—Sitt Rasheeda said—we had not yet received the news you brought—"

"Cecilia," Papa said, his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper now. There was death in that husking tone, death and horrible punishment. Robert had never heard anything that frightened him more, not even from his aunt. "For this crime, I will cut her heart out and feed it to her. I will make sure that she is Forgotten like the Cursed One."

"Lord!" cried Jaleel. "Forgive us, please!"

Robert heard a thump, as if Jaleel had fallen, but a cautious peek revealed the Master of the House in full prostration, his face pressed to the carpet. "Sitt Rasheeda said it was necessary. The boy consented! And the Cursed One is among us once more!"

"You know as well as I do that a beardless boy cannot lawfully consent to Transformation or the sharing of blood," Michael said, but his tone was scornful now, rather than deadly. "Nevertheless, the real responsibility for this act is Cecilia's. She knew exactly what she was doing when she ruined my son."

"Lord, you mean his powers—?"

Robert felt his father's hand cradle his head, and stroke the curling hair that escaped his cap. "—have been deliberately bound," Papa finished. "I can see something like a chain wound about his aura."

"And you can cure him, lord?" Habiya asked, filled with concern.

Robert felt his emotion echo hers. Was it true? Could his weakness be cured?

Papa's reply dashed hope. "I don't know. I've never seen a geas like this before—or at least I can't remember it." His voice held deep frustration. "But when we return to Beziers, perhaps my sister Lady Mathilde can find a way to unbind him." Papa drew him closer. "Blessed Virgin, you're only a boy. How could she do it?" he murmured, so that only Robert heard him.

"Are you taking me with you to London?" Robert asked. He wondered if Papa would be sailing with them on the *Rose of Yarmouth*.

Papa shook his head. "Your mother, Aunt Mathilde, and ... Uncle Dominic, await us near Beziers, in Toulouse. And you'll get to meet some of your cousin Blanche's children, too." His face looked funny when he said that.

"The winds are contrary right now, lord," Captain Thomas said, apologetically. "So it may take us some time to reach Barcelona."

"No matter," said Papa. He set Robert down, and said to the assembled kin. "We'll start flying back at sunset. I promised the others I would return as soon as possible."

Jaleel bowed. "For today, then, we offer the hospitality of our house, and whatever supplies you need." He swallowed visibly. "And w-when Sitt Rasheeda returns ... if she returns ... we will serve her summons to council."

A council of elders? Was Aunt Cecilia going to be punished because she failed to Transform him properly? Robert wanted to ask, but Master Jaleel was already bowing and escorting Papa to the djinni's chambers to refresh himself and sleep. He would have to talk to Papa later, when they were alone.

The sky above the courtyard had turned gray with approaching dawn as Robert hurried back to his own rooms, following Cousin Antarah, who said his trunk and other belongings would be shipped to Beziers; he had only to pack a change of clothing and those few small items that could be carried by a djinn in flight. Those tasks were quickly accomplished, and there was nothing to do but wait through the long hot hours of the day for nightfall.

Robert wondered what it would be like to fly at last. Humiliatingly, he would be forced to wear a harness of silken cords, and Papa would have to carry him. But they would make it to Beziers in a matter of days, rather than the weeks required by ship-travel, and he would see Mama again within a fortnight. Finally, the sun began to sink into the west, and it was time to drink his supper of blood.

As he climbed the stairs to the roof, where Master Jaleel, Mistress Habiya, and the rest of the household waited to see them off, Robert vowed to himself that if he ever came this way again, it would be under his own powers, when he could glide through the air as effortlessly as his father, or Aunt Cecilia.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

"...the storm that annihilates countries stunned the city, the storm that will make anything vanish wickedly stomped it, the storm burning like fire cracked the skin on the people, the storm ordered by Enlil in hate, the storm gnawing away at the country,

covered Ur like a cloth, veiled it like a linen sheet."

—*The Lament for Ur* (Sumerian poem)

Along the coast of al-Andalus, Spain, Wednesday, 29th of the moon Muharram, 669 AH (September 17, AD 1270)

On the first night of travel Robert's father flew north along the coast. The stars shone with a light as sharp as silver blades glittering off the restless facets of the sea. Robert wanted to continue on this journey forever. Flying was even more wonderful than he had imagined when he had contemplated his destiny as a djinn. He loved the cool air beating against his face, bringing the scents of fishy brine and musky rotting seaweed, the earthy scents of dung and hay and smoke from the coastal villages and farms, the sharp fragrances of herbs and plants he couldn't identify. He loved the sight of the beaches and cliffs and occasional farms unrolling below. And most of all, he loved being in his father's company, with the prospect of seeing Mama again very soon.

Papa talked with him, and Robert thirstily soaked in every anecdote, every story. Papa related his adventures, and the adventures of his relations. In return, he told Papa about Cousin Antarah and his lessons in Arabic, about Cousin Khalil

and learning the sword, and about how kindly Mistress Habiya and Master Jamal had treated him.

Papa told him Aunt Cecilia had deliberately bound his powers, but he didn't understand why she had done that. Hadn't she Transformed Robert because the House needed all its Protectors against the Cursed One? Why would she prevent him from being able to use all his powers?

"That's what I want to ask her," Papa said grimly, when Robert voiced his questions.

They dropped the subject by mutual consent, and Papa spoke instead of the Cursed One, which confused Robert further. After Aunt Cecilia's many many warnings, it was strange to hear that Papa remembered seeing her as a little girl in church every Sunday. He looked and sounded sad when he spoke of her. Robert tried to picture a golden-haired cousin who looked like Papa, and yet was the most dangerous djinniah alive. He wondered how his Aunt Mathilde felt, having to fight against her own daughter. It sounded like one of the stories that Cousin Antarah told of the intrigues at the courts of the sultans, where brother plotted against brother, wives against their husband's concubines, sons against fathers. It made Robert sad to think of, too.

They arrived in Cartagena near dawn, welcomed by the kin, who had a house near the harbor. Papa gratefully accepted the jars of blood offered to him, and fielded anxious questions about both Cecilia and the Cursed One with dignified courtesy. He had more shocked questions to answer when he handed off one of the jars to Robert.

Rapid-fire Spanish was exchanged between Papa and the Master of the House, and all Robert understood was that he was being presented as a Protector-in-training. It didn't require any knowledge of Spanish to interpret the looks of pity turned his direction when his djinn status became known, or to recognize Aunt Cecilia and Master Jaleel's names being discussed in outraged tones. He wanted to defend Master Jaleel, but his stumbling attempts to do so in Spanish were politely dismissed, and the conversation raced on ahead of his faltering tongue.

He was fluent in Arabic, but that language would become more useless the further north they traveled. In the meanwhile, he had English, French, Latin, and Greek, but very little Spanish yet, which would have been the most useful on this journey. Robert waited until they had been shown to the djinni's suite before making his request.

Papa sat on a stool with a weary sigh, and Robert rushed to help him pull off his boots. When he had put the boots neatly next to the linen press, he ventured, "I had a hard time understanding everyone. Will all the kin speak Spanish for the rest of our journey?"

Papa shook his head. "When we reach Barcelona, they'll be speaking Catalan. And in Beziers, the folk will be speaking langue d'oc, which is similar to Catalan."

"Can you teach it to me?" Robert asked, timidly, "in the way of the djinni?"

Papa's eyes widened in shock. "God, no!"

At Robert's involuntary flinch, his father reached out a comforting hand, and drew him close. "I'm sorry, Robert, but

to share blood with you, before you've been Raised and Named ... you'd be burdened with all the things I've done and seen. I don't want to do that to you, not yet. Maybe when you're older."

Robert didn't want to spend the rest of this journey not understanding what people said to him. It was bad enough that he was too crippled to fly by himself, but not to be able to *speak* for himself? He began to protest, but bit off the rest of his words when he saw the sad line of his father's mouth.

"Go to sleep now," Papa said, gently. "I promise I'll teach you some words and phrases tonight, on our way to Valencia."

"Yes, Papa," Robert murmured, trying to feel grateful that his father was at least willing to instruct him. But it would have been so much easier to simply absorb the knowledge the way that he had been told the djinni could. Not that he'd ever had the chance, he thought, sulkily, as he began to pull off his own clothes in preparation for sleep. Aunt Cecilia had forbidden him to taste the blood of any human being until his Appointing, and she had never let him taste her blood. When would he be allowed to finally use those few powers left him?

* * * *

Venice, Feast of St. Luke, Thursday, September 18, AD 1270

For Blanche and Roland it was four nights of hard flying west from Constantinople during the dark of the moon, over the arid, mountainous landscape of Greece, then north, along the rugged Dalmatian coast, seeing stony soil and brown

grass give way to thick forests. Near dusk on the fourth day, as they crossed over the narrow arm of the Adriatic Sea, Blanche saw a cluster of tiny church spires and red-tiled roofs rise from the middle of a gray-green lagoon set in a flat coastline. The clean wind off the faraway Alpine slopes was tainted by the pall of hearth smoke from innumerable fires.

They had finally arrived in Venice. They descended cautiously toward the pastel city as the last rays of sunlight glinted off the pale domes of the cathedral. She was both unutterably weary and determined to continue home to her sons, if she could only—for a moment!—stand on solid ground.

The air roared past her ears as the inflamed orb of the sun winked sullenly out. Roland's tall figure, which had been a glorious hawk stooping at her side but a moment ago, grayed out. His aura still cast a crimson corona of rage to her Seer's eyes. Once ignited, his anger had fed upon itself, building brighter and hotter the further they flew.

Roland leveled from his steep glide and began a slow spiral. She matched his path, and saw from horizon to shadowy horizon: the still scarlet-drenched mountains crowned by a brand new moon; the silver tongue of the sea, going gray; the bulky shadows of the eastern shore. When the sky's cloak of midnight blue overtook the twilight, it was too dark for the people in the plazas below to see them in the air. As they drew nearer to the colorless surface of the sea, she began to see individual buildings in the city, lit by torches, even as the toylike galleys and wallowing cogs began to disappear against the dark water.

Roland showed her, mind-to-mind, the rooftop where he was going to land. They slipped down onto the roof in silence and alighted next to the dovecote, illuminated by a single lamp. She was in some state beyond exhaustion that had no name. So it was that, when Roland stooped down to look for the jars of blood Sharibet had agreed that her House would provide them, the voice that greeted them was a complete shock.

"Oh, you must be djinni!" said a little girl in the Venetian dialect, which Roland had foresightedly shared with Blanche the day before. She was perhaps the same age as Blanche's oldest son Pieter, and like him, all thin arms and legs, brown hair, big eyes, a piping sweet voice. "I know! I know! You're Lord Arjumand! You look like Lady Mathilde. She's not here now. Oh, you're pretty," she said, directly to Blanche. "You look just like Lady Mathilde, too. Who are you? I'm called Petronella. Shall I run and tell my mother that you've come? She's Cosima, the Mistress of the House."

Roland's face had gone still, and grim.—There's no food here for us.—

"Oh, no, wait! I almost forgot!" Petronella stood straight and solemn, folding her hands at her waist, bowing. "It is good to meet again." Then she relaxed, tilting her head in obviously practiced adorableness. "Do you need a pigeon? Let me show you. This is Ariel," she said, pointing at an indistinguishable bird, "and this is Bethiel." She pointed to another lump of feathers. "And this is Ceriel..."

"Petronella," Blanche said in her most authoritative mother-voice, "We're supposed to find jars of food here. Do

you know whether your family has received any message from Sharibet recently?"

Petronella blinked, frowning slightly. "Mother Sharibet? Yes! They're having a meeting about it now. Shall I call them?" Before Blanche could stop her, she had pulled a cord hanging from the dovecote. A sweet bell rang out.

—Damn!—Roland sent.—Wish she hadn't done that.—He picked Petronella up, earning a big grin from her. She nestled into his shoulder as trustingly as only a fully beloved and cosseted daughter could.—We may have to—Roland started to send a picture of *Petronella, eyes closed, head lolling...*

She cut him off, fiercely, with the most absolute negation she could send to him.—No. Sooner you should kill me now and be done with this. How can you lay a hand of harm upon this innocent?—She's not innocent,—Roland said, exasperated.—Well, she's innocent *now*, but it's only because she can't remember anything yet. According to Mathilde's report to Sharibet, she was Simon Major in her last life. And *he* was the Man of the Ax at my Appointing. He was prepared to kill me then.—He—she—he—whatever, might have had an excuse. You have none.—

Footsteps racing up stairs sounded clearly. Somebody missed a tread as a face appeared at the opening. Then they disappeared, shouting, "Intruders on the roof!"

Petronella cried, "Intruders? Intruders, no, papa!"

"They've got Petronella," a man's distraught voice bellowed.

Roland insisted,—In the air. *Now!* Get clear.—

Blanche obeyed. When she stabilized, a hundred yards up, she did not find Roland in the air with her. Horrified, she saw him still on the rooftop, holding Petronella.—What are you doing?—Fly higher! You're still in range of—

Shutters at the windows of the building below snapped open, and the vicious rustle of crossbow bolts shredded the air. Her instinct was to escape, straight up. The bolts followed her. One scraped her calf, and she felt its burning. Then another, traveling faster, ripped through her lower ribs. It was a moment before she began to register any pain. Then she choked on blood.

"NO!" Roland roared. He drew power from the air and from the earth. She knew she needed to put distance between herself and that danger, but there was something wrong with her aura, over and above the fact that she couldn't breathe. And then lightning smashed into the House of the Rose, dazzling her eyes, deafening her ears. She could not feel her aura at all now.

She fell, spinning in the air. Stars and moon, houses and water whirled. One whole corner of the house appeared to have fallen into the canal. The rooms within were on fire. She grabbed for air with her human fingers. Where had her aura gone? Her heart beat so fast she thought it—and she—would shake loose from her body. She had no breath to scream. Where was the ground?

She hit the water of the canal with a mighty—smack!—Water closed over her head, and she sank like a stone.

* * * *

Roland felt the concussion as Blanche hit the water. Sickened, dizzy, he yet finished setting fire to the priceless tapestry revealed when his lightning strike had sloughed the face of the building away. He started more fires. They had *dared* to harm his daughter!

They would burn. But—

Petronella, little fingers clinging to his hair, skinny legs wrapped around his chest, shrieked, a thin rabbit sound.

He swooped down to the canal, hovering above the spot where Blanche had disappeared. The water still surged. It had left dirty splash marks on the houses all around. Clamor was rising in the whole neighborhood, with shutters slamming open and dogs baying. He couldn't hold the hover for long. A projecting spar from a galley tied up to the next house swayed only a little under his hand of air.

With another hand he reached down into the water. It wasn't too deep, but the galley rocked. Someone shouted, "He's standing on the water!" He didn't care what anybody saw, what anybody thought.

He opened his seer's eyes, looking for Blanche's bright star. There! Dim, rising slowly through the murky water. He grabbed for her and missed. He grabbed again, and caught her this time. She was utterly limp. Her head broke the surface and he shaped his hand of air into a wide band around her chest to force the filthy water out of her stomach and lungs, but all he got was a river of blood from her mouth. She convulsed and he squeezed again. Then he pulled her torso free of the water.

Oh, God. The crossbow bolt was still in place, from her back to below her breast. He screamed frustration, fear for her, and rage at the enemies who had dared, *dared*—

"Our house is burning!" Petronella yelled in his ear. Had been yelling, apparently. He was only now registering the sound. "You have to protect us! Why aren't you protecting us?"

He had no time to deal with her. He lifted and then pushed Blanche onto the dock by the galley. There she lay, bleeding and dripping, half on and half off of the dock.

"Petronella," he said, careless of her fear. "You must tell them, your parents, the people of the House. No one harms my daughter."

"I ... I understand. But ... who's your daughter?"

"This is my daughter. Inanna, the Queen of Heaven. Can you remember that?"

Petronella nodded jerkily, amber eyes glassy, her lips shaping *the Cursed One*.

"Good. Be sure to tell the Master of the House exactly what I have said." He set her down onto the wave-splashed dock.

She scrambled away, backward, not daring to take her eyes off him.

"Remember my message to the Master." He didn't wait for a reply. He scooped Blanche into his arms and beat his aura wings, taking off high over the canal, ignoring the incredulous shouts of mortals who saw him. He had to find a place of safety, where he could pull that damned bolt out of her. And

someplace where he could feed her blood, to speed her healing.

* * * *

Almost immediately below was a broad marketplace, with permanent butchers' stalls containing livestock. He swooped down, searching for some animal he could steal, and found a young goat, not too large. He lifted it off the ground, bawling, and carried with him westward over the large canal. But when he got to the edge of the lagoon, he couldn't see any habitations on the mainland in the dark.

Blanche was still bleeding from the crossbow bolt. If he didn't pull it out soon, she'd heal around it, and it would be much harder to remove.

He found the rooftop of a church, and set Blanche down. He held the goat motionless, keeping its mouth closed so it could only whine. His hands shook, but he had to get the bolt out of her. It went all the way through, thank God. He didn't have to cut the tip out of her. And, another mercy, it was a standard bolt, not tipped with the special poison the House brewed to subdue erring djinni.

He snapped the tip, using his aura like shears. He drew the bolt from his daughter's body in a quick snap. She woke with a scream, and he had to hold her down, too. Whispering soothing words, and wordless encouragement, he brought the struggling goat near. He cut its throat near her mouth so it bled where she could drink.

She drank. The blood stained her face and her gown, already shabby from travel and made filthy from the canal

water. She drank the whole goat, and shivered when the animal died.

He lifted the carcass and placed it as far as he could reach across the roof of the church. Let the priest wonder where the dead goat came from! Patiently he waited for Blanche to come back to herself. She was crying tears of pain. Each one fueled fury in his heart. They had dared to harm his daughter!

—I'm all right,—she said, a patent lie.—Let's go on now.—

"You need rest," he told her, allowing no argument. "I'll find a place."

He carried her to a well-lit pilgrim's hostel near docks where the shipping traffic from the mainland tied up. He hid her bedraggled and nearly unconscious state from the hostel owner with the Voice of Coercion, and ordered a private room and personal attention from the hostel owner's wife, who was not averse to being paid, though she grumbled about being kept from her bed.

Blanche needed new clothes from the skin out. He spent her money freely to obtain the articles she needed. She was too busy coughing to remonstrate with him. He knew she would take no lasting harm, but even this temporary ailment racked his heart. He stood outside the private room's door while the goodwife brought clothes to Blanche. Something soft and blue and pretty was all he noticed. Her old clothes came out bundled and sopping, held at arm's length.

"What shall I do with—?" the goodwife demanded. She was plump and pale and dark-haired, with beady eyes that saw only gold.

"Burn it. Wash it. Give it to beggars. I don't care."

—May I come within?—he sent to Blanche.

—Yes. Certainly,—she sent back to him.

His nod dismissed the goodwife. She did him the only courtesy he wished; she disappeared.

The room was cheerfully used, mostly bed, with pegs upon the wall and a single candlestick.

Blanche lay alone under the covers of a bed that usually accommodated many more travelers than themselves. She was turned away, toward the wall, but a rusty cloth on the floor testified that she had washed her face free of blood. "Am I your sister or your wife now?" she croaked.

"No one cares."

—When can we leave?—Blanche asked, saving her voice. She coughed again.

"When you feel better."

—I feel fine. I have clothes. Let's go now.—

"We can't fly now. You must rest."

—We could take a ship. I want to go *now*.—

He huffed. "We'll go when you wake, and you can talk."

She sent him a screaming roar through their blood bond. He winced as she turned her back to him.—If I knew how to get there by myself I'd leave without you,—she snarled.

"I didn't hurt the child," he protested.

—You threatened her.—

"They shot you!" he defended himself.

—Of course they did. You attacked their house. Anybody would have done the same.—

"Not anybody. We were flying. And why are we fighting?"

She didn't move. Didn't speak. He caught the sharp scent of salt tears.

He stepped toward her, and caressed her arm. "Blanche, I'm s—"

—Don't touch me.—

He snatched his hand back. "I don't understand. I only did what I had to do—for you."

She didn't answer at all.

Baffled, he stepped away from the bed, and used his hand of air to draw its curtain. He hadn't hurt the child at all. Why was she so upset? He stood by the window a while, wishing he did not have to hear his daughter weeping.

* * * *

Blanche's tears lasted for a long time. Crying was, itself, a surcease from thought. Eventually thought returned, unwelcome, inescapable.

It wasn't that she hadn't come to love Roland. What made him endearing was his supreme unawareness of the strength he took for granted. His mastery of his skills was effortless. He had conducted her from Carthage to Constantinople to Venice without undue incident, where mortals were concerned.

But God in heaven, why did men want to hit first, and talk second, if at all? Why couldn't he have thought of a better way of dealing with the people of the House than destroying their home?

Well, *reason*, she thought. That was the missing element. Why couldn't people discover better ways to solve their

disputes? She, herself, could think of three, no, four, possibly five different ways to do so. But then, she had always known she didn't think like other people. Why would she think like other Apkallu?

But she wished, oh, she *wished* she were really a goddess. She would change this world and all the people in it. Banish stupidity. Banish lack of foresight. Banish unkindness. Banish...

Sleep rescued her from melancholy thoughts.

* * * *

Venice, Friday, September 19, AD 1270

Roland kept watch, again, over his sleeping daughter. He had thought he would never grow tired of it, but this time was different. He didn't want her asleep, recuperating. He wanted her well, lively, and many miles away from here. It was almost as if he could feel the evil regard of the House. He had worked with House people. He knew how they thought. He knew how fast they could react, and how ruthless they could be when pressed.

He watched through the night, until the sky lightened with dawn. There was a lingering coldness, and his own tear-tracks dried in the brisk caress of a breeze on his cheek.

The longer they stayed cooped up in this pilgrim's hostel, the more anxious he became. The noises inside the hostel and outside on the street left him jumpy, wondering when a jar of burning oil would be coming through the window. But she needed her rest! The tension between two imperatives wore on him through the afternoon.

And in the heat, after all his exertions of the night before, he fell asleep, dozing in an uncomfortable straight chair. He slept, and dreamed of Sharibet's stair-girdled temples, and of hot, squirming, welcoming flesh, and the coolness of gold warming against his skin. He dreamed songs of death sung by thousands of voices. He dreamed of rivers of willingly offered blood, and of Sharibet's ever-present scent of roses.

He woke abruptly in twilight gloom. Had it been a dream? Or not?

He couldn't take the chance that it was not a dream.

He placed a hand of air over Blanche's mouth. With another hand of air, he gently nudged her foot, to wake her. She opened her eyes without making a sound.

—Do you smell roses?—No. Did you? It doesn't mean it's the House.—It doesn't mean it's not.—

She rubbed her face with her hands, as if trying to press more awareness into herself through her skin.

—How's your side?—he asked.

—It still hurts.—She stretched cautiously.—But it seems healed.—Put on your clothes.—

She scrambled into the new chemise and gown while he sat beside the window, trying to look out without being seen. He tested the air for perfume, but there was only the sour sewage tang rising from the water.

Were they there? He exhaled an angry breath. Before he could inhale, four brittle clay pots came through the window. He grabbed two with hands of air before they could fall to the floor. He cushioned another and prevented it from breaking on the hardwood floor, but the fourth slipped from his airy

grasp, and shattered, splashing volatile oils everywhere in the room. The oils ignited as the burning wick in the other compartment of the jar hit the floor. Fire rushed out.

He tried to cover the flames with his aura to stifle them, but the surface area was too great. He could get most of the spots to deprive them of air, but he couldn't get all. And what he couldn't get, re-ignited the spots he had already snuffed as soon as he let them go. He spread his wings very thin, but the heat hurt his aura the moment he made it substantial enough to smother the fire.

Fine lord of the air you are, he sneered at himself to suppress unwelcome panic.

—I see what you're doing. I'll get this half of the room,—
Blanche sent.—Watch out!—

More clay pots cascaded through the window. He caught most of them and sent them back where they'd come from. One was so fragile it broke against his hand of air, sending out a dusty drift smelling of cloves and opium. Before he could even think about it, he whirled a vortex of air like the dust-devils the Saracens called *djinni* and banished the drugs through the broken opening before they had a chance to burn and release their poison. Some of the attackers sneezed, sounding awfully close, perhaps even on the street below the inn.

A glance told him that Blanche had smothered the flames on her side of the room. Several of the deadly pots sat with coy innocence on the scorched floor. He snatched them up and rained them down upon the sneezers. Crackling splashes sounded and then screams. He dusted his hands.

—Smoke!—Blanche sent.—The hostel is burning. They didn't aim for just us. How do we get out?—

It was not yet sunset. They could fly off, but could Blanche, still shaky from her wound, hold a glamour of invisibility and fly? He would find it difficult to hold one for them both. The House's rule was, 'who knows our secret must be silent, dead, or one of us. Who betrays us deserves a traitor's doom.' But there was no 'us' in that precept anymore. He had no particular interest in Venice. He didn't care what the Venetians thought about him, or Blanche.

—Can we go out now?—Blanche asked.

—If you can shield, I can fly for us both.—Good! When we're out of arrow range, I can send a waterspout to douse the fire.—

You can? he wondered.

The smoke smell increased.—Hurry!—sent Blanche. She had finished packing.

At the window, he was estimating how they could both get through it. She would have to go first, and he would have to project his aura to shield him.

She sent an image to him, one that would have made him blush if he'd had any blood to spare from the agitation of combat. The image she sent was of them clasped in one another's arms, tightly as lovers.

Briskly, she tied the knot in her tired bundle and came to stand before him at the window. She put her arms around his neck.

He felt the ghostly impression of hands of air, clasping around his back, as well. Then he realized, awkwardly, that

the window was too small. He couldn't get both of them through it. Nothing for it. He smashed a hundred, a thousand needles of air into the plaster and lumber of the wall so that it fell down upon the Venetian street. As the dust from the rubble rose up, he leaped through the broken wall, cupping air to launch himself and Blanche into the sky.

Blanche spread her wings in protection. People down on the street were shouting. There were shocked or sympathetic screams as well, probably from bystanders. But the screams changed pitch to terror as hissing bolts flew up to intersect with Roland's trajectory. As they bounced off Blanche's shield, he strained to raise them higher, above the range of the angry storm. He was succeeding, too, when one of them hit Blanche on her just-healed wound.

Blanche's arms, curled close around his chest, lost strength and slipped. Her weight shifted and her hands of air around his back clutched too tightly.

He faltered, causing her to slip more. And in that moment of imbalance, with Blanche struggling to hold on to him, and to keep them both protected against the weapons seeking to pierce their flesh, a clever, wicked bolt slipped through her shield. It pinned their upper arms together; his left, then her right. For a moment he felt her pain more keenly than his own. She shared his pain, and the two of them cried out in unison.

Then the injury began to burn, and he realized that this arrow had been smeared with poison. The drug began its evil work. His vision focused narrowly upon his enemies on the ground. He allowed himself one heartbeat of anguish before

wrath ignited. He would not run away now. They all would die for daring to harm one hair upon his daughter's head with their filthy, cruel missiles. He would destroy them.

He ignored her as she shouted, "No! No! No!"

Between beats of his mighty wings, he created multiple hands of air, caught each one of the next volley of crossbow bolts and flung them with all his strength back at the would-be murderers. The screams of the dying and the silence of the dead comforted him. The pilgrim's inn crackled with flames. Smoke rose up as from a pyre.

He banked in the air, but instead of heading across the water to the mainland, he circled back toward the center of the floating city.

Blanche was conscious—barely. Her hands of air were busily breaking the bolt and removing it from their united flesh. She gasped, but did not cry out as she did it.

He supposed it must hurt, but only fury was real. His head felt light. Swiftly he found the House of the Rose. Half-burned, great chunks of the building gone, it yet was inhabited. "Arise, O House!" he shouted from above the rooftop, in a voice inhumanly loud. "Arise, O House! Let your murders and your sorcery cease!"

He focused and collected power. There was so much of it in the cloudy sky, in the watery earth. He had only to capture it and they would know his wrath...

He held Blanche in his arms as the night exploded. When he blinked the dazzle from his eyes, he tore what was left of the roof off the house, exposing the whole of the top story. Screams and whimpers came from within. He relished them.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a woman whispered, "No! No! No! Don't'!" He shut her out. He had no time for impediment. This was where the women and children lived. Oh, yes. They dared to hurt his daughter, thinking that their own children would be exempt from his vengeance.

"No! No! No!" shrieked the voice in his head.

Hah! There was a female and her hell-spawn now. He seized her with two hands of air. One to hold the neck still. The other to push the head off that neck. The crack was pure satisfaction. The screaming stopped even before the sound did. The woman's body fell, limp. He looked for the child, to seize it, too, but it had disappeared.

There were noises coming from beyond a wall that still stood. He stiffened his aura in the pattern of a thousand needles. The wall disintegrated. *Wham. Wham. Wham.* He had as many hands of air as he needed to deal deserved death.

But—where had the children gone? His peered back and forth into the darkening crannies of the broken building. Where had they gone? They were just there!

There was another bitch. She was old, sagging, wrinkled. He only needed to slap her with a hand of air and she fell down, blood dripping. There were more here somewhere. There had to be more!

He listened again. Was that a whimper? Was someone making a "shhh" sound? He was going to find them. He was going to kill them. He would kill them all, punish them ... He had to punish them...

But it was so dark. He could no longer see anything. Even his Seer's eyes had closed. Had they killed him, too? He could no longer see, or feel, the brightness of his aura. He could not feel his hands of air or his hands of flesh. He could not find his face. He dared not remember what he had just done.

Someone was whispering into his ear. Where was his ear?

"Sleep. Sleep, my father." The voice was kind and sweet. She still lived.

He surrendered to her will.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

"There are times when fear is good.

It must keep its watchful place at the heart's controls.

There is advantage in the wisdom won from pain."

—Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 458 BC

Ca' dalla Rose, Venice, Friday, September 19, AD 1270

"Mama! Mama!" Petronella called.

Damn, thought Blanche. *I have to get this old woman to wake up.* The children, in various states of shock, clustered behind her. She had saved them from Roland with her cloak of invisibility, but without an adult to care for them they were already as good as dead. Slavery was no fate she wished on any child.

She would have been utterly appalled at Roland's abominable actions if she hadn't been entirely privy to every thought that had gone through his head. He had done everything for her. He had slain these women and would have slain their children for *her*.

"Come on, old woman! Wake up!" The injured woman did not stir, but she wasn't dead. Yet. Her lip was split. What wasn't bleeding was already bruising. At least Blanche had deflected Roland's blow so he had not killed her.

"You, boy, what's her name?" she said to the nine-year-old glaring at her.

"Grandmother Maryam," he croaked.

"Maryam, wake up!" she yelled. She wished she could have saved the other women, but Roland had been too ... incensed.

The itchy ache in her wounded arm reminded her: he had taken the poisoned arrow into his own flesh first, absorbing most of the venom. Her head hurt as if it were filled with burning lumps of charcoal. How much worse must he feel, lying pale and still on the splinter-strewn floor?

She shook the old woman, but Maryam didn't waken. The children started to cry in shocked whimpers, "Mama! Mama!" Blanche's heart ached. What could she do? She wished for water to dash upon Maryam's bloody face.

A thought occurred to her. There were clouds above, and clouds were just like fog, which was wet. To get fire, one closed one's fist of air so tight that heat sparked. To get water, should she spread her hand of air very wide? She sent a thin hand of air high above her. She started with a pinpoint, then created an aura-bubble that would push air apart. It was hard to do, and she was tired and ill. She couldn't make it perfectly spherical, and she wasn't sure whether her mostly insubstantial aura would stretch as far as it needed to go. But she made the experiment, and discovered that, indeed, the space within her bubble grew cold, and the surface of the bubble dampened with water.

The water ran down the cord of her aura, and by the time it reached her hand of flesh, holding Maryam's face, it was a goodly trickle, enough to wash away the worst of the blood. Some color returned to the wrinkled cheeks.

"You must wake up!" Blanche commanded.

"Yes, lady," the old woman muttered. When she opened her eyes, she stared blearily. "Lady Mathilde? Have you returned to save us?"

She knows my mother. The thought was like a nail driven through her heart: someone else had the privilege of her mother's company. "That's right," she said briskly, in Mathilde's no-nonsense tone. "I'm here to save you and the children."

"What's happened?" Maryam started to turn her head to look, then gasped and held her head and neck very still.

"A terrible thing," Blanche said. "But the children are safe for now."

Maryam's eyes focused. "Lords of the Mountain!" she breathed. "You're not—" She tried to scuttle away on hands and backside just as Petronella had done.

There was nowhere she could go. The room was enclosed on three sides, and Blanche guarded the exit.

"Nana!" one of the children cried. It was Petronella. "Mama's not moving!"

The old woman's eyes skittered across the carnage of the room. Her gaze stopped, horrified, at the body. "Cosima!" she breathed. When next she looked at Blanche, her eyes held millennial hatred. "What have you done, Cursed One?"

Blanche was already tired of the weight of that epithet. "I am trying to salvage some kind of future for these poor children, *just as my mother would have done, if she were here*, and you think to berate me? I did nothing but accompany *him*." She pointed to where Roland lay,

unconscious, his sleeve bloody. "Yes, I failed to stop him. My sin may be great, but it is not what you accuse me of."

Maryam blinked, as if battered by the spate of Blanche's words. "But you're ... Lord Arjumand did this? He *killed* them?"

"Yes," Blanche said. "And a great many, if not all of your men folk, as well, when they attacked us at the pilgrim's hostel. They shot at us with poisoned arrows. He was wounded, and went mad." Hot tears fell from her eyes despite her effort to forbid them. She dashed them away. "So was I wounded." She pointed to her own bloody sleeve. "But he received the brunt of the poison." She wouldn't admit to herself the rest of that thought. *He may yet die...*

"Father Enlil, in his rage..." Maryam said, as if quoting something. After a shaky breath, then a more determined one, she uncovered and asked, "All dead?"

"All the ones who were after us. He also tore the roof off the house. And may have loosed the house from its foundation. Do you feel how it's swaying? We're going to have to move these children somewhere else safe, and quickly."

"Why are you helping us?"

"I'm a mother, too. If I had only known what he was going to do—" She shut her mouth. She was talking too much.

"Petronella, you must help with the babies," Maryam said.

"Everything flew everywhere and Mama fell down. And she won't get up." The girl sobbed once. "Nana. I think Mama's—"

"Yes, child. I know."

"Mama, and Auntie Giacinta, and Auntie Evangelia and Cousin Fabia. And Frederigo's swaddling came loose."

"Frederigo's swaddling is the least of our troubles."

Maryam groaned and sat up. She rested her weight on one plump forearm, then heaved herself to her feet.

"We're on the top floor and the structure is damaged," Blanche said in a rush. "Are there any outside stairs?"

The old woman shook her head.

"Inside stairs?" At Maryam's nod, Blanche said, God be thanked for small favors." She counted children—thirteen—and gave the littlest ones into the care of the biggest ones. She heard Maryam giving stern instructions. Roland lay as if dead, save for his ragged breathing. She would have to carry him.

"Nana, he's too heavy," said an older child, trying to lift a toddler. To Blanche, they all looked very similar: dark hair, golden eyes, brown chubby faces.

"Give him to me, child," said Maryam. She took the wide-eyed boy into her arms, grunting. The two youngsters standing on either side of her repositioned themselves to support her. One grabbed the hand of a child old enough to walk by itself but too young to carry another.

Blanche followed as they negotiated the roofless maze of walls toward the stairway. They scrambled over unrecognizable debris, crumpled tapestries, bits of clothing and unlit candles scattered as if by madmen. When they reached the steps and started climbing down, Blanche felt a tremor deep in the structure of the house. "Stop!" she ordered. When they didn't stop, she sent hands of air to block their way. The children shrieked in alarm as they collided with her invisible hands.

"What are you doing?" Maryam asked shrilly. The child in her arms began to cry, sobbing hopelessly.

"The stairs won't hold our weight. We can't go down this way." Blanche was weary from carrying Roland, and her vision had an alarming tendency to go dark, or change focus: bringing far objects near, or making close objects seem very far away. She tried to be grateful that the poison on the arrow had not struck her down as it had Roland. "I think we need to go back to the roof edge, and then I'll fly everyone down from there."

"You can't do that! You mustn't do that!" said Maryam, aghast. "You must never use your powers where some outsider might see you! No one not sworn to us may learn the secrets of the House."

"Maryam, I am not part of your House," Blanche said with gritted teeth. "If what Roland—Lord Arjumand—has told me is true, I have never *been* part of your House. Therefore, my secrets are free to disclose wherever I choose. And I choose to get you *and your children* out of this crumbling house alive."

The old woman closed her eyes and shivered. "You can't..."

"Your prohibitions hold no weight with me. Now, hurry!"

When Maryam did not move, Blanche wrapped her gently in a hand of air and turned her back from the stair's edge.

"Which way is closest to the outside wall?"

Maryam pointed weakly.

"Quickly! Quickly!" Blanche said to the children. "The stairs are bad. We're going another way."

The trembling of the house increased with every step. Was it swaying now? Blanche prayed it was not. She kept her ragged little procession, and herself, going in the direction Maryam had indicated.

"We're here," Maryam gasped.

Blanche saw the remnant of a window. In the dark, white shutters. all askew. glowed like cracked bones. She let Roland down onto the littered floor and said to the children, "All right. We're going to play a game now."

"What kind of game?" asked Petronella.

"We're going to play 'jump down' while I hold you."

"It's too high to jump!" Petronella objected. "Mama said that when I jumped on the stairs!"

"Yes, but I can fly," Blanche said reasonably.

"Can't either," mumbled one of the bigger boys.

Blanche tickled him with a hand of air. "Can so," she said when he jumped.

"That's right," Petronella agreed. "I saw you when you came, just before you..."

"She's a djinniah?" asked the boy of Petronella.

"I ... think so."

"Who are you, then? We don't know you," the boy said to Blanche. "We know all the djinni. Mother Sharibet, Lady Mathilde and Lord Dominic, who are our own djinni, Lady Cecilia, who is now Sitt Rasheeda, Lord Arjumand, Lord Michael, Elder Sister Leila, Elder Brother Basil, Elder Sister Theodora and Lord Rafi, who will become our Protector when he comes of age. Who are you?"

"Who are you?" countered Blanche.

"I'm Antonio," he said. "I have a True Name, but I won't find it out until I'm grown up."

"Well, Antonio, I'm Blanche of Bressoux, and Lady Mathilde is my mother."

He squinted at her in the gloom. "That's why you look like her?"

"Yes, indeed. Now I'm going to carry you all down to the ground, because the house is likely to fall down in a minute or two."

"Maryam, you must come with me first to guard the children once they're down."

"Be very still until Lady Blanche comes back to get you," Maryam said in a strained whisper. The shaking of the house was becoming more and more noticeable.

Blanche broke the shutters out of the window, and, recalling how Roland had broken the walls, she did the same until the hole was big enough. She beckoned to Maryam, whose sweat beaded on her forehead and upper lip. Blanche lifted the old woman in arms of air, and, on the edge, looked down. There was the house's dock below, perhaps ten feet wide. Beyond that was the canal, into which she had fallen the night before. The taste of putrid water returned to her, but she dismissed it. "Here we go," she said to the old woman, still holding the weeping boy. "Don't wiggle," she said to the toddler.

It was a fast glide and a short drop. There were neighbors across the canal, staring and shouting at Blanche's and Maryam's appearance on the dock. They fell silent as she climbed back up the wall—it was too short a distance to fly.

Her aura hands found or made purchases in the outside wall. In a few seconds, she was back to the children.

"One on my back, one or two in my arms!" she ordered. After a bit of confusion, she had three children in place. "Get the next batch ready for me by the time I come back," she told Antonio. "You're in charge now."

He nodded, and started arranging the children in a line before she even turned toward the window. This time before Blanche jumped, she felt the shivering of the house clearly through her feet; and it was clearer still as she climbed back up to the broken window.

She carried another three children—there were six left, and Roland. The shifts in her vision were growing more pronounced. Climbing up the wall was the hardest thing she'd done since giving birth.

The next to last set of children were squirmy, scared, and one of them must have been Frederigo, because he was wet and smelly. These children yelled as she jumped, and almost drowned out the sound of the house, settling.

Maryam and solicitous neighbors took the children from her arms. They were loading them into the boat tied up at the House's dock. She couldn't stay to see more.

Her heart was pounding with fear and effort as she crawled the wall. This time, she wasn't moving straight up. The wall had tilted to an angle overhanging the canal, over the boat and the bawling babies. The wall itself shuddered as she pulled herself along. Just as she reached the window, the section of wall she was holding onto with her right hand of air

fell completely away from the rest of the wall, and landed in the canal.

Blanche set her hand of air into another section of wall so hard that it went entirely through and into the clear space beyond. She splayed fingers of air in all directions, and held on, hanging now over the water, her skirts flying free. A third and fourth hand of air went into the window to keep the children there from falling out. She abandoned hope of getting into the window again, and tried only to decide how to get the children down safely, without breaking or crushing.

The house was toppling, leaning farther and farther toward the water. The lower stories were pleating together, crunching and smashing plaster and lumber with a noise like giants chewing rocks.

The children still inside were screaming, and her heart clenched within her chest to hear them. She was hanging nearly straight down now, and starting to feel the wind of a fast descent. The house was going to fall down onto the dock, and crush all of them unless she could figure out what she could do.

Well. There was the house. There was the dock. Here she was, in between, with tired arms and an aura that had once moved a rock falling from the sky. How had she done that? She'd need legs, lots of legs, holding herself up from the ground. She'd need arms, lots of arms and splayed little fingers, pressing the house back onto its foundation. The pressing ... that was the hard part. She thought about how her knees would lock. Nobody could move her if she didn't want to move.

The house pressed on her. It threatened to squeeze her flat. It ground onto her with all its might, and where she wasn't holding it up, it dropped pieces of itself onto her and the children below. The weight was suffocating. It crackled like fire along the joints she had created. The burning increased as she held the structure from falling, and began to push back. Time was moving faster and faster, the third floor had been crushed into the ground now. There was less building to have to hold up, and the remainder was less resistant to her will.

The roofless top story settled onto the broken mass of the house. There was a long, terrible groan, some scattered rubble fell with separate clatters, and all was silent—or not, really. Just the human volume of sobbing and prayers.

She climbed up to the window. Her hands of air felt like they'd been stretched between wild horses, but they bore her weight. Inside the window, three children waited, shocked, eyes wide in fearful hope. Was their ordeal over?

She opened her flesh arms, and they ran to her. Gently she carried them down to the dock, now full of people and broken wood and plaster.

"Nana, Nana!" the girl in her arms called out. "Our house fell down, and we were in it!"

"Yes, you'll have a story you can tell all your life," said the old woman. She didn't look at Blanche. She took the children and handed them immediately to a neighbor woman, who put them into the boat, where the other children hugged them.

"What about Lord Arjumand?"

Blanche felt as if she'd been slapped. How could she have forgotten him? She took a calming breath and turned back to the house. It was just a step, now, to the window. She squeezed through into a much narrower space. Roland lay on the floor, face shredded by splinters. Still breathing. He was so heavy now. She squeezed him through the opening and laid him onto the dock, noticing for the first time the sweat dripping down her cheeks, matting her hair, and dampening her undergown. The brisk evening air touched her with chill finger. She stood over Roland, breathing hard, and tried to wipe her face, noticing also the splinters in her own fingers, and the plaster dust covering her in a thin layer of pink mud.

She wanted to ask Maryam for wine or water. She required blood, but wasn't likely to get it. As she passed her hands across her face again, trying to chase the stinging sweat out of her eyes, she caught a stealthy movement. Immediately, she immobilized someone standing not two feet from Roland's insensate body. When she finished blinking, though the blur didn't go away, she recognized Maryam, crouching with a dagger in her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"He did this. He did all of this," Maryam snarled. "He killed them all. They're all dead. He's a traitor who has harmed the House. He must die!" She kept trying to move the dagger through Blanche's impenetrable aura.

Blanche crouched down in front of Maryam, hoping she would be able to get up again. "I'm only going to tell you this once. We didn't hurt anybody first. We have a treaty of

neutrality with Sharibet. You attacked us, and Roland defended me."

"Lies! How can that be? You're the Cursed One!" the old woman snapped, tears streaming unheeded. "Mother Sharibet would *never*—"

"Cursed I may be," Blanche said. "But undeserved." She had to put one hand on the dock to steady herself.

"What will you do to us?" Maryam whispered.

"Where is your next nearest House? I will escort your children there. They can't stay here without protection."

"Escort us? You can't! *'Whosoever aids the Cursed One shall share the same damnation.'* They'd kill us for helping you."

Blanche scoffed. "You're not helping me. I'm helping you. You don't have any choice in this. Now, tell me what you used to poison him, and the antidote."

The old woman told her what it was and sent a neighbor woman to get it and give it to Roland while the babies in the boat cried and more and more Venetians came to see the spectacle of the fallen house. Some of them tried to clamber onto the ruins looking for plunder. But the instability of the structure disabused them of their plans.

"Now, tell me where is the nearest House that I can take your children to."

"Milano is closest, but will take ten days overland to get there. Ravenna can be reached in two or three days by galley. But we have no one to man the galley!"

She let Maryam go. The old woman fell forward onto her hands and, hanging her head, and her long gray braid straggling down.

It was a close contest, which of them had the hardest time standing up. To Blanche it felt almost as far as the wall had been high. The babies still squalled, and she had to do some hiring before the neighbors and spectators all went away. "I need a galley crew!" she shouted over the hubbub of the neighbors. "Who wants to hire on for a voyage to Ravenna? Deposit in advance—reward on delivery!" A widening circle of attention formed around her as she shouted it again.

"I'll sign," said one young man, his mustache a thin straggle. He elbowed another next to him, similarly dressed in handsome hand-me-downs, and just as young.

"Oh, I'll go, too," said a third companion, affecting a bored tone; but his eyes were suspiciously bright.

In no time she had the required complement of eighteen rowers, steersmen, and officers, and they all agreed to show up at dawn to cast off. For most of them, this was their first chance to make a solo journey for profit. And Blanche felt fairly safe with the selection; neighborhood youths were certainly not going to be hardened pirates.

In the meantime, Maryam pulled herself together and arranged a collection of food, water, and clothing from the neighbor women for the children, using cajolery, appeals to Christian charity, and, where necessary, thinly veiled threats of House reprisal to those who might signal hostile intent by their failure of generosity.

The children, fed, given water and blankets, had already fallen asleep in the boat. Petronella was the exception. She watched everything with intense interest—almost, but not quite the same proprietary air with which she had introduced the pigeons.

Blanche, hoarse from shouting and negotiating, took an opportunity to catch her breath near where the girl looked out.

"Where's Ravenna?" Petronella asked.

"South of here, is all I know," Blanche answered with a pang. South meant away from her own children. South meant more time until she could go home to them.

* * * *

Saturday, September 20, AD 1270

The next morning, a bedraggled party of survivors gathered in the House of the Rose's small galley at the charred dock, eating neighbor's charity for breakfast and waiting for the hired crew to board. Thank God Maryam had told Blanche where to find enough gold in the shell of a house to pay the men. But she worried. What if they failed to honor their bond to deliver them all safely to the House in Ravenna? What if they did turn pirate and sold them all as slaves?

However, when she tried to voice these fears, Maryam dismissed them. "Everyone knows our House's reputation. If they abduct us, men—or a Protector—from another city will come for vengeance. Nobody harms the House—more than once."

Blanche shivered at that. If the children hadn't needed her so badly, and if she hadn't been so adamant about protecting them ... She remembered: *Maryam, crouching, with a dagger in her hand...*

Roland, still unconscious, was bundled aboard from the dock last of all. It reminded her unpleasantly of loading the frightened horses before the Crusaders' departure from Aigues Mortes. On that unlucky voyage, the waves had been so high they nearly swallowed the ship. The water casks had been swamped by undrinkable seawater, and life was an utter misery for everyone aboard: sailors, Crusaders, horses, and all. She checked this boat's water barrels herself. This trip was only supposed to last a few days. Surely they'd be all right that long?

The rowers, at signal, lifted their oars and dipped them into the silvery green water in unison, just as if they were a seasoned crew. They were underway.

* * * *

Roland woke to the sound of waves slapping against the sides of a wooden boat. He felt disoriented and hungry.—Blanche?—Shh. I'm here,—she responded instantly.

—Where is here?—he demanded. Above him the sky was blue, filled with puffy white clouds. He could see a flat, sandy shore passing by in the distance.

—We're sailing to Ravenna.—Who's 'we'?—He started to get up but the surface on which he lay rocked.

—Don't move! The babies have just gotten to sleep.—

She sounded a bit desperate, so he subsided.—Babies?—You destroyed their home. I'm taking them to the next nearest House.—

He couldn't believe what she was saying.—They tried to kill you!—Well, yes, but I looked at it from their side. They didn't know me, except for the tales. And we did ... kill most of the adults. The children had no one else to save them.—

Roland let his head fall back.—What's wrong with me?—I don't know. You just ... fell down. I was worried. Are you hungry?—

With that question, he couldn't avoid the raging pain in his middle.—Yes!—I was afraid of that. We're in an open galley in the Adriatic Sea south of Venice. I don't think the crew should see you drink.—

He wanted to ask her why she'd drawn his attention to it, then, but she sounded so fretful that he decided not to.—How soon till we reach Ravenna?—Another day, at least. When it gets dark, I think we can risk it. I found a couple of unbroken jars with the mark you showed me. I shook them and they sound like they're still liquid. Go back to sleep. I'll wake you at dusk.—

He said he would, but he couldn't, after all. His hunger burned, and he felt ... strange.

* * * *

Ravenna, Feast of St. Maurice, Monday, September 22, AD
1270

Mid afternoon on the next day, Blanche was edgy with impatience as the galley slowly rowed up the canal linking Ravenna to the sea.

Maryam had assured her that she knew the way to the House of the Rose here, and a few of the galley crew, interested in the substantial reward they'd offered for the safe delivery of the children directly to the House, had agreed to escort the refugees, rather than immediately go searching out commercial opportunities. But Blanche debarked with the group anyway, unwilling to relinquish the responsibility she had taken until it was complete.

The streets of Ravenna had seen better days. There were far fewer people abroad than she had seen in Venice, and far less wealth displayed. The House in Ravenna was small, made of brick, with a tile roof. The family here was, of course, stunned at the sudden arrival of Maryam and the children. Blanche stood back as one after the other of the children she had come to know aboard the small galley was snatched up into loving arms, kissed and cuddled and made welcome.

She watched them disappear into the depths of the House. No one spoke to her, but a few of the children and Petronella waved goodbye as they moved from warm sunshine to the shadowy indoors. Then she turned to her father, who was staring at a passing farmer's cart laden with chickens. She tugged on Roland's arm. "Let's go now,"

It still worried her that he was so distant since his collapse from the poison. When would he return to himself?

"What?" he asked, as if she were some bothersome tradesman. Then he seemed to focus on her. "What? Oh,

Blanche! What do you want?" he asked, in an entirely different voice.

It broke her heart to see him so changed. She tried to keep that feeling out of her voice as she answered. "Let's go to Liege now. For my children."

"Of course, of course," he said. "Yes. Let's go. After we buy some chickens. Do you, um, have some money?"

She gave him a denier and he took it, humbly. He rushed over to the farmer, negotiated briefly, and returned holding four squawking chickens by their feet. "Breakfast, Blanche," he said proudly. "Let's do go now, sweetling. I'm hungry."

She patted his arm and they retraced their steps to city's gate by the port. They set off on foot along the road that wandered north. It was an hour before they found a coppice they could shelter in and drink the chickens out of public view. By that time Blanche was tired enough of the bothersome birds that she didn't mind killing them.

It was disgusting to take blood from a live creature, but the ending of that life brought even more disturbing pleasure. Roland drank his two chickens before she'd even finished her first. He still looked haggard, so she let him finish the fourth one, as well.

That seemed to do him good. He was not so pale, and his aura seemed brighter. Pleased, she stood up. "Do you feel well enough to fly now?"

"I don't think I can manage a glamour of invisibility as well as flight, yet," he said, shamefaced. "We can fly after dark, though."

"All right," she agreed, wishing he had strength to lend him. She wanted to be flying *now*. They discarded the chicken carcasses by the side of the road, and started walking.

"And maybe, for supper, we can buy a lamb?" he asked.

She checked her funds. There was just enough, she judged, to get them to Liege, if they traveled frugally. "Maybe we can catch some rabbits on the way?"

"Rabbits would be fine. Lamb would be better," Roland said.

Blanche sighed.

* * * *

The warm Italian afternoon seemed to last forever, as Roland trudged behind Blanche along the rutted dirt road. The countryside was flat and swampy, muggy, and filled with the busy sounds of insects and birds. Only the absence of papyrus reeds—and Blanche's brisk presence—differentiated it from the nightmare journey to escape Dominic's vengeance in the swamp around Lake Manzala. He remembered his mortal days less-than-perfectly, but that afternoon was etched by terror.

The recent past was very ... unclear. He had gotten used to his perfect djinni memory, and the last few days had gaps he could not fill in. Except for moments he wished he could forget. He had never thought himself capable of the vengeance he had taken in Venice. Only Blanche had prevented him from committing murders as horrible as or worse than Dominic's. How could he—even in pain, even drugged, even in fury over the risk to Blanche's life—how

could he have intended harm to innocents? Grief and shame hung heavy as millstones round his neck.

"Roland! Are you ill?" Blanche interrupted his self-flagellation. "Do you need to sit? Rest?"

"I need—" He stopped in the empty road. "I need—to drink." He gagged at the thought of more rabbits.

"I can get you something. Rest here." She led him to the side of the road where some pitiful pine trees grew raggedly and helped him sit on a fallen branch, as tenderly as if he were her aged father in truth, and not a magical parody of his youthful self.

"I'll return in a moment." She stepped into the scrub land between the road and the seashore, her slim form in its blue gown disappearing into the bushes.

With a chorus of squawks, a flight of large, improbably pink, long-legged birds flapped into the sky. Invisible snares caught six of the birds around their flexible necks and held them, flapping broad wings and clacking beaks like scimitars.

Blanche hurried back to him. "Here you are," she said with a hunter's fierce grin. "There's many more, should you desire."

He shook his head. The savagery of his desire to deal death left him breathless, aching, and certain it was a bad idea. Anything he wanted so much must be bad. He just had to wait until the fit passed, and *he* could drink from the strange-looking bird, rather than have his hunger drink it. When he did, it was just as delicious as he expected, and frighteningly as *necessary* to drink the death. He sat, panting, recovering, for long minutes until he could face doing it again.

Blanche had killed three of the birds herself. Short rations over the past weeks had thinned her down until she resembled more than ever her mother, Mathilde, as he had last seen her in Constantinople. Haggard, careworn, covered with dust and salt spray, she looked as shaken as he felt, to drink and kill the birds.

"Do you need another?" she asked.

He wanted to say no. He *needed* to say yes. He rested his head on his knees, and wished his life were just a nightmare, so he could wake up.

They went on down the road soon after that, walking together silently. Roland had nothing to say, and Blanche seemed content with her own thoughts. Finally, it grew dark enough for them to feel safe in taking flight. No one else was on the path at this hour. The night was hardly cooler than the day, and the stars were twinkling in the muggy air.

Blanche rose up, and up, and up, looking like a miracle to his mortal eyes, which didn't see auras, only the slim body of his daughter, seemingly unsupported against the stars.

He extended his own aura, and realized for the first time what he had been missing. He couldn't move the air with his aura. He tried to form a hand of air—and touched nothing.

—What's wrong?—Blanche sent.

—I can't—He couldn't finish. He was too shocked. Except—the *sound of neck bones cracking* rang in his ears, and remorse filled his heart. Had he foregone the right to use his hands of air because he had killed an innocent with them? God was cruel enough to punish him just this way.

"Roland!" Blanche cried, hovering, then landing in front of him. "What's wrong?"

"I can't—"

Blanche's aura wing swept through him. He shivered. He could see it with his opened Seer's Eyes, but he couldn't *feel* it.

A soft gasp relayed Blanche's belated understanding. He saw her wing move toward his face. A ghostly sensation, or perhaps just his imagination, passed through his head.

"Do you feel that?" she asked.

There was a slight tickle behind his eyes. He stood very still. "What are you doing?"

"Did you feel that?" she asked again. "I can see where your aura attaches here."

The phantom feeling tickled him again. "I do feel that, but only a very little. Can you please take your hand of air out of my head?"

She stepped back, raising her hands as if to show she bore no weapon. "Do you know what happened?"

He couldn't look her in the eye. "I—" He held his own hands out, palms up. His voice wouldn't work, so he sent her the only truth he knew: ... *neck bones cracking*.

"Mother Mary," she swore. "How can we fix it?"

"I don't know that," he said, despair a weight like a dead horse rolling over him. "Nobody ever mentioned this kind of thing."

He tried again to move his aura. There was nothing. It was as if someone had cut off his legs, or his arms. *My wings are gone*. Grief ambushed him, cutting out his heart. "No," he

protested, as Blanche ran to him, holding him in her strong arms. "I deserve this. Don't pity me."

"There, there, it will be all right," she crooned, sounding so like his own mother that he shivered under her patting hands.

"I owe a blood debt," he whispered. "I've sinned. My grievous sin..."

She slapped him sharply. "You can fall apart after we've returned to my children. Until then—you're mine. Your guilt is mine. Your debt is mine. Your service is *mine*. You brought me into this world of yours and promised me you'd get me home to my sons. You did what you did in Venice. Now—keep your promise to me!"

He stared at her, unable to speak, or think what to answer. He tried once more to move his aura. "I can't," he said. "You'll have to go on without me."

She slapped him again. "You promised to get me home!"

"I can't," he moaned.

She slapped him with her aura this time, tossing him to the ground. "I'm not going anywhere without you!" she screamed, and suddenly they were both flying.

Just as when Dominic carried him over Lake Manzala, he was terrified. Blanche's aura held him, and her breaths grew ragged as she strove to fly higher. He prayed for the grace to control his bladder.

—You are coming with me all the way home,—she threatened.—Or I will kill you myself.—

At her grim tone he surprised both of them again by laughing. It was a dead dog barking of a laugh, but he knew

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

one thing beyond a shadow of a doubt: if she said it, it was true.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

"And they will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth: they have taught their tongue to speak lies, [and] weary themselves to commit iniquity."

—*The Book of Jeremiah, 9:5*

Hotel de la Rose, Liege, Monday, September 22, AD 1270

It was drizzling when Dominic and Mathilde arrived at the House of the Rose in Liege. Bells from the nearby cathedral pealed for Matins as they landed in the dark, muddy courtyard in front of a brick house with a gabled roofline. *Four hours until dawn then*, Dominic thought.

The dovecote here was in one corner of the courtyard rather than being located on the rooftop, as was customary in southern lands with flatter roofs. Dominic rang the bell to announce their arrival, and greeted the sleepy, startled pigeon-keeper when he stumbled out into the courtyard, his face hidden by a hastily-draped cloak to keep off the rain.

The young man welcomed them inside with alacrity, and stirred up the banked fire in the parlor before disappearing to rouse the Master of the House and the other kin with news of two visiting Apkallu with a *Red message. Thus it had been on every stage of their flight north, as they stopped at each of the Houses along their route to give the news of Cecilia's tampering and to hand off copies of the Red messages for further transmission via pigeon-post.

Within a short time, Dominic and Mathilde had been offered dry clothing, hot wine, and a formal welcome by Matthias, the Master of the House, and his wife, Ermengilde.

The rest of the Raised and Named kin of this house lined the parlor walls—six adults and six adolescents.

"Er, lord, if you don't mind me asking," Matthias said, as soon as the minimal number of courtesies had been exchanged. "You are most welcome here, of course, but it *is* a surprise to see you. Has something happened to Lord Michael and Elder Sister Theodora?"

Of course Matthias would be startled to see anyone but the Protectors formally assigned to this region. Dominic shook his head. "Lord Michael and Elder Sister Theodora have been called to attend urgent business in Beziers. And we have equally urgent business here in Liege."

"I see," murmured Matthias, though it was clear that he did not. "But what—?"

"We've come for the Cursed One's children," Dominic said, bluntly.

"Er, yes. Of course," Matthias stammered, wringing his hands. "She's never—what I mean to say is, we've been observing her for years and she seemed like a perfectly nice young woman. Extraordinarily intelligent, of course, but harmless..."

"...without her memories and her powers," Dominic finished. "She's now a djinniah. Whether Arjumand was able to Raise and Name her—that remains to be seen."

"Such terrible news," said Mistress Ermengilde. A solidly-built blonde woman who had clearly been born outside the

House, she looked as anxious as her dark-haired, golden-eyed husband. "We really dread hearing the dovecote bell these days."

"I'm afraid that I'm the bearer of more bad news," Dominic said, handing them a stack of thin, vermilion-edged parchment messages. "This concerns the matter being dealt with by Lord Michael and Elder Sister Theodora. I must ask you to send these on to all the Houses that you have pigeons for."

"Red messages? Lord, what new calamity has befallen us?" Matthias quavered as he accepted the messages from Dominic's hand. As he read the neatly-scripted cuneiform, he let go of the remainder of the messages from nerveless fingers. The strips of parchment fluttered to the floor.

"Lady Cecilia has betrayed her oaths, and our trust," Dominic said. The expected shocked gasps and wails of protest fell silent once he began telling the tale.

Mathilde bestirred herself from her stupor. The long flight north had taken its toll on her powers, never very strong to begin with, and verified his account. Dominic also had an affidavit, signed by Sir Jean, but Master Matthias waved off his offer to produce it.

"No, no, the testimony of three Apkallu and Elder Sister Theodora is sufficient ... but *why* would Lady Cecilia do such a thing?" Every member of the kin who had heard Dominic's account thus far had asked the same question in identical tones of hurt confusion.

"We don't know," Mathilde said, her hands folded in her lap, "But I am determined to find the reason when we return

to Villeroise-sur-Orb. We suspect that something happened on the night that Michael was Transformed, something that Cecilia wants very badly to hide."

Matthias bowed jerkily. "I offer all the resources of this House, if it aids you in your efforts."

"Thank you," said Dominic.

"We request an escort of two or three of the Raised and Named kin for a few hours tomorrow, and mounts for the journey," Mathilde added. "We plan to ride out to Bressoux after Sext, and it would be unseemly for us to arrive on foot and without attendants."

"Of course, Lord Dominic, Lady Mathilde," Matthias bowed again. "Whatever you require."

* * * *

Near Liege, Tuesday, September 23, AD 1270

The next afternoon, under an overcast sky threatening more drizzle, Dominic and Mathilde left the city walls accompanied by Master Matthias's two oldest children, Barthélémy and Ysabet, serving as maid and squire.

After they crossed the Meuse River, its gray waters and the city's quays crowded with ships, they went only a little farther before Barthélémy said with a grand gesture, "Lord, these are the lands belonging to the Lord of Bressoux."

"Very prosperous." Dominic nodded. From the expanses of golden stubble on the right, the harvest appeared to have been bountiful, and to the left, many workers with tall baskets on their backs were moving between rows of a

vineyard, short curved knives glittering as they harvested grapes.

"Indeed," agreed Barthélémy. "Bressoux is so rich that Lord Evrard was able to equip himself and his men for the Crusade without having to visit the moneylenders. Or so I heard," he qualified his gossip modestly.

By moneylenders, the youth probably meant the Templars, thought Dominic. It was just as well they were not involved in Bressoux, since Michael had assured him that the Order knew more about the House, and Dominic's role in it, than any of them liked. As they approached the tall stone tower of Bressoux's manor house, he smelled woodsmoke from the smoking sheds and the heavy, sweet scent of apples from the cider presses.

Mathilde inhaled deeply and relaxed, smiling. "This brings me back to when I was a little girl, living on my father's estate. The apples smelled so good, but I was afraid of the bees and wasps that gathered around the cider presses."

"Our youngest brother died last summer of a bee-bite," said Ysabet, who was a year younger than her brother Barthélémy. "He had been bitten before without ill effect, but this particular bee must have had a potent venom. His face and fingers swelled up, and he choked to death. It was horrible."

Mathilde clasped the hand of the girl riding next to her. "May we meet again, and may you remember each other as I will remember you," she said softly.

Ysabet inclined her head. "Thank you, lady. I—"

But whatever else she was going to say was interrupted by a flushed young man who overtook them on a lathered horse, closely followed by several burdened attendants. He had apparently just returned from hunting. A brace of geese hung from his saddle, he wore a quiver and bow slung across his shoulders, and his attendants carried the parts of a freshly killed and dressed ten-point hart. "God give you good day, travelers," he hailed them, and reined in his chestnut gelding, a horse that might have come from the excellent stock bred by Mathilde's father. "I am Sir Henri of Bressoux, steward of this estate."

Dominic bowed courteously in his saddle. "I thank you for your greeting, Sir Henri. I am Sir Dominic, Protector of the House of the Rose, and I bring my wife, the right worshipful Lady Mathilde, to visit with her daughter, the Lady Blanche." He and Mathilde had agreed in advance to pretend ignorance of Blanche's absence on Crusade with her husband in order to avert suspicion.

"I fear you have journeyed for naught. Lady Blanche and Lord Evrard are both away at present," Henri said, dismayed, "but I bid you welcome in their absence. My lady wife will provide you with refreshments and news if you will follow me..."

The way to the manor house led past an apple orchard, whose large, old trees spread fruit-filled limbs toward the house over a high protective wall. Once through the stout gate, Dominic could see the estate's outbuildings to the south swarming with men and boys unloading a steady procession of wagons loaded with sheaves of grain into a large

threshing-barn. The sweet-sour tang of brewing beer drifted on the breeze.

The Bressoux manor house, which was surrounded by a pleasant—and defensive—expanse of greensward, consisted of a large stone building with a tower at one end, a stone chapel with a slender spire at the other, and plaster-and-timber buildings framing the sides of a paved courtyard.

After grooms took the horses in charge, they climbed wooden stairs and were ushered through a massive ironbound oaken door set in an arched doorway into one of the dim, smoky great halls so common in northern lands. Though it was midday, a fire burned in the hall's central hearth, and gray daylight entered only feebly from narrow windows set high on the walls. Servants were setting up long trestle tables in preparation for dinner, and a linen-covered table against one wall was set with an impressive display of silver-gilt plates, goblets, pitchers, and bowls.

Sir Henri waved a young boy over. "Adalbert, here are Sir Dominic and Lady Mathilde, who is the mother of our own Lady Blanche. Take them up to the parlor and bring my lady wife to them. Have Gilles fetch refreshments and prepare the tower chamber." He bowed in Dominic and Mathilde's direction. "If you will excuse me, sir and lady, I must go wash and attire myself. My page here will provide you with anything you need. I will rejoin you shortly."

He left them with long strides, and a moment later, Adalbert caught the sleeve of a tall, lanky man wearing a gold chain of office. Once Adalbert had finished conveying Sir Henri's wishes, Gilles, the marshal of the hall, took charge of

Barthélémy and Ysabet, whisking them away to the kitchens with the promise of warm apple tarts.

Adalbert then led Dominic and Mathilde through a door set next to the wide stone staircase at the near end of the great hall, and into a low-ceilinged room paneled in pale oak, well-lit by a set of diamond-paned windows inset with a pattern of heraldic devices in stained glass. The ceiling was painted with an alternating pattern of green and white squares, with a row of gold-leaf lions—the device of Bressoux—marching across the beams in an orderly parade.

The chamber was furnished with a table and a cushioned bench underneath the window. Instead of the usual hunting trophies or antique weapons, Dominic was surprised to see a collection of ten books displayed in a finely-made wooden cabinet against one wall.

Irresistibly drawn to this display of intellectual wealth, Dominic crossed the parlor and studied the spines. These were clearly the possessions of a secular rather than religious scholar: a worn-looking *Legend of the Holy Grail* stood next to a copy of *Garin le Loherain*. Dominic also spotted a *Romance of Brutus*, and a Byzantine edition of Paul of Aegina's *Medical Compendium in Seven Books*, written in Greek.

It was a pity that Michael hadn't accompanied his sister on this visit, Dominic thought, his own fingers itching to open the *Compendium*. Books were distracting at a time when he needed to concentrate on the mission at hand...

* * * *

"Sir Dominic, Lady Mathilde, peace be with you and I bid you welcome to this house," said a feminine voice.

Dominic turned and bowed to the young noblewoman who had just entered the parlor. Greetings and courtesies were exchanged while he studied Blanche's sister-in-law.

Like her husband, Genevieve's aura was ordinary, not distinguished by the mark that identified the reborn kin of the house or the djinni. Her hair was hidden by an embroidered wimple dyed to match her dark green gown, her complexion was rosy-cheeked and fresh, and her shy smile showed good teeth. As was so common with mortals, even young ones, there was a shadow of old grief lingering in her hazel eyes.

"I understand that you have no baggage and only two servants. Have you met with some misfortune along the way?" she asked, concern creasing the smooth skin between her plucked brows as she supervised a maidservant pouring hot cider scented with cloves from a pitcher into a silver goblets set with semi-precious stones.

Mathilde smiled politely. "Fortunately not. We spent the night in the city. Our own servants fell ill, so we left them and our baggage train at the House of the Rose, and continued here with only a small local escort. I hope you will excuse the informality of our sudden visit."

"I suppose my lord husband informed you of Lady Blanche's absence?" Genevieve asked. She continued wistfully, "I was hoping you had word of how she is faring on Crusade, but if you did not even know she was gone..." She sighed, and motioned one of the servants to offer a plate of almond shortbread. It was obvious that she badly wanted to

ask something more, but at first, she restricted herself to polite conversation.

Finally, all but one of the servants withdrew, leaving Dominic and Mathilde seated with their hostess on the cushion-strewn bench under the window.

"Lady Mathilde," began the girl, her fingers rubbing nervous circles over the garnets studding her goblet. "My sister-in-law, the right worshipful Lady Blanche, wrote you many times, imploring you to visit. Why did you wait so long to come?"

Cecilia's thrice-damned geas seized his wife, leaching the color from her face.

Dominic put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and answered for her. "We have been living in distant lands, and my lady wife's health has been poor. Surely Blanche told you that Lady Mathilde suffers from weak lungs? The rigors of travel are a sore trial to her, as you see."

Genevieve blinked rapidly in distress. "But you never wrote, either," she persisted. "Blanche sent you so many letters—one every month—and you never replied!"

Mathilde swayed, biting her lip now.

Dominic's grip tightened in support. "We received some of those letters, but many went astray, I fear." It was no more than the truth—never mind that the kin of the House and even Dominic himself had been the agents of interception, in order to spare Mathilde the agonizing headaches that followed any thought of her banished daughter.

It was time to end this conversation, he decided. With just the barest brush of his power he said, "The welfare of my lady

wife's grandsons has been of great interest to her, and she desires to meet them. Can you have someone fetch them to us?"

Genevieve blinked again, this time slowly, her hazel eyes glazed. "Y-yes, of course, Sir Dominic. The boys are at archery practice with Master Lambert, but it's almost time for dinner. They should return shortly."

* * * *

Bressoux Estate

Dominic allowed Lady Genevieve to escort them to dinner when the bell rang, summoning the household. The great hall had been transformed in their absence. It had been hastily swept, with new rushes laid on the floor, their sharp green scent mingling with fresh scattered herbs. The plates, goblets, and ewers that had previously been displayed on the side table were now polished to a high gleam and artfully set upon an expanse of crisp white table linen, proudly embroidered with green diamonds and golden lions, covering the high table on the dais.

The hall was crowded with curious faces around the common tables, nudging one another and whispering as Dominic and Mathilde waited with Genevieve. Shortly, Sir Henri strolled down the stairs, his face and hair still damp from washing. He took his place at the center of the high table, seating Dominic at his right and Mathilde at his left, with Genevieve at Dominic's right.

Henri glared around the table with a frown. "Where are the boys?"

"My lord!" called a stout, middle-aged woman, coming up the hall at a trot. She had red cheeks and a red nose, and was herding three young boys ahead of her.

Henri's frown deepened. "Clothilde, where's Pieter?"

She dipped into a curtsey, abashed.

"He sneaked into the solar again," said the oldest of the boys, a sturdy, golden-haired lad who looked to be six or seven years old. "Master Lambert was angry because Pieter was supposed to practice with us, but he said he wanted to read more about Julius Caesar. I *told* him he'd get in trouble!" the boy finished, bouncing a little on his heels, and searching the faces of these new arrivals for admiration of his boldness.

He earned a swat from Clothilde. "Reynaud, how often must I remind you that true knights do not tattle on their brothers?"

"But Pieter always—" Reynaud protested with a whine.

"Silence" snapped Sir Henri. "Boys, give greeting to your grandmother, the right worshipful Lady Mathilde, and her husband, Sir Dominic, and then be seated with no further chatter."

"Yes, uncle," muttered Reynaud, glaring resentfully at the rushes on the floor, his lower lip outthrust.

All three boys bowed towards the head table, more or less in unison, and chorused, "God give you good day, Grandmaman and Grandpapa."

Sir Henri growled, "Clothilde, fetch Pieter."

She curtseyed again, then picked up her skirts and bounded up the stairs, bellowing, "Pieter? Pieter! Come down to dinner right now!"

As the boys took their seats next to her, Mathilde said with a fond smile, "I have been longing to meet all of you. I know you are Reynaud," she nodded at the oldest boy present. "And you must be Baudouin," she said to the next youngest, whose hair was a paler gold, with flax-blue eyes just like her own.

"I'm four years old!" the boy announced. "And this is Giselbert." He nudged the gilt-haired, chubby-cheeked three-year-old. "He doesn't talk much."

Giselbert pulled his thumb out of his mouth, and gave Mathilde a solemn stare. "Are you Maman?"

"Stupid, she's an angel!" Baudouin trumpeted at his little brother. "Can't you see her wings?"

"No." Giselbert studied Mathilde a moment, then stuck his thumb back in his mouth.

"Grand-papa's got them, too," Baudouin added, bending over the table and staring straight at Dominic.

He felt Mathilde's shock, mirror to his own.

She recovered quickly. Smiling again, she shook her head. "I'm your grandmother—your maman's maman," she told the child.

Appalled and amused in equal measure, Dominic opened his Seer's Eyes to examine the three boys. Sure enough, the little boy bore the mighty aura of an Apkallu in tones of brown and green, or perhaps red and green. It was misty enough to make exact identification unsure.

—Can you tell who it is?—he asked Mathilde.

—No. It might be Ninurta, or Dumuzi,—she replied.—I hope it's not Dumuzi. It would be dreadful to have to ign—

Just then, the ewerer, a short, elderly man dressed in immaculate white tunic and hosen, approached the high table, carrying a tall wide-mouthed pitcher and a large basin. He poured warm water (scented with roses, Dominic noted approvingly) for the washing of hands, starting with Mathilde.

—We'll test him later,—Dominic sent as a slender, brown-haired boy ran down the stairs, skidding and nearly losing his balance at the bottom of the staircase.

"You're late, Pieter," Reynaud sang out. "And in so much trouble!"

"I—I'm very sorry, Uncle Henri, Aunt Genevieve," Pieter gasped, panting from his mad dash. "I was reading, and didn't—" He stopped in surprise as he saw the guests at the high table, his eyes round with curiosity. Then he blushed, and lowered his gaze.

"—notice the bell. Of course." Henri huffed. To Dominic, he said, "Just like his father—always has his nose in a book. He'd skip all of his training in sword and bow if we let him. If only he were the second son, bound for the church..."

Dominic smiled at the lad, who had turned red to the tips of his ears as Sir Henri performed the necessary introductions, and opened his Seer's Eyes. Nothing out of the ordinary. "I'm very fond of books as well, young Pieter. I noticed you have quite a good collection here."

Pieter nodded. Henri waved him in Dominic's direction. "Go, sit next to Sir Dominic."

Genevieve made room for the boy. After Pieter seated himself as directed, Dominic asked, "Which of Caesar's works are you reading?"

"*Commentaries on the Gallic War*," Pieter answered, promptly, "in Latin."

"That's a good work for students of Latin to read. Caesar's style is elegant yet quite simple. Did you know that he wrote that book in response to the criticisms levied by his political opponents?"

Pieter shook his head, his eyes bright with curiosity. "Who were his opponents? Why were they criticizing him?"

Dominic started to answer, then the musicians gathered in the corner of the hall sounded a fanfare of bagpipes and trumpets to herald the meal being carried in. The first course was eggs baked with cheese, mustard, and herbs, succeeded by a course of barley-and-fruit soup, followed by smoked fish baked in a pastry, chicken in almond cream, spiced beets, and at last a large quince tart. Although he had long been a drinker of blood, he managed to choke down bites of all the courses—enough so as not to offer a mortal insult to their hosts by refusing to eat.

While Mathilde was entertained on her end of the table by the lively antics of the younger boys, Pieter proved an interesting dinner companion. They discussed Caesar, then the language of the Greeks, which Pieter had just begun to study. He was scholar enough to appreciate, and not resent, slight corrections on his pronunciation. From that topic they went on to Dominic's travels in the Byzantine Empire and Outremer. Pieter was filled with questions, but he also was keen to know about the country invaded by the current Crusade, and what his parents might be doing there.

Dominic enjoyed the boy's company and inquisitiveness, which reminded him strongly of Michael. With the exception of Robert during his visits to Michael in London, he had not been allowed to spend much time with children since those dark days in Venice that had earned him the sobriquet of "Child-killer."

Above the jabber filling the rest of the hall, and the energetic playing of music, Dominic overheard Reynaud asking when his Maman and Papa would be returning, and whether they would all be able to travel to Jerusalem together.

"...as for that," Mathilde said, raising her voice slightly to catch Genevieve's attention. "We have an estate near the town of Beziers: Villeroze-sur-Orb. It's a vineyard and rose farm with a delightful and healthy climate. We've come to invite the boys for a visit, and to await the return of their parents when God wills they should return from Crusade."

"Absolutely not. I forbid it." Henri struck the table with his fist, making the silverware clatter. "Young Pieter is the heir to this estate should anything—God forbid it—happen to his father. It's too dangerous to allow them to travel such a distance."

The nearby diners fell silent at Henri's outburst, and even the musicians faltered before gamely plodding ahead out-of-tune.

"My daughter wishes it," Mathilde lied, and Dominic winced.

As he feared, Genevieve leapt on the falsehood. "I thought you had not heard from Lady Blanche!"

"Are you trying to secure her heirs?" Henri slurred with a sneer. His cheeks were flushed with wine. "You won't get them away from me!"

"When my daughter returns from the Holy Land, she will wish to greet her beloved children as soon as possible," Mathilde said soothingly.

"A visit with us will enable the boys to meet some of their other relations," Dominic added. "Their cousin Robert is of an age with Pieter. My wife's cousin, Sir Roland, who accompanied King Louis on his first Crusade, and who has long dwelled in Outremer, is also expected," he added truthfully.

Reynaud pounded on the table, making the goblets dance. "Can we? Can we please go greet Maman and Papa?"

"Maman! Papa!" chorused Baudouin and Giselbert. "We want Maman and Papa!"

Pieter pleaded, "Please, Uncle Henri, can we go south with Grandmaman?"

This was the perfect opportunity. Dominic met Mathilde's eye, and simultaneously they reached out with their auras, touching the foreheads of Genevieve and Henri.

"Well, I suppose, if Lady Blanche truly requested it..." Henri said, doubtfully.

Genevieve stubbornly resisted Dominic's efforts to compel her agreement. "It's too dangerous," she insisted.

The more Dominic pushed her, the more her fears for the boys' safety—and a core of devotion to their well-being—fought against his coercion. As the moment was drawn out, second by second, the force of his aura pressing on her mind

to change it, her resistance stubbornly denying his effort, he began to get a flash of insight ... *She hunches over in the rushes, sobbing. Her hair hangs loose from its pins and wimple, streaming over her shaking shoulders in a tangled fall. The neck of her gown is torn, and the skin of her breasts and shoulders burns with reddened bruises from his bites. A pain between her legs is filled with shame. She never wants to feel this way again, even if she has to die....*

Cautiously he eased his aura away, certain that any further attempt at coercion would break her, and might shatter his own sense of self in the rupture.

Fortunately, Sir Henri, under Mathilde's gentle manipulation, quelled Genevieve's objections. "Wife, do not contradict me. We will discuss this later in the privacy of our chambers."

"Yes, husband," Genevieve acquiesced, though her eyes sparked with outrage.

It was an emotion Dominic understood better now.—We must take the children tonight,—he told Mathilde.

Mathilde concurred.—Poor girl. Since Henri has agreed, she can't gainsay him.—

* * * *

That midnight, outside the gate in the wall around the estate, having put everyone to sleep with djinni magic and collected the boys and the House of the Rose's horses, Dominic instructed Ysabet and Barthélémy: "Return to Liege before dawn, when the gates open. Give Master Matthias our thanks for his help—and yours."

In the quiet ruffled only by wind in the orchard leaves, they fastened the boys and their few possessions to the flying harnesses they had brought with them, being careful of their lolling heads.

As Dominic and Mathilde rose into the night sky, burdened with hope, Ysabet and Barthélémy called softly, "Remember us. May we meet again."

* * * *

Wednesday, September 24, AD 1270

Nothing on the ground below looked familiar to Blanche. Not that she'd traveled much before her journey to Carthage, which was as far south as she ever wished to go.

Flying northeast into the twilight, they passed over hills and rivers she didn't know the name of. There were tidy estates, and sleeping towns, trees without number. Roland thought that the big, meandering river they found must be the Ourthe, but neither of them knew for certain. She prayed it might be so.

Constant use of her wings, and carrying Roland, had built up her strength on the journey from Ravenna. She felt—except for her constant worry for the safety of her children and her eldest son's patrimony—more alive and powerful than she had ever dreamed. When she had been a girl, facing her dreadful father-in-law, she had fantasized about having a perfect friend: smart, courageous, invincible in battle. When she had shared blood with Roland in the Turkish town of Konya, she had seen in his memories the reality of that

dream: a man invisibly scarred by a dreadful injury, saturnine, full of aching, unspeakable sorrow.

Carrying Roland another weary league, she daydreamed about Inanna's friend. She hoped to meet him someday, this Apkallu called Dominic, the man who had married her mother, and cut the correspondence between them. Would he still be her friend, or would he call her cursed, like the rest of the House of the Rose did?

She flexed her wings, and rose up further into the sky.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

"Death am I, and my present task
Destruction." *Bhagavad Gita*, 11:32

Bressoux Estate, Friday, September 26, AD 1270

Cecilia *hated* that all her stratagems and cautions had been reduced to this: having to handle things directly. It was distasteful in the extreme, and her failure to predict the route that Arjumand and Blanche might have taken only deepened her irritation. It had been logical to assume that Blanche would want to return to her children as quickly as possible, so she had followed the most direct route across the middle sea via Sicily, across the Tyrrhenian Sea, to Naples, then north to Rome and beyond. But everywhere she went, the kin had neither seen nor heard of two travelers matching Blanche and Arjumand's description. Nor had the rebels attacked or contacted any of the Italian Houses. If Cecilia hadn't had cause to hate Inanna already, this would have been enough to make her start.

Finally, after many fruitless days of searching, and having to tell the same embarrassing story over and over at every House where she stopped, Cecilia decided to fly north with all possible speed. Sooner or later, Blanche would come for her children. Cecilia intended to take the boys into her custody first.

Light from the nearly full moon broke through scattered clouds. The terrain below was cut by deep narrow river valleys. Squat castles topped hills or occasional cliffs. She

thought briefly of the people who infested those castles, that landscape. It continued to be the worst sort of aggravation that they thought they ruled the world. In days long past, the gods' worshippers knew why they lived, and laid down their lives in love and devotion. She had spent all her energies overturning that world and keeping its secrets, but at times like this, she missed it bitterly.

She flew until the town of Liege came into view, its wall outlined by moonlight, its castle on the hill dark and brooding. She turned southwest, knowing Bressoux lay near.

Neatly tilled fields and orchards surrounded a fortified house whose windows were all closed to the warm night air. It was dark within. The fires had been covered, and those who dwelled there slept. She slipped in through a window that she opened far above the ground and grimaced at the ripe smell of many mortals gathered together.

She held a glamour of invisibility at the ready, should she need it. But all the people she found were sleeping.

She looked for Blanche's four sons. She'd had reports on all of them. She thought she would recognize them from the descriptions Matthias, the Master of the Liege House, had written. But when she found what must have been the nursery, there were no children in it. There was a nurse, snoring alone, but the children's bed was empty. Where were they?

A half-hour's search of the manor found no lord's sons, sleeping. There were plenty of servant children, huddling together despite the warm evening air. The doors were all

locked, so they hadn't gone astray, as adventurous children often wished to do. Where had they gone?

The nurse's mind opened and came under Cecilia's control with a drop of blood, before she came to consciousness.

"Clothilde, where have the children gone?" she asked.

"With their grandmother and her husband," came the sleeping answer. "The lady Mathilde—such a beauty she is, for all she's forty if she's a day—came not a week ago with her husband. My, and wasn't he a handsome one, oh yes. She said Lady Blanche had asked for them special, seeing as how they were stopping at a house in in the south, with vineyards and roses."

Cecilia silenced her. She sought to contain the explosion of rage that built up and up within her. Mathilde and Dominic had beaten her to the children! But why? Had Mathilde's daughter already suborned her mother, as well as her father? Arjumand had never been well-disposed toward Cecilia, but Mathilde had been her friend. And how had Mathilde broken the her geas regarding Blanche?

Dread swallowed her rage. Did they think they could use them as hostages, just as she did? And why had Dominic helped? The last she had heard of either of them, they had been conducting Raising and Namings on opposite sides of their territory centered on Venice. What had caused them to drop all of their other duties and come here?

To blunt the burn of rage, Cecilia took the nurse's plump hand and bit into the pulse point in her wrist. Warm, rich blood foamed into her mouth, almost immediately sating her hunger and easing her exhaustion from flying. The nurse

slumped back onto her pillow. She made a feeble attempt to keep talking, but as Cecilia drank deeper, riding on the rapturous memories, she fell silent, then motionless. Her body voided wastes, but Cecilia was too caught up in the ecstasy of her death to notice. It had been so long since she had taken life with the blood. She had not forgotten how it felt—she could forget nothing—but the intensity of the rush was surprisingly sweet.

The echo of her cry of release returned her to her senses. She listened for any waking sleepers. Hearing none, she spent a few moments to examine the nurse's memories.

She found the images she wanted: how the boys looked now, so she might recognize them if they met. She would make it her business to create that chance quite soon.

There only remained the question of what to do to reduce Blanche's chance of success in this undeclared war between them. If she came here, searching for her children, someone would tell her where they had gone. If anyone yet lived at Bressoux to speak.

There was only one way to create that desired end. And if it increased her strength, her power, and her reach? Yes, she would take that strength and defend her world. The secret must be kept.

She stood up, already flushed with power, her heart racing. She began to sing, first a low, sweet note of longing, of enticement, of establishment. Then another note, of rising excitement, of love, of sacrifice accepted. She sang, and her aura resonated with the music of her voice. The resonance built, and she began to feel the auras of the sleeping humans

nearby. Then her song encompassed the entire manor, and reached beyond it to the nearby stables and orchard. Finally, when she had reached as far as she dared, she started the next note.

She sang the Word of Death. The vibration immediately shook asunder the auras and the bodies of all living things within its range. She felt the sundering, absorbing each life's release like a baby suckling milk. She drank the humans and their children and their lice. She drank the horses and the barn cats, the dogs and their fleas, the rats and the mice, the sparrows under the eaves, the chickens and the geese, the worms and the ants, the snails and the herbs in the garden, the trees in the orchard from root to crown and all their fruit.

And every death enriched her, increasing her aura, allowing her to reach farther.

She was beyond ecstasy, beyond intoxication, beyond words, beyond humanity. She reveled in her godhood. If she wanted to, she could keep drinking until nothing in the world was left alive. She would drink everything...

That thought alone sobered her, as it had always done since the beginning. She could not allow herself to succumb to that temptation. If she, with all her strength, felt such ravenous desire ... Much as she loved them, she could not trust her siblings with this awful knowledge. She ended her song, releasing a final exhalation.

Her aura swirled with multi-colored iridescence that faded to her usual silver-white, shining like the moon. As far as she had reached was darkness to her Seer's eyes.

She didn't have to walk through the manor to check if everyone was dead, to see their bodies, as if sleeping, in their beds or on their ragged pallets, unmarked. The nurse was the only one she'd touched. To protect that secret, she practiced the Drinking of Life, just as that fool, Arjumand, had discovered for himself. In a few moments, the nurse's body and its wastes was reduced to dust, as if she had never existed.

She stepped up to the window and launched upward with no strain at all. Her wings stretched now over fifty feet, carrying the slight weight of her body with ease. She inhaled the cool night air with satisfaction, knowing that her enemy would find no information, no help here.

If any regret touched her heart, it was that she had missed Blanche's sons. But she would find them. She would bind or kill them. And the Cursed One would die, again.

Cecilia, who had discovered the Word of Death, and first used it, could not allow others to remember how to use it again, lest they unleash more horrors and miseries upon this sorry world. Ereshkigal had vowed this long ago, and she would keep that promise she had made to herself. It was her atonement.

* * * *

Hotel de la Rose, Bishopric of Liege

As befitted a House endangered by rogue djinni, there was a watcher in the courtyard by the dovecote. He was fifteen, perhaps sixteen years old. As Cecilia's feet touched the ground, he was busy pulling a rope attached to an alarm bell

located in the Master's chamber, and pointing his loaded crossbow at her. She stood very still.

Before the bell stopped chiming, a trio of similarly armed men out the front door. "What's—" said the leader, then the light of a candle in of one of his companion's hands reached her face. "Lady!" he said, shocked. "Why are you here?"

"Master Matthias," she said calmly, though her heart still raced. "It is good to meet again." She nodded to his brother, Amboise, who bowed back. "Your security is to be commended."

He bowed, accepting her compliment silently.

"It—is good to meet again," Matthias said, at last. He did not look at her as he spoke.

Shocked, she wondered why he hesitated, and what he was hiding. She kept her tone even. "May we go inside? The night is cool."

"Yes! Of course, yes, Lady," he said rather stiffly. He spoke to the third member of the small delegation, a young man, fine-boned in the way of the kin, wearing a life-chip that read 'ninety-two.' "Fetch our lady some refreshment, and let the house know we have a visitor."

Matthias would not listen to her demur, though she tried to tell him she did not need anything. The young man hurried off.

"Lady, please come with me." He gestured to the stairs, and she let him lead.

The parlor was a formal room with fashionably striped wall hangings, a carved chest and bench, and two straight-backed chairs by a round table. Once he seated her in one of the

chairs, he bustled here and there for a few moments, lighting candles and straightening the quill pens on the table, which also contained a blue painted pottery jug, some cups and a writing desk. He seemed extremely nervous, and she was determined to find out why. Shortly, the youth entered, carrying a clay jar with fresh warm blood and herbs for her.

Amboise took the cup, and handed it to her, bowing.

"How kind of you," she said, waving it away. They would think her rude to refuse this gift, but she had no appetite for the bland taste of cooling lamb's blood. With its pale echo of the release of death, it would be like drinking sour milk after honey mead.

Amboise frowned and gave the cup back to Martin. As the server took himself reluctantly away, she turned back to Matthias, wondering even more at his anxious reaction. What was he worried about? Had he seen Blanch and Roland already? She set her hand down on the table and her old silver ring met the wood with a definite clink. The noise seemed to awaken Matthias to his danger, for his skin color went even paler.

"To—to what do we owe the honor of your visit?" He bit his lip.

"I have come to ensure the safety of the House in regard to the Cursed One's children," she said bluntly. It would be much safer for the House if they were dead. "Tell me what has happened."

"Hap-happened?" His gaze skittered to an empty corner of the room.

"Master Matthias, your post here is to watch over the Cursed One and to guard the House from any harm she might do. How do you think I felt to find out from the survivors of the Tunis House that she had gone on Crusade and destroyed their home? Where was *your* report on her departure?"

"Lady Cecilia—" he began, and she could see him summoning excuses. "Perhaps a falcon killed the pigeon—"

"Master Matthias," she said sharply. "What have you done?"

He turned white as bone. "I ... I don't know what you mean. I have done nothing—"

"Indeed it seems that is exactly what you have done. *Nothing. Where is my report?*"

"L-lady, I sent a report to your residence in Malaga this past spring, when the Cursed One departed with the Sieur de Bressoux—"

"Did you send it by caravan? Why was no pigeon dispatched?"

He started some rambling farce of an excuse about the pigeons becoming scarce due to illness, or perhaps laxness on the part of his fellow House Masters, not including him on their pigeon-routings, or ... It was all nonsense.

Time for a more direct approach. "Give me your hand." He did so. It was shaking. She brought his fingers to her mouth. "I will read the truth in your blood. Are you willing?"

"Lady, I am—"

She bit.

"—not!"

But she was already into his memories, sifting the recent past: *The red-banded message 'for the Master only' unravels in his hand. "From Guibert, True Name Homeros, Master of Beziers, on 13th September AD 1270, 25th of the moon MuHarram 669 A.H. Sitt Rasheeda, formerly known as Cecilia le Byzantine, True Name Ereshkigal, currently Protector of House Malaga, discovered by Lady Mathilde, True Name Ninharsag, Protector of House Venice, to have altered memories of djinni and kin; she is henceforth barred from performing Raising and Namings, and summoned to face a Council of Elders in Beziers, or be Forgotten."*

Oh, gods. They had discovered her geases. *What did they know?* How much had they discovered?

She had no time for rage. What else was there?

She searched for a recent memory of Blanche, and found Dominic instead. He was saying, *"We'll need horses and ponies for a quick visit to Bressoux. Once we get the boys, we'll depart from the House as soon as it's dark. Tell no one."*

She froze at the enormity of this setback.

"Lady! Lady!"

The voice came from the room where she sat, not from Matthias's memories.

"He said 'Not!' You must let him go! Lady!"

She looked up at Amboise, who glowered.

She dropped the master's hand and took a breath. "I beg your pardon, Matthias," she said with her prettiest smile. "I did not hear your objection, Are you well? I hope I have not harmed you?"

He snatched his hand away and inspected it with surprise, as if he had expected her to bite it completely off. "I'm ... unharmed," he said. "As yet," was only whispered under his breath. When she didn't immediately set to screaming at him, he relaxed, thinking, *She didn't notice. Gods! If she had found out!*

Oh, yes, gods, she thought. Gods who had forgotten the *mes* she kept for herself, alone, like this useful power of reading mortal minds. Grief threatened to seize her. *They're coming too close. I can't let them come any closer.* How could she bear to lose her loved ones again? She would be so lonely without them. And there was no one else she could rely on. As always, the awful responsibility rested on her shoulders, alone.

"I intend to bring the Cursed One's children into custody," she told Master Matthias, just as if the intervening conversation had never occurred. "They must not be left where the enemy might get hold of them. With them in our hands, we have some hope of leverage over her. Can you help me arrange this?"

"Well, that is..."

"Yes?" She wanted to scream and gut him and be done with this shabby charade.

"Lord Dominic and Lady Mathilde already came for them," he said, not meeting her eyes.

"They have!" she exclaimed, as if just finding out. "Why did you not say so? Have they taken them to Venice, then? I can join them, there, and make a suitable defense against the Cursed One."

"Yes, certainly," he lied. At her expression of open waiting, he added to cover his tracks, "Well, as to that, they did not disclose where they were going." But his thoughts shuddered. *How can they stand returning to Beziers, where they all died? And I know I should tell her she is summoned to Council, but ...* His only reason was too obvious by the terror stink he was emitting.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Did they leave no message for me or other Apkallu?"

"No, lady," he said. *Thank the gods.*

"Not only is your security commendable, but you have taken the exact next step I was planning." She smiled at him again, taking secret satisfaction in his twitch as she did so. "There remains nothing for me to do but to coordinate with the other Apkallu against this grave threat to the safety of the House." She made as if to stand up.

"But, lady, won't you sup with us?" he asked, putting the cold cup of blood before her without much hope.

She could smell the evil herbs from where she sat. Those drugs would send her unconscious, if she drank them. Matthias, the lying bastard, was trying to capture her without giving her the right to rebut the slurs against her. Had all the Masters of all the Houses turned against her?

She was sorely tempted to speak the Word of Death again. Instead, she took the treacherous cup in her hand. "As to that," she said, "I must be away. I will bring this with me and drink it later." She rose, finding herself somewhat unsteady, so that she had to grab the walls with her hands of air to stay

upright. She was inebriated from the surfeit of death-energy and rage.

She blundered toward the door, tears blurring her vision in the candle-haunted room. *Seven thousand years*, she thought. *I gained that time to be with them. It was worth it, though we have no more. But, oh, I will miss them!*

Amboise made the mistake of putting his hand on her, trying to keep her within the parlor. Her aura now was larger than the room so she spent a moment sorting out how to form a close-in hand of air. In the next moment, Amboise fetched up against the cloth-draped wall, his head and shoulders hitting with an audible 'thunk.'

She stared at him, holding Matthias in his chair, and his hands away from the throwing knives he grasped for in his sleeves. "You dare?" she breathed to Amboise, who had gone satisfyingly pale. "You dare to lay hands on me?"

"Lady," Amboise said, braver than his brother. "You are summoned to Council to answer charges of memory tampering. If you are innocent, you will attend. If you harm us, you will have a much harder time proving that your deeds are just."

"Summoned? This is the first I have heard of it. Master Matthias." She turned her head to eye him unkindly. "Why is it that this news has been given to me by your brother, and not yourself? Why did you not just tell me?"

He tried to move his mouth to answer, but she had gripped him so tightly he could not open his jaw. She released his head so he could speak.

"For just this reason," he said, unable to move his hands and shoulders in a shrug. "How can we trust you now? Your word to us is broken. We do not know you anymore."

Stung, she released them both. "Who accuses me? What do they say I've done—I, who have had the care of this House and of Sharibet, your mother, from the earliest days?"

"Lady Mathilde, Lord Dominic, Lord Michael, and Elder Sister Theodora," said Amboise levelly. "They all—"

"Have you this from Michael and Theodora in their own words? Or was it a tale Mathilde and Dominic told you?" At their silent consternation, she pressed on. "Think! Mathilde is the Cursed One's mother in this life! Dominic, as Ninshubur, was her vizier! Can't you see? They've already gone over to her side, and they're spreading this vile rumor about me to sow dissension within the House. Oh gods," she breathed, praying they would believe her. "Can't you see?"

She debated giving her anguished question some additional force by using the Voice of Coercion, but Matthias's thoughts were running exactly in the direction she had pointed.

He bowed his head, and showed his palms in surrender. "Forgive us, Lady. It is, indeed, what they would do were they traitors. Amboise, stand down."

Amboise put down the Ax of Judgment that he must have been hiding under the garish cloth draping the walls. Her flesh crept at the narrowness of her escape. Showing a fine tremble in her hands, she dropped the poisoned cup of blood, which smashed and splashed across the floor.

Thank gods she didn't drink it, thought Matthias, and she agreed wholeheartedly. "You'll want to send your own messages countering this awful slander," she said. "I need to discover where they've taken the Cursed One's children—probably to rendezvous with her?"

"Villeroze-sur-Orb," said Matthias. "It's near Beziers."

She had to shuffle through her many memories to pull up the names she wanted, with the Master's name at the head of the list: *Sir Jean de Pezenas, True Name Utusagila.*

I condemn them! All her patchwork measures were come undone.

She gave a single heartbeat to the intimations of desolation that lay before her. Then she took a calming breath. There was so much more work to do. "Thank you, Master Matthias. I look forward to reading your report when I return to Malaga. May the House still stand!"

"May we meet again! Remember me!" said the two kin. They followed her up to the roof and stood, waving, as she flew south as fast as her greatly increased aura would carry her.

* * * *

Bressoux Estate, Friday September 26, AD 1270

"I recognize that hill." Blanche said to Roland, too tired to be excited. "That's the citadel of Liege. Bressoux is right over there." She pointed northeast, past the island formed between the confluence of the Ourthe and the Meuse rivers.

Home! Oh, Blessed Mother, she was almost home.

"I'll set us down within the courtyard. We should reconnoiter while everyone is still asleep."

The tower shone dull as pewter in the light of the setting half moon. The orchard outside the wall rustled strangely as she passed by, low overhead. The noise was wrong, somehow, like snakes slithering through dry grass. And the tops of the big old trees were bare, like skeletal hands. Was Fall so far advanced?

She hoped she was just imagining the menace, simply worrying because she was so close to her goal. It was time to make a landing in the courtyard.

But there was something wrong again. The stone-paved yard was covered by a drift of withered leaves. And, strangely, there was no sign of human passage. None were crushed by footsteps. None had been swept aside in a path from the door to the stables, or the storerooms. There seemed to be more leaves than could possibly have fallen in one evening. Had the orchard trees caught some blight?

The wind from her wings scattered leaves into the air. Before they touched earth again, they crumbled into dust.

She released Roland, who climbed the stairs to the great hall's door, impatiently motioning her to push her aura through it and lift the bar inside so they could enter.

But she was afraid. The leaves fell into dust. What disease could do that? *Let me not be too late*, she prayed.

The door opened with a familiar groan. A banked fire glowed in the central hearth, as usual. But no dogs barked. Nothing moved. She opened her Seer's Eyes. No shifting auras cloaked the bodies of the people who slept in the hall.

"They're all dead!" she whispered, as if they might hear her, and wake. What had—?

Roland seized her hand, holding it tightly. Was he trying to prevent her from running blindly into danger? Giving sympathy?

She broke away and ran to the stairs, heading toward the nursery. *Oh, God.*

The cheerful room was bare. No sons. No Clothilde. Some of their clothes were missing: Reynaud's wooden sword, Baudouin's ball, and Giselbert's chewed blanket.

Horror gripped Blanche. Cecilia. She had taken them. Her enemy had struck first, just as she had feared.

Roland came running after her, breathing hard. "Are they—?"

"Gone," she said, voice glacial. "Cecilia's taken them. I will kill her. I will kill her so she never lives again."

Downstairs in the great hall, she leaned against the cold stone wall, observing the quiet postures of the bodies. No one had struggled. No violence had been done. They were just ... dead. "Are they all...?" she asked Roland, who had gone to check on Bressoux's other inhabitants.

"As far as I can see. Was this your brother-in-law?" He sent her a picture of a face, ruddy no more, his temper tamed at last.

"Yes. That was Henri. Genevieve, too?"

He nodded.

She wanted to scream and have hysterics, but she didn't have time. "Come on!" She ran back to the dusty courtyard.

"Where—?"

"The House of the Rose!" she said impatiently. She embraced him and flew from this wasteland, blighted from manor to orchard. Cecilia would pay for this!

* * * *

Hotel de la Rose, Bishopric of Liege

The spires of Liege glowed in faint contrast against the hill of the citadel. She knew where the House of the Rose stood, not that she'd been there often. She hardly had time to ask Roland, "How did she kill them?" before they were there.

Shaken, he said, "I think that must have been the Word of Death," and then she was breaking down the three-inch thick door and leaving it in pieces.

"HOUSE!" she shouted, loud as war horns. "House of the Rose! Come face me!"

Dimly the sound of tinkling bells echoed her voice.

A young woman, sleepy-eyed, with braided hair, peered blearily into the hall, and Blanche seized her. One by one as they came she caught and bound them with hands of air, not waiting for them to send their poisoned crossbow bolts her way.

Finally she had Master Matthias in her grip, well known to her from a decade of purchases of pins, and pens, and paper. "What have you done with my sons?" she demanded.

His eyes showed whites all around, and sweat gleamed on his forehead. "Lady Blanche," he quavered, "your sons are safe—"

"For now, you mean? How dare you threaten them?"

"No threat!" he squealed, as she tightened her grip. "Your mother has them."

"My—mother?" she faltered. "Not—"

"Lady Cecilia was just here," Matthias said, aggrieved. "She was angry to be late, too."

"How long ago?"

"Just earlier this eve."

"You should know," Roland said, striking flint against steel to light a candle, "that she spoke the Word of Death at Bressoux. We have just come from there. She killed everyone." Candlelight shone on disbelieving faces.

"Everything was dead. People, dogs, grass, even the trees in the orchard," Blanche added, then returned to her most pressing concern. "Where did she take my boys?"

"Cursed One," Matthias said, but at her murderous glance he amended. "Lady Blanche, I may not aid you in any wise, upon pain of being Forgotten. Please, I beg of you, spare my wife and children."

"We haven't attacked anyone who hasn't attacked us first," Blanche said. "Will they cast you out if I overpower you and take your memory?"

He didn't answer, which she took for assent. She grabbed his ear, and made a small scratch on his neck, despite Roland's abortive protest. At the first taste of his blood—sweeter than any animal blood she had tasted, and so tempting to drink more of—she had the information she needed.—Villeroze-sur-Orb, near Beziers,—she told Roland.—Do you know the way?—

"Yes," he said, startling the huddled kin.

She held the master as close to her as a lover. "I want to you bury them all," she ordered. "Everyone at Bressoux. Get a priest to perform an exorcism, funeral rites for everyone, and a purification against plague. Get a steward with men-at-arms to protect the land from squatters and raiders. Where nothing grows—burn it. Preserve Bressoux from rapine. I don't know what the House will do to you, but I know what I shall do to you if you fail. You don't aid me in this, you aid my son, Pieter, now the Sieur de Bressoux. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, Lady Blanche." The stench of his terror overwhelmed that of rose perfume.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Cecilia killed my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, my servants, my tenants. She would have taken and killed my sons. She's kept some damned secret from your people forever—" at this, Matthias's eyes opened even wider, and he seemed to realize something she did not have time to investigate. "And I'm going to stop her before she causes any more damage."

"What of L-Lord Arjumand? He killed in Tunis—"

"Did you not hear where I said we harmed no one who hadn't attacked us first?" She shook him, just a little. "I don't want to be your enemy."

"You wrote excellent reports," Roland said, out of the blue. "I always appreciated them." He bowed at Matthias, who recoiled in dismay.

"You weren't on the official routing," Matthias whispered. "How did you get—" he shut his mouth with a snap, and turned away from Roland's blue eyes, blank as sky. "Yes, lord."

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

She headed for the door she had broken, Roland following. Outside, she wove her aura hands around him, and took off south, toward vengeance.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

"And the LORD shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of [his] anger, and [with] the flame of a devouring fire, [with] scattering, and tempest, and hailstones."—*Book of Isaiah, 30:30*

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Saturday September 27, AD 1270

The long flight had been arduous but uneventful. Mathilde and Dominic stopped at Houses of the Rose along the way for sleep and refreshment during the daylight hours. They fed the boys cupfuls of broth but they did not let them awaken, judging it too dangerous to let them know what was happening mid-journey.

Tonight, the moon lit the golden walls and tiled roof of the Villeroze-sur-Orb. Mathilde found it a welcome sight. Yesterday, fatigued from the journey, she had nearly faltered before dawn. Dominic had offered to let her rest more, but she insisted that they press on the last few hours. And now: no more flying!

As they landed in the courtyard, they were greeted with shouts of welcome and jugs of preserved blood. Helping hands quickly untied the still-sleeping boys from the flying harnesses, and then they were escorted inside the House. At Sir Jean's direction, his twin sons Jean-Phillippe and Olivier gave up their private chamber upstairs for pallets in the great hall. Under Mathilde's supervision, the boys were tucked together into the adult-sized bed, where they fit easily.

Leaving them there, Mathilde and Dominic reported on their journey to Sir Jean, and then she had the vast pleasure of retiring to bed well before sunrise.

When it came time to awaken the boys, Dominic stood in the doorway, leaving the task to Mathilde, who, he said, would surely be a less threatening presence. She thought he meant to the House, not the children. It was just as well. With a precise brush of her aura-wing, she released them from slumber.

Pieter came awake first, blinking at the unfamiliar bed with its thin hangings—more suited for mosquitoes than frost—and the tiled floor, white-painted walls, and dark-beamed ceiling. "What—" he began to ask, but was interrupted by Reynaud's screech.

"Where are we?" Reynaud looked around wildly. "Aunt Genevieve? Uncle Henri?" He scrambled out of the bed, and pressed his face to the narrow, pointed-arched window, squinting out. "Are those olive trees? I see a vineyard—is this your estate?"

"You're a very clever boy!" Mathilde said brightly, though her heart was sinking. "This is Villerose-sur-Orb. After you went to sleep, your aunt and uncle, ah, gave their permission for you to visit here."

Pieter, calmer, was no less concerned. "Where are our parents?" he asked, rubbing his eyes but not looking away from Mathilde. "You promised they would be here."

"We expect your Maman to come very soon," Mathilde said, soothingly.

"But how did we *get* here? It takes *months* to travel this far south!" Pieter's gaze darted to the door that Dominic guarded, as if gauging his ability to escape. "Did you use sorcery to carry us here in a single night?"

"Not in a single night, though you slept the whole time—" Mathilde began, trying not to reveal too much dangerous truth.

Pieter's mouth thinned at her evasive reply.

—Use the Voice of Coercion if you must,—Dominic sent.

—I'd rather not,—she returned. To Pieter, she said, "The important thing is that you're here safely, and your mother will be coming soon. Until then, we count on you to uphold the honor of your name, and keep your brothers in line. You're our guests, and we will treat you as such."

"You lied to us! And took us away from home!" Reynaud put his back to the window and screwed his eyes shut. "Are you a bad fairy? Are you going to eat us?"

"Of course not! I'm your grandmaman, and no one here means you any harm," Mathilde said in her most patient manner.

"Are you really our grandmaman?" Pieter asked Mathilde, visibly struggling between curiosity and fear.

"Yes," she said. "I swear to you, I am."

—We'll have to keep an eye on him,—Dominic said to Mathilde.—He's too smart by half.—I know,—she replied.—I wish I could tell them the truth, but even if it were permitted, it would only frighten them more.—She reached out to smooth Pieter's hair, and he flinched away from her.

Her motion woke Giselbert from his stillness. "Want to go home! Want Nurse!" The boy began to cry in a piercing wail.

"Shut up, Gizaber!" Baudouin said, clinging to his wriggling little brother. "We're with the angels now!" Pieter and Reynaud both came over to pat him, and try to comfort him.

In all the noise, Mathilde was surprised when Tirgit peered shyly around Dominic's shoulder.

—These are the Cursed One's sons?—she sent, rather than shouting over the noise.

—Will you come in and meet them?—Dominic asked.—We had hoped that you might agree to watch over them, especially since—one of them is Apkallu!—Tirgit finished, having opened her Seer's Eyes.—How wonderful! Do you know who he is?—I tasted his blood a few nights ago,—Mathilde replied.—He's Emesh, Ninurta, Horst-who-was. He fell defending the kin in Beziers.—She sent a memory: *At the Appointing of Raymond-Soleil, Horst, a blond giant, chooses the Crown of the Fields. The crowd laughs and cheers. "Lord of the Fields! Giver of beer!"*

—He came back as the Cur—*her* son? Oh, my.—Tirgit covered her mouth with her hand, then relaxed.—It would be my honor to be their guardian,—she sent, solemnly.—I will protect them with my life.—Let's hope that doesn't become necessary,—Dominic sent.

Mathilde could imagine the fury of a mother deprived of her children. Trying not to imagine *this* specific mother left her with another headache. "Let me introduce them to you," she said aloud, over Giselbert's commotion, as Tirgit still hesitated.

Baudouin saw her by the door and his eyes gleamed. "You're an angel, too ... but your wings are very small," he added, doubtfully.

Giselbert's wails sputtered to a halt. Baudouin helpfully offered his sleeve. "Blow, Gizaber," he ordered.

"This your Great-aunt Theodora," Mathilde said.

"She will be watching over you until your parents arrive," Dominic added. "You *will* heed her." He did not employ the Voice of Coercion, but, eyes wide, all four youngsters nodded obediently.

"Great-aunt, I am Pieter de Bressoux," Pieter said, bowing stiffly. "And these are my brothers Reynaud, Baudouin, and Giselbert."

"My son—your cousin Robert—will be arriving here in a few days," Tirgit replied with a wide smile. "He's of an age with you, Pieter, and he's been living in Malaga."

Mathilde noticed an immediate spark of interest in Pieter's eyes. "Malaga? But that's in the kingdom of Granada ... it's *Moorish*."

"Indeed," replied Tirgit, "That's impressive. You must have been studying geography!"

Pieter ducked his head, color flooding his pale cheeks. "Lady—I mean, great-aunt, I wanted to learn about Saracen lands, because Maman and Papa went there."

"You can ask me anything you wish to know," Tirgit said cheerfully. "Most of the kin in this house have lived in the Holy Land and other places. Sir Jean and Lady Alais, the master and mistress of this estate, both lived in the Kingdom of Jerusalem; Sir Dominic lived in Egypt for many years, and I

myself have traveled from North Africa to Hind and back, on the Silk Road."

Pieter looked suitably impressed, and she had caught the interest of the other boys, too. "Did you travel alone?"

"No, I was captured by raiders, and they took me far from home. Then, one day, Sir Dominic appeared, and rescued me..." Tirgit settled herself on the bed as she began her tale, and the boys, fascinated with their new acquaintance, crowded close. There were tears and recriminations when both Baudouin and Giselbert tried to climb into her lap at the same time, but by the time Mathilde and Dominic withdrew with promises of breakfast to be sent up shortly, Tirgit had an arm around each, and the two older boys were studying her with the utmost fascination.

"...so you were born a Saracen but converted? Were you baptized?" Mathilde heard Pieter asking as Dominic closed the chamber door.

She sighed, rubbing her aching forehead. "I hope they can forgive us our deception."

"I hope that we do not have to go to war against their mother," Dominic said. "For their sakes, and for our own."

* * * *

County of Toulouse, Michaelmas, Monday, September 29,
AD 1270

Cecilia flew steadily south under a huge full moon, her thoughts dark with foreboding and grim intent.

She wanted to race south to Beziers, and to confront Dominic and Mathilde with their vile betrayals, but she also

needed to stem the infection they had spread with their messages. How had they found out? What else did they know?

Underneath her simmering anger, she did not want to acknowledge that she was afraid that this was finally the end, the irrevocable collapse of the edifice of family and loyalties that she had spent so many millennia constructing, and which had received such a blow under the arrows and swords of the Crusaders who had destroyed Beziers.

And so, gritting her teeth and forcing herself to smile sweetly at the kin who had the temerity to question her, Cecilia called upon each of the major Houses of the Rose that lay along her southbound route through the kingdom of France. Not all of them were as easily convinced as Matthias, of course, but she managed to sow a crop of doubt and debate. This was a half-measure at best, but until she could confront and defeat the revived Inanna, she needed to stave off judgment by the elders of the House. But, oh how she despised her role as petitioner, begging them for a fair hearing! She, who alone among the Apkallu had retained her full divinity, must simper and bow her head, while all around her, those she thought she could trust, those who had once been her siblings or her worshippers, betrayed her at every turn.

Tonight she had left behind the last of the important Houses along with the lush landscape of rolling hills and fields. Below her, jagged limestone hills gleamed like fallen giants in the silver moonlight. She followed the shining ribbon of the Orb River as it unwound from the hills, pouring down to

the rocky bluff where rebuilt Beziers clung bravely. This was familiar ground, filled with memories of smoke and slaughter. The city still looked battered from the Grand Massacre, and as she descended over the silent rooftops, she held a slender thread of hope that she might salvage something from the wreckage of that long-gone Crusade. She doubted it, but she had to try. And if she failed, then she would sweep the board clean, and set up new pieces.

* * * *

Old Master Guibert at the new Beziers House was just like all the others—half-asleep and startled by Cecilia's arrival, concealing terror beneath a flaking layer of courtesy.

Cecilia smiled at him over a reluctantly-offered goblet of fresh blood, and repeated the same things she had already said a dozen times on her journey south, "Mathilde and Dominic have sided with the Cursed One, and they're spreading this vile rumor about me to sow dissension within the House."

The old man's heartbeat thudded like the Sultan's war-drums, his gnarled hand wrapped around a cane shaking only a little. He spoke with great deliberation. "Lady, you may believe that is true. But I am glad that you have come to stand before the council and to answer the charges made against you."

By the fallen temples of Sippar, he *dared!* She leaned forward. "But, first, it would be best if I spoke to Dominic and Mathilde directly, wouldn't it?" She set her lips in a pleasant smile as she saw him struggle with the desire to protest, then

said as calmly as possible. "Now, where, exactly, is Villerose-sur-Orb?"

He gave her directions, and even offered her a mule from the House's stables, which she declined. Two hours remained before dawn; she would fly.

The kin did not try to disguise their relief at her departure.

* * * *

Not long after, Cecilia found herself seated in the candlelit parlor at Villerose-sur-Orb. At least here, she had a potential ally: Lady Alais, niece to Maryam dalla Rose. "Alais, my dear, it is good to meet again," she said benevolently. "I remember you fondly from my days as Protector in Venice, when you were a child."

Lady Alais dipped into a curtsey, her shoulders tight, her head bowed. "Lady, I thank you for remembering me. It is good to meet again."

Cecilia took a sip from the spiced wine that had been offered to her upon her arrival. *Not blood*, she noted, and wondered if that was a bad sign.

"Lady," said Alais's husband, who introduced himself as Sir Jean de Pezenas, True Name Utusagila. The wine curdled in her stomach. Here was the man whose memory she had ... borrowed ... to cover over the true events of the night Michael was Transformed. Why was he yet alive? She smiled at him, too.

"We welcome those who are our sworn *Protectors*." The insolent man actually emphasized the word. "You have come to answer the charges against you?"

Cecilia noted how Alais tightened her fingers warningly in his sleeve. Were they at odds over this matter? It might benefit her if this was the case.

"I've seen the summons," she replied. "And I have also heard a rumor that you're harboring the Cursed One's children here. I will not dissemble: both of these matters are of great concern to me."

"And to us, also, lady." Sir Jean said, coolly, though perspiration glistened on his time-creased features. "Yesterday, at dusk, we received a Red message from the Ravenna House. The Cursed One and the banished Protector Arjumand descended upon the Venice House, and destroyed it."

"My cousins have all been killed. Only my Aunt Maryam and the children survived," Alais added. Now she raised reddened eyes. "The Cursed One must be destroyed."

"She's certain to come here next," Cecilia warned. "We cannot afford to be unprepared. Therefore, I wonder at your willingness to introduce a distraction in the form of these trumped-up charges against me."

"There is convincing evidence—" Sir Jean began, unhappily.

Cecilia did not miss the look of grateful relief that crossed his homely face when the door to the parlor banged open, and Dominic strode in, Mathilde at his heels.

* * * *

Robert and Papa arrived at Villeroze-sur-Orb at the hour of the Fajr prayer on the tenth day of their journey. The moon

was setting in a sky still dark and thickly scattered with stars when Papa began his descent toward a large house with lamplight shining from many windows. They landed softly in the paved courtyard. Robert began fumbling eagerly at the knots of his flying harness when he saw Papa's eyes close and his face go blank for a moment.

In a strained voice, his father said: "Cecilia is here." Papa's expression was ferocious, and his eyes burned with the same rage that turned his aura scarlet.

Robert's stomach churned. For a panicked instant, he thought that Aunt Cecilia had come to take him back to Malaga. Then Papa's hand clapped his shoulder.

"Don't worry." Papa stood tall, every inch the brave knight that Robert had always imagined him to be. "Everything will be well. I won't let her hurt you again."

* * * *

"Are—are you angry?" Robert asked in a small voice.

His anxious expression was as maddening as his insubstantial green wings, marred by the swirling dark blue that wound through his aura like a malignant shadow. "Yes, but not at you," Michael replied.

By the third day since leaving Malaga, his son had blossomed, his beaten-puppy demeanor replaced by quiet observation and the occasional, startling flash of a smile that showed clean white teeth. The boy was intelligent and courteous, with impeccable manners. Whatever else Cecilia had done to him, she had not stinted on his education. Michael had been moved by deep pride and even deeper

frustration as he introduced his son to the kin of the Houses in Cartagena, Valencia, and Barcelona.

Pride gave way to rage at the damage Cecilia had done to his son. He battled his need to storm into the building, sword drawn, and make her lying smiles vanish in a spray of blood. He wanted her to fear his coming, but dared not open their blood-bond connection more deeply, lest she be alerted to their arrival. She was very old, and very powerful. He would not vanquish her unless he had a plan.

He told Robert, "Let us give greetings to your mother. She's been longing to see you." That had been the right thing to say. The pinched expression ebbed from his son's face, drowned by the radiance of a hopeful smile.

Michael opened his link to Tirgit and felt her presence at once. She was safe, sitting in on a bench upstairs in one of the bedrooms, watching four boys sleeping peacefully, snuggled together in a lightly curtained bed. These could only be his great-nephews. The eldest boy, his lashes long and dark against his smooth, flushed cheek, looked to be Robert's age. His three younger brothers had blond hair in shades ranging from ripe wheat to nearly silver.

—Tirgit, mine own sweetheart,—he sent to her. He supplied a glimpse of Robert, standing next to him in the courtyard, looking around curiously, and their connection was suddenly swamped with inchoate joy.—Don't let the others know yet,—he cautioned her. Amidst the bright threads of the active blood-bonds in his mind, he sensed Dominic's smoky bronze and Mathilde's ice-blue. He gave them the barest brush, and saw that they were in the parlor.

Cecilia was speaking in a perfect simulacrum of sweet concern and sincerity: ... *Have I angered you in some wise, to make you turn against me in such a fashion?*...

Rage enflamed Michael's aura, and he closed the connection immediately. He could not afford to lose control. He had to take Cecilia by surprise, and discredit her so thoroughly that no question regarding her perfidy would remain in the minds of djinni or kin.

—Where?—Tirgit asked, and he sensed that she had left the bedroom.

He sent her a picture of the kitchen garden, safely tucked away in back of the house. "Your mother is coming," he said quietly to the boy, and led the way.

Tirgit's aura blazed amidst the herbs and vegetables as they rounded the last corner of the house. She wasn't strong enough yet as a djinniah to actually fly, so she must have simply leapt out one of the upper-story windows, trusting in her rudimentary aura to slow her descent and cushion her landing.

"Robert!" She stopped short in shock and turned on Michael. "Did you—?"

"No," he said, sharply. "This is Cecilia's doing."

—My poor boy.—She bent and caught Robert in a tight embrace.

Michael's heart sank as he saw his son hold himself a little stiffly in her arms. Robert had been so young when Cecilia had taken him for fostering. Had he forgotten his mother? Tirgit would be heartbroken if she sensed it ... To his relief, Robert buried his nose in Tirgit's unveiled hair and inhaled her

scent. His arms locked around her neck, and he began crying, great heaving sobs. "...Mama..."

Tirgit met Michael's eyes above their son's head. She smiled radiantly. "Thank you for bringing him home, to me ... to us," she said, softly, holding Robert close, rubbing comforting circles on his back.

"I couldn't leave him there, in *her* power," Michael said. He sent Tirgit a swift report of what had been done to Robert. As she absorbed the information, the hand rubbing Robert's back slowed.

"She arrived a short while ago. She's trying to convince us to ally with her against the Cursed One," Tirgit said. "Lord Dominic and Lady Mathilde are—"

Michael interrupted grimly. "I leave Robert to you. Keep him safe while I—"

"I want to go, too." Robert pushed himself out of his mother's embrace, though tear-tracks still shone on his cheeks.

"Absolutely not," Michael said. "She's dangerous."

"I am a Protector of the House," Robert reminded him. "If Aunt Cecilia in-injured me, then I have the right to c-confront her."

Michael steeled himself. "I will speak to her first, and then perhaps—"

"No! You're going to k-kill her, aren't you, Papa?" Despite the stutter, Robert faced him, utterly determined.

With an internal sigh, Michael recognized that mulishness. Nothing could have swayed his cousin Robert, Roland's older brother, when he wore that expression, and his young

incarnation looked exactly the same. But Protector or not, Robert was only nine.

To Michael's astonishment, Tirgit said valiantly, "I will go with you. I, too, am a Protector of the House, and Lady Cecilia has harmed me. I loved her, and she took away my memory. She hurt our *son*."

"It's too dangerous," Michael argued.

"Lord," said Tirgit, her voice hard and sharp as the steel that rode at Michael's hip. "We are Protectors. Let us do our duty. Together," she added, taking Robert's hand.

Michael held his ground for a moment longer. "But—" He felt cold dread at the thought of exposing Tirgit and their son to whatever malign force Cecilia wielded.

"*Michael*. Please," Tirgit said, still steely. Despite her words, it was not a request. He knew that she would not yield now.

Dominic and Mathilde would be there. *He* would be there. Against three full-strength Apkallu, what could Cecilia possibly do to harm his wife and child? And she wouldn't get the chance. He intended to take her by surprise.

"Come, then," Michael said, finally. "But be very careful."

* * * *

Mathilde and Dominic both seemed composed and not the least bit guilty. Time to launch her attack, then. "Dominic," Cecilia said, rising from her chair and giving him an icy nod. "Mathilde—my dearest good-sister, what has happened? Have I angered you in some wise, to make you turn against me in such a fashion?"

"I should ask you the same question," Mathilde replied, without flinching. "Your geas has caused me great suffering."

Dominic put his arm around his consort, his expression unreadable.

She should have seen how damaged he was, and not intervened to save him all those years ago! But she had been so desolated at the thought of being the only remaining Apkallu that she had allowed emotion to override her judgment. And now, look what repayment she reaped from her act of compassion! He was cold as ice, and not the slightest bit intimidated by her.

Sir Jean and Lady Alais, however pressed themselves against the far wall, as if they hoped to escape notice during this confrontation.

"I have come to answer these traducing charges made against me, of course," Cecilia said. Coquettishness would not work on Dominic, and she dared not try to coerce him, not with so many hostile witnesses. "It is most distressing at a time when I am attempting to deal with the threat posed by the return of the Cursed One. If there must be a council, let it convene once this threat has passed. Menelaos—Dominic—you must know how important it is to unify the djinni and the kin against our common enemy. Divided, we cannot stand against her—and she has already suborned Arjumand!"

He inclined his head, his very composure a challenge. "There can be no unity without trust."

"Will you agree to hear my side, then? I swear that I did nothing with the intention of harming you, or Mathilde, or Michael—speaking of our Ea, where is he?"

"Away," Dominic replied.

Aura wing poised to smite his smirking countenance, she challenged, "On House business? Or to spread more mistrust?"

Mathilde and Dominic exchanged glances. Cecilia cursed the fact that she no longer had an active blood bond with either of them, so she could not eavesdrop on their thoughts. "Never mind." Weariness lapped at her like floodwaters. "If you have questions, I will answer them." How much did they know? To what extent had they uncovered her efforts to conceal certain truths?

"We know that you falsified our memories of the night Michael was Transformed," Dominic said, bluntly.

She had suspected as much, and prepared her answer during the long hours of travel southward. But did her deeper secrets still lie untouched? "Only to protect you. You know how few Apkallu remain in service to the House. Every Protector is vitally needed ... and you cannot say that my act caused you harm, can you?"

"Harm enough," Dominic said, his voice rough.

"If what you say is true, dear sister," interjected Mathilde, "then you can undo some of that harm by lifting your geas and restoring the true memories of what happened that night. I've tried, but you did your work well. I can see where memories were altered, but I'm unable to get to what's underneath."

So, still safe. Cecilia fought to keep from showing her triumph. "I am sorry, but I cannot do as you ask, not now."

Dominic lifted his brows. "Why not?"

"It's too dangerous under the circumstances," Cecilia said. "Surely you noticed the effects? I may have laid the geas, but undoing it is not easy, I assure you. It is a delicate operation, with great risks, and I would not take the chance of injuring you—"

"—further," muttered Dominic, under his breath.

She decided to ignore him, and forged ahead. "—while we need all of our Protectors for the struggle that lies ahead. Afterwards ... perhaps..."

"Not *perhaps*," Sir Jean spoke up, sounding both frightened and determined. "On behalf of the kin, I insist that you undo what you have done to the Apkallu, Lady Cecilia, and present yourself to council, and both of these things sooner rather than later. Your covenant with us rests upon your promise: 'As you open our memories, so shall we remember you.' If you alter our memories, how then shall we remember *you*?"

Cecilia gritted her teeth, and forced herself to assume a tone of humble appeal. "It was never my intention to injure anyone. I was merely trying to keep Dominic from paying the consequences of his folly. I apologize for doing it so clumsily. I only had your best interests at heart—I swear it."

"You lying bitch," said a new, deep voice. To her dismay, Michael strode into the room, his golden wings limned with blood-red rage. "Was harming my son also in his best interests?" His sword was drawn, and every line of his frame sang with killing intent.

"Is this your plan, Sir Jean? To lure me here so he can murder—?" Cecilia began to ask. Then, to her shock, she saw

Robert's slender, dark-haired form following close on his father's heels, his faded wings wrapped tightly around his body, as he clung to Tirgit's hand. What was Robert doing here? It was useless to try and regain their trust now. She snarled, and dodged the swift swing of Michael's sword. The blade bit deeply into the frame of the cushioned chair where she'd been sitting, and shattered it into splinters with an explosion of goose down.

She formed her aura into a sword of silver fire, and prepared to counter-attack, only to be brought up short by a sickening wave of pain in her head. How could forget the geas Dominic had laid upon her? *Galla-demons devour his entrails!* She was not permitted to kill either Michael or Dominic, but neither could she leave them untouched. That left—

Michael's next thrust tore through her gown, just over her ribs, and left a burning line against her skin. She pushed him away with all her strength, her silver wings lifting and tossing him against the wall. She swept Dominic and Mathilde off their feet as well, the force of her blow stunning them into temporary submission. Sir Jean and Lady Alais were left to cower amidst the ruins of the parlor's furniture

* * * *

God's Nails, how had Cecilia gotten so strong? Michael barely had time to think as he found himself surrounded by cold silver fire and flung across the parlor as if he weighed nothing.

He slammed into the wall with the sickening crunch of broken ribs, all breath driven from his lungs, unable to move or even shout.

* * * *

Cecilia turned to face her foster son. He spread his crippled wings, as if he wanted to shelter his mother. *He hates me, too, after all my care for him. Does he see my intent? No matter.* They had betrayed her, the boy she had raised as a son and the girl she had rescued from a life of degradation and slavery.

She spoke, using the Voice of Coercion. "Utu hear me: Irkalla, Ereshkigal commands you. Unbind your chains." Before she finished, or her enemies could react, she shattered the parlor window with her sword of light and leapt into the gray dawn.

Michael wanted his son to regain his powers? The sound of screaming followed her into the cool morning air. *Be careful what you wish for.*

* * * *

As Michael lunged after Cecilia's retreating form, ignoring the agony in his chest, a scorching inferno erupted at his back. He turned to see Robert's pale aura suddenly flaring into incandescence. The boy screamed, and began to struggle in his mother's restraining arms.

Robert! Michael shouted in his head. Without a blood bond, it was impossible for his son to hear him.—Tirgit! Sweetheart!—

She turned her head toward him, her mouth open in shock, and then she and Robert both vanished in a flare hotter and brighter than Egypt's noonday sun.—Michael! Michael! He's burning!—She sent, then there was only shrieking.

Michael tried to move towards his wife and son, but his back spasmed and he fell forward on his face. He felt the prickling sensation of his injuries healing, but not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough. Unbearable heat became unbearable stench. And throughout it all, Robert never stopped screaming.

Michael had to reach them ... had to do something ... God and all His saints be damned, why couldn't he *move*? *Hot. Too hot. Too bright. Oh God! What did Cecilia do to you?*

—Mathilde!—Dominic sent as Michael saw a flash of torn blue gown.

His sister, headdress askew, face marred by streaks of blood, threw herself toward Robert, using her aura to enclose the pillar of unbearable light that hid his son and wife. His heart leapt. Mathilde would save them. She wrapped the burning auras with her own blue-white wings, surrounding the fire, snuffing it like a candle. She would save them!

Hope died an instant later. Robert's light grew even more intense, and Mathilde's aura bulged with the effort to subdue it. Fire blasted upwards, blackening the painted plaster and scorching the great oaken beams. Robert's screaming fell abruptly silent. Tirgit's, too. Then Mathilde's aura *tore*, and she fell backwards, arms outflung.

A wave of ecstasy pulsed through him, shining splendor, power and glory healing him—*too late, much too late*. He convulsed in a horrible exaltation, drinking it in, unable to stop, all the while wishing, *No! No! Take it back! Take it back!*

Finally able to breathe again, to move, if not yet to see, he scrabbled for shreds of control. His eyes wept bloody tears. His heart, his mind, had gaping holes where blood bonds had just been. Tirgit and Robert were ... gone. The pillar of light had devoured them, and nothing remained except for the stink of ashes and smoldering carpet wool.

They couldn't just be ... *gone*. He heard a terrible howl from Dominic. "Mathilde! *Tirgit!*"

Michael rubbed away his scarlet tears. Dominic, an arm and leg broken in several places, had crawled to his wife's side and lifted Mathilde onto his lap. He bent over her, rocking slowly, keening. Mathilde still shone with the weak glow worn by all living things, but her great Apkallu aura was gone.

Robert. Tirgit. Mathilde.

In less than the space of time it took to recite a Paternoster, Cecilia had robbed him of his family. She would pay for this, he vowed. He would kill her before the shock of his losses vanished, and the pain set in. Propelled by the terrible strength that was their last gift to him, Michael dove out the window. He shot forward, chasing the silver-winged figure fleeing over the hills ahead.

* * * *

Cecilia flew with all of her considerable strength, but still, Michael pursued her, his enraged presence beating against the doors of their faded blood-bond like a sanguine battering-ram beating against fortress gates. He drew closer to her, impelled by the rage and grief that surrounded him like Greek fire, blazing and unquenchable.

Oh, how she wanted to kill him, instead of running away so ignominiously, but that damned geas forbade her.

It did not, however, forbid her from injuring him.

She paused in mid-air, taunting him to come within range, and smashed him down into the neat row of rosebushes that lay below them. Dust arose, veiling him from sight, and the heavy pressure against her mind faded abruptly as he lost consciousness. She waited long enough to catch a glimpse of him sprawling unconscious in a tangle of thorns, then she fled again.

She did not slacken her speed as the first rays of the rising sun set the hilltops ablaze with golden light, risking detection to put as much distance as possible between Villeroze-sur-Orb and herself. But as she passed over more settled areas, the chances of being seen grew too great. She landed in the sparse shade of an olive grove and gasped for breath, knee-deep in dried brown grass.

Gradually her breathing slowed, and she opened her senses, seeing the gnarled tree trunks wreathed in vines which sagged with dusty clusters of dark grapes. She listened for the faint melodies of the earth below her feet. Yes—that's what she would do first: sing down the walls of Villeroze-sur-Orb and every other building within a hundred leagues. She

began to hum softly, sending the vibrations of her voice out through her aura, listening for dissonances in the earth-melodies she could exploit. But to her disappointment, the fault-lines were deep, and too hard to grasp. She poured more power into her song, and willed the ground to shiver.

It would not move. She increased the power of her song until she was nearly shrieking, her aura burning and tingling with the force she was pouring through it, down, down, down into the dark, cool veins of the earth, but still, she could draw nothing more than a barely perceptible tremor. The stable melodies of rock and soil held firm, refusing to quiver and join her song of destruction.

Gasping for breath, furious and thwarted, she concluded it was impossible. She was strong, stronger than she had ever been, but even so, she could not move land that had no fault, that offered no access to the rivers of fire far below.

What now? She was alone, on foot, and it might take hours, if not days, to walk to the nearest House of the Rose or rose farm, which was, what? Pezenas? Should she conceal herself until night fell, and then fly? The thought of spending precious hours in enforced idleness was repugnant. She needed to make her next move against her enemies before they had the opportunity to regroup and counterattack.

But how? She glanced around the grove, seeking inspiration, and saw a peasant man approaching. He had a deep reed basket on his back and a short curved knife in his hand with which to harvest the grapes that hung from the tree limbs around her. He spotted her at the same time, and gaped stupidly, thinking her a fairy, no doubt. And what else

should he think, to see a lady in fine clothing and no mount or attendants nearby? When he came within range of her aura, she held him immobile, thrashing, then trembling in terror.

"Where is the nearest town?" she asked, gently.

"P-p-pezenas, my lady!" he gasped, his eyes rolling in an attempt to track her as she walked around him. "It's not far. I go there on market day."

She pointed behind him. "Is that the road to Pezenas, over there?"

"Y-yes, lady! Turn left, and by noon you should reach the town. You'll see the walls."

That was closer than she could have hoped for ... and not only did Pezenas have a House of the Rose, but there was also a Templar preceptory. She knew it well, from the memories that Michael had shared during the pleasant time when he was her consort.

"You have been most helpful," she told the peasant, standing behind him. Terror deliciously accelerated his heartbeat. "I need one more thing from you now..."

He whimpered as she bit into his throat, but made no sound as she drank deeply, lowering his body into the tall grass when he sagged, unconscious.

She drank until the bright ecstasy of his death swept through her, driving away all of her fatigue, and then she swept his corpse with her wings, absorbing the remainder of his life, leaving only his knife lying on the ground.

Feeling refreshed, she set out for Pezenas.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

"Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I [am] sick of love. His left hand [is] under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."

—*Song of Solomon, 2:5-6*

Villeroise-sur-orb, Tuesday, September 30, AD 1270

Coming back to consciousness, Michael lay for a long time where Cecilia had felled him, pinned by thorny rosebush canes and paralyzed by his own sense of powerlessness. He had failed, failed *utterly* to protect those he loved. Failed even to obtain vengeance. Amidst the splintered greenery, his head pillowed on dry, dusty soil, his mouth filled with dirt and blood, he couldn't find the strength to move.

The sunlight grew brighter, until it resembled his son's aura in his final moments of life. Perhaps, if he lay here long enough, the fire would take him, too, and burn away the dreadful silence that had once been filled with his blood-bonds to his wife and his sister.

One presence remained.—Michael, where are you? Are you injured?—Dominic.

Should he reply?

Then Dominic's strong arms of air pulled him free of the stinging thorns, lifting him to his feet, and gently brushing dirt away from his face.—Michael?—

The other djinn's hand lingered, unnaturally warm against Michael's cheek. Michael turned his head away, and closed his

eyes, avoiding Dominic's concern, his grief. He was too empty to give any sort of comfort or reassurance.

—Come back to the house. Sir Jean is mad with worry, and we have matters to take care of.—If Dominic was suffering, he hid it well. His mental voice was gentle, yet firm, recalling Michael to his duties as Protector.

Ah, yes. Duty—the harsh mistress that had sustained Michael when he was crippled after the battle of Mansurah and sentenced to a lifetime of keeping accounts and writing correspondence for the Templars. Bound to the House of the Rose, he would serve Duty with equal exactitude.

He pushed free of Dominic's supporting arm. "I can stand." Staggering, he began the long walk back toward the golden-stone walls of Villerose-sur-Orb, Dominic limping alongside as his own bones healed.

Michael lost track of time after that. His body slowly froze, growing colder and colder as his soul shrank inside. He heard himself give a series of orders to Sir Jean and Lady Alais. Cecilia, punctilious about her vows to the kin, had not harmed them. There was a flurry of activity. Mathilde's still-breathing body was carried away to the chapel, where a vigil would be held for her as the flame of her body's life guttered and burned out. The ruined carpet was rolled up, revealing scorched floorboards underneath. Other needed actions were taken care of. He did not allow himself to feel.

* * * *

The Templar Preceptory of Pezenas, Feast of St. Jerome,
Tuesday, September 30, AD 1270

"Cecilia le Byzantine? Blessed Virgin preserve us, is it possible?" The white-clad Templar stopped abruptly in the doorway of the small reception chamber. The brown-robed sergeant-brother accompanying him had to rise on tiptoes in order to peek over his superior's shoulder to see what had startled him.

Cecilia, who had been waiting impatiently for some time in the stark room, furnished only with cobwebbed weapons hung on the wall, looked up in shock. She had not used that name for nearly a decade.

The knight-brother was a man in his forties, with a deeply lined, freckled face, and a bushy beard of mixed red and white. His tonsured head was fringed with graying auburn. She stared at him, trying to recollect where they might have met. Then it came to her. He had been Michael's assistant at the preceptory in Ypres, over twenty years ago, and a frequent guest at Mathilde's dinner table.

"Brother Aumery," she acknowledged with dismay. Would she have to kill him, and his sergeant-brother, too? "I had not expected to see you here," she admitted. "You had departed the Order when last we saw each other in Ypres."

"Indeed. I decided to return and take permanent vows when my Margaret passed on to her heavenly reward. God surely wished it, as we had no children, and I missed the company of my brothers in Christ." He gave her a shrewd glance, and turned to the sergeant-brother, a stocky young man with heavy black brows. "Richard, wine for our guest," he ordered.

Brother Richard gave a disappointed bow and took his leave. But he looked back before he closed the door. No doubt he was curious. She was in no mood to be amused.

Aumery eyed Cecilia warily, as if she were a poisonous serpent. "You have not changed in the slightest since last I saw you."

"You flatter me," she replied coyly, though his tone had been anything but flattering.

"Forgive my discourtesy in asking this so bluntly, but ... why are you here?" Aumery, still standing by the door, showed no inclination to come further into the room.

Knowing she could not afford to frighten him too badly, she reached out her wing, and held it over his head like a benediction, projecting soothing and peace. *You trust me*, she sent to him. *I am no threat to you*. "I have some information that may interest you."

His frown lessened, and when Brother Richard returned with a tray holding a flagon and two earthenware goblets, Aumery waited until Richard had poured and served the wine before asking, "What was it that you wished to tell me, Lady Cecilia?"

She took a sip of the wine, which was a local vintage, strong and sweet, then asked, "Do you remember Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne?"

"Of course," Aumery said, startled. "As you well know, I served as his squire for many years. I was shocked and deeply grieved when he vanished from the Preceptory at Ypres, with the doors still bolted from inside, leaving behind his habit and his shoes."

At her sidelong glance he added, somewhat warily, "It was a common theory that the devil took him. I myself never believed that he deserted the Order willingly. What have you come to tell me?"

Cecilia smiled at him sweetly. "That you will surely recognize him when you see him again. He calls himself Sir Michael de Murat these days. He's currently visiting at Villeroze-sur-Orb, an estate near Beziers, with Dominic de Bergama, also known as Menelaos of Pergamon."

Brother Richard gasped. Brother Aumery, though suddenly pale, ground his teeth. "How do I know you're telling us the truth, Lady Cecilia? Menelaos of Pergamon is well known to the Order. And you are known to have been his widow, and also the wife of Sir Michel de Murat. How do I know that *you* are not a sorceress?"

"Sir Michael attacked me this morning, causing me to flee for my life," Cecilia said, hiding annoyance. "I come to you a helpless woman, begging for your aid. If you will but go to Villeroze-sur-Orb, you will find him."

"At what time this morning did he attack you?" Brother Aumery asked. "And where?"

"At dawn," she answered. "At Villeroze-sur-Orb."

He looked at her from under frowning brows. "That's a day's walk from here. The gate keeper reported you arrived on foot, Lady Cecilia. How did you come to us so swiftly?"

"It doesn't matter when or where he attacked me," Cecilia said, in the Voice of Coercion. *"You will believe my report, and go to capture him."*

To her great displeasure, Brother Aumery continued to hesitate, studying her intently. She soothed his aura with her own greater one, attuning him to belief. Finally, he turned to his assistant. "Go, and tell the Marshal to assign six Sergeant-Brothers and their mounts. We will ride to this estate after the services for Sext." He turned back to Cecilia. "I hope, for the sake of your soul, that you are not lying to us."

She suppressed her triumph. "Everything I have told you is true. Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne is alive and well, and at Villeroze-sur-Orb."

Aumery nodded, grimly. "We shall see, soon enough."

* * * *

At some point in the endless afternoon, Michael found himself standing at the tall writing desk in the sunny parlor, writing out message after message to be posted by pigeon and sent by courier. Numbness and distance allowed him to write out the cold facts of Cecilia's murders.

"Michael." The voice was soft. He continued writing, trying to ignore it, gathering slippery threads of concentration. "Beloved," came the voice again, and the threads tangled hopelessly, leaving confusion and a large ink blot behind on the narrow, red-edged strip of parchment. "You must eat something. The kin are afraid."

"They should be." Michael's voice scraped like rusty mail, startling himself. "And I'm not hungry." He was hollowed out of all feelings, all emotion. His stomach rebelled at the thought of citrus-preserved blood.

A warm, heavy hand fell on his shoulder. "Michael, here. Drink. You're at the end of your strength."

Michael turned with a faint snarl and lifted his heavy—so heavy—hand to knock the familiar jar from Dominic's hand.

The motion of his hand slowed to a stop with his fingers touching Dominic's cheek. Michael blinked. His Seer's eyes showed him an unbelievable sight. Dominic's scarred aura had been healed. All polished bronze, it gleamed with strength and vitality.

"How—?"

Dominic shrugged, gray eyes cloudy with sorrow. "I can only guess it was Mathilde's final gift to me. She ... somehow ... channeled the—the deaths. Her death, and..." He swallowed hard. "And it healed me, where the raw energy would have torn me apart."

As it had, in Beziers. As it had torn Mathilde apart just hours ago, driving her soul out of her body.

Thoughts he had held at bay returned, tearing him apart. His sister's body lay in state in the quiet cool of the estate's chapel, the coverlet rising and falling ever-so-slightly, but she was gone. Her flesh just hadn't realized it yet, but when it did ... *Michael swings his son's chubby little body up and around. Robert squeals in delight. "Again, Papa! Again!"*

A sob, barbed and merciless, clawed its way out of Michael's chest, his throat. It hurt, ah God, it hurt, and it was shredding the blessed numbness that held his pain at bay.... *at their first meeting, Tirgit gives him a long glance out of startling blue-green eyes. "Oh, mistress, he is indeed 'Brother What-a-waste!'..."*

"Damn you!" he said, his left hand rising, fingers curling into the soft wool of Dominic's tunic. *Damn you for making me feel! ... she stands between him and the door, looking very young despite the smooth curve of breasts half-hidden by her embroidered silk chemise. "It's my wish, and the wish of the House, to bear you a child, lord."*

"Damn you," he said again, and another sob tore through him. "I want—I want—ah, God, Robert! Tirgit!"

The pain was too much. Ice rose around his feet, his ankles, up his legs. Shortly it would fill up the empty space inside his chest where his heart had been. *So empty, like a winter night without moon or stars.* The only warmth came from Dominic's hand upon his shoulder, burning through Michael's torn clothing, and the heat of his beloved's cheek and chest against Michael's fingertips.... *"Up, Papa! Up!" Tiny hands tug at the hem of Michael's surcote, scrabble at the hardened leather of his scabbard.*

—Menelaos, I'm cold,—Honorio whispered, her presence just as lost as Michael's inside the vast, echoing space of the skull they shared.... *Tirgit's hand is light and hesitant against his chest. Her expression is wary, fearful.*

Dominic's newly-healed wings rippled with light, and then those strong arms, those wings, embraced him. It took only the slightest effort to lean forward, to press his mouth against Dominic's.... *Menelaos pushes Honorio's red wedding veil back, loosening the hairpins that fasten it, and it slips over her shoulders. She's afraid of what will happen next, and tells herself that she shouldn't be. This is Menelaos, after all, her friend, her mentor, her beloved.*

Dominic's mouth was hot. Michael craved that heat, and the life that it offered. He deepened the kiss, opening his mouth as if trying to devour Dominic's lips.

Dominic stiffened with a gasp, his hands tightening on Michael's shoulder. He drew away long enough to ask, "Are you certain?"

"...I shall do nothing, not even kiss you, except by your command," Michael promises Tirgit, though his loins are aching at the sight of her breasts and sweetly curved waist.

—Yes.—Michael's voice blended with Honoria's, his longing merging with hers until the presences in his head were no longer male and female, present and past, but simply ... Ea, who had loved Ninshubur in every lifetime they had shared.

And then Dominic's mouth was moving over Michael's, his tongue sweeping into Michael's mouth, tasting of citrus-infused blood and smoke, and heat. Blessed warmth, driving away the cold. He wanted to be here, within this circle of strong arms and bronze light. It was a place without coldness, without loss...

Michael moaned, eagerly swallowing the taste of smoke, and pressed himself closer, seeking to join himself with the source of that heat. ... *She smiles at him, tremulously. "I know, lord. I'm not afraid."*

"I want—I want—" Michael said at last, his lips moving against the prickle of stubble on the skin of Dominic's jaw. Desire was a bonfire, painful but *alive*.

"I know," Dominic murmured. "Come with me."

His hand locked in Dominic's, their fingers entwined, Michael let the other djinn lead him upstairs to a bedchamber

made dim by tightly-fastened shutters. Dominic swiftly unbuckled Michael's belt, and pulled his tunic over his head. Then his fingers were working at the laces of Michael's shirt, and Michael studied those familiar, saturnine features with desperate hunger, inflamed by the lingering touches.

Dominic's fingers stilled. "I—perhaps this isn't the right thing—"—Because I couldn't bear it, if you repudiated me again, afterwards.—He refused to meet Michael's gaze.

Did he want this? Could he do this without reservation, without regret? Michael deliberated, trying to remember why he had thought it was wrong, trying to force down the blind need that screamed for comfort, *any* comfort.

Dominic's aura dimmed steadily, until it began to look almost tarnished again.

"Beloved," Michael said, taking Dominic's face between his hands. He kissed the other djinn delicately, almost chastely, at first, until it rekindled the flame between them. "Remind me that I want to live. Warm me."

"I want you to live," Dominic whispered hoarsely, clutching Michael with painful strength.

They finished undressing each other, Michael craving each touch of skin against skin, until they were both bare. He let Dominic lead him to the bed, banishing sudden apprehension with more kisses.

* * * *

"I want you to live." *Don't leave me, my love. Don't make me wait for more painful decades, more empty centuries*

*searching for you, hoping against hope that I will find you,
and that when I do, you will want to remember me...*

As he pushed Michael gently down on the coverlet, Dominic wondered if his beloved would change his mind again, if he would let nervousness, or grief, or anything else come between them, as had happened so many times before.

In the midst of all this day's tragedy, what were the nonexistent gods thinking to finally—*finally*—give him hope of what he had wanted for so long? Would they tantalize him with the prospect of his long-delayed reunion with his beloved, only to yank it cruelly away at the last moment? And yet, Michael lay quietly in Dominic's arms, as beautiful and golden as he had been at seventeen, before lines of sorrow and suffering strengthened his features. The blankness was beginning to fade from his dark blue eyes, banishing the remote stiffness that had terrified Dominic since—

Michael reached up and laid his trembling fingers against Dominic's heart.—Do what you will,—he said, the glorious light of his aura shimmering.—I trust you.—

No more need to hesitate. As his aura touched Michael's and mingled with it, Dominic lowered himself to press thigh against thigh, hip against hip, longing to map out and set fire to the unfamiliar territory of Michael's flesh. He had been intimately familiar with Honoria's body, but Michael was an uncharted expanse.

Mathilde, you've given me a gift beyond compare, he thought gratefully, as the sweet ache grew in his loins, and unbearable agony did not, for once, follow. *When we meet*

again, I will owe you a debt beyond repaying, my friend Ninharsag.

He kissed Michael's throat, rejoicing in the acceleration of his pulse, and began to explore, his mouth moving over Michael's collarbone, feeling Michael's stomach muscles contract under the touch of his fingertips. Dominic was gratified to draw out sharp gasps as he swept his hand firmly down a muscled ribcage and over an elegantly-arched hipbone, then turned teasingly lower, to the rough white scars marring the smooth skin of Michael's thigh, legacy of the Crusade that had crippled him before his Transformation.

Another transformation began as cold skin warmed under Dominic's touch, like marble turning to flesh. Michael's breathing grew harsh as Dominic discovered his sensitive places, and exploited them with ruthless sensuality, stroking, kissing, and biting gently. Only when Michael was arching into his hands, deliciously flushed and pleading, did Dominic, almost unbearably aroused himself, cradle Michael's head against his throat.

"Drink," he commanded softly, and gasped at the sting of sharp teeth and the soft pressure of Michael's lips against his skin.

He reached between them, Michael's phallus a rigid, velvety pressure against his fingers, and stroked firmly, sweeping his thumb crosswise in a wicked caress over the weeping tip. Michael groaned and convulsed immediately, clutching Dominic's shoulders as he drank, his aura brightening to pure electrum.

Dominic turned his own head, and almost reverently bit down into the smooth skin closest to his lips. How many decades had it been since he had experienced this ultimate joining between two djinni?

With the first swallow of Michael's blood, his mind opened. He tumbled through a flood of images: ... *Menelaos, resplendent in a gold-embroidered wedding tunic, bends to kiss Honoria ... Tirgit, pale but smiling, with a dark-haired newborn against her breast ... Marcus scowling as he tears a round loaf of bread in half ... Roland looking sleepy and hung-over, cropped golden hair shining against a grimy pillow. "God's Nails, Michou, have you no pity for a wounded man?" ... Mathilde, young and breathtakingly beautiful as she kneels to fasten Michael's gilded spurs.*

Dominic gasped as Michael returned his caresses, his touch tentative, but hot. Great golden wings surrounded Dominic with a pressure lighter than down and stronger than death. Climax tumbled him into myrrh-scented light, sharing one mind, one soul.

In the aftermath, he fought sated drowsiness, running his fingers through soft hair, tracing the edge of an ear, drawing gentle patterns on Michael's nape.

Michael closed his eyes under the caress, and let his head rest on Dominic's shoulder. He seemed to be drifting off to sleep, but that thought was dispelled when Michael let out a long, hitching breath, and began to shake. He turned his face into Dominic's chest, clinging to him with bruising strength as grief poured with molten strength through their link, and tears dampened Dominic's skin.

Dominic held his mourning beloved and continued to stroke his hair, his shoulders, his back. It was a bittersweet moment. If only he could weep, too. They were finally reunited but they had each lost so much ... wife, sister, son, daughter. Now they had only each other—and two enemies to face.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, Mathilde would have said. There had been quite enough evil done already this day. Dominic dreamed of staying in this bed forever, his beloved in his arms, even if their kisses were made bittersweet with tears.

Finally, Michael's tears slowed, and harsh grief was replaced by exhaustion. "I have to defeat her," he murmured at last, his voice hoarse. "And make her reveal the secret that she feels was worth the lives of—of—of three djinni."

He couldn't yet speak the names of his lost, but Dominic understood. "I'll stay with you and fight by your side, until the end."

Michael sighed, and relaxed into sleep at last, his body heavy and limp and warm.

Soothed by the sight of that golden head sharing his pillow, and the touch of Michael's breath against his skin, Dominic's eyes closed, following his beloved into sleep, still amazed at the unexpected presence of joy, woven like a single, shining thread in the somber fabric of this day.

* * * *

Surrounded by warmth, Michael was dreaming.

...*"We have to hurry," Tirgit says, gathering an armful of gowns, and stuffing them into a large traveling chest with uncharacteristic carelessness. "Captain Thomas wants to sail before Vespers, so you'll have to remove that thing from Robert soon."*

"I had the most awful dream," Michael begins to say, but then his attention is drawn to his son. Robert stands in the middle of the room, and the woven patterns from the rug underfoot are writhing upwards, entangling him.

"Hurry," Tirgit says, still stuffing clothing into the chest. "Or we'll miss the ship."

"Hurry, Papa," echoes Robert. "I want to go home with you and Mama."

Michael draws his sword and tries to cut away the dark tendrils trapping his son, but for every dark vine he severs, two take its place.

"Hurry, Papa!" his son says, his aura nearly eclipsed by the things imprisoning him...

Michael awoke with a gasp, still consumed with the urgent need to free Robert before the ship sailed ... and found his cheek pressed against warm skin that smelled faintly of fragrant smoke, as if incense clung to him. *Dominic.*

Honorias presence stirred inside his head. *My beloved, and my friend,* she said, softly.

In an instant, memory returned to Michael. Robert. Tirgit. Cecilia. And ... Dominic. Twilight seeped in around the wooden shutters, so he hadn't slept long ... after.

After. Heat rose in his cheeks at the memory of Dominics skilled touch, his mouth—oh, saints, his mouth—and his

delicate forbearance. He had restrained himself, Michael knew, making love only with hands and lips and tongue.

Surely this won't be the only time? Honoria asked, wistfully. *You'd enjoy everything he did to you, if only you let him.*

I know, Michael answered, honestly. It was no use lying to his other self, anyway.

How could this happen? Honoria asked, and Michael flinched, the reminder of his failure like vinegar on a deep, bleeding wound. But he had mistaken her intent—she was not accusing him, but rather trying to analyze cause and effect. *Our son was so weakened. He could barely use his hand of air ... and yet, what he did—the Apkallu haven't been able to summon that much power in centuries.*

Michael realized Honoria was correct. His losses were so overwhelming that wondering about how the destruction was caused had not even occurred to him. But thanks to Dominic, the worst of the wounds had been bandaged, even if healing would take a long time. Now, he had to face his losses head-on, in order to find a way to defeat Cecilia.

Using the weight of the still-sleeping Dominic's hand on his hip to anchor him, Michael cast his thoughts back to the events of the morning. An image from his dream returned to him as he remembered the strange writhing darkness in Robert's aura, reminiscent of chains wound around his wings.... *unbind!* Why else would Cecilia have commanded an unbinding, using her True Name?

Honoria curled around his soul, a warm, copper-colored presence in his mind, and confirmed the suspicion that had

flowered in him since he saw Robert: *If she was able to unbind him, then she must have bound him to begin with.*

Had Cecilia planned this, perhaps from the moment Robert was born? Why Transform him, if only to bind him? Why tamper with all of their memories?

Fear. She's frightened of us, Honoria mused. *But, why?*

Dominic stirred. The first glance from those dark-lashed gray eyes was soft, then wariness replaced it, tension forming in Dominic's body, apprehension seeping through their blood-bond.

He's waiting for us to reject him, Honoria said, quietly. *You won't do that, will you?*

Shouldn't he feel guilty for seducing Dominic right after Tirgit and Robert's deaths, and before Mathilde's body had even grown cold? But it felt right to take comfort with someone he loved, and who loved him. Tirgit would have understood. Mathilde, too.

No, Michael assured her. *He needs us, and ... we need him.*

We love him, Honoria added.

Michael reached up, trailing fingertips through Dominic's black hair. "Beloved," he croaked, his voice still suffering from the effects of grief and passion.

Dominic blinked down at him, as if startled, and then he smiled, the smile that Honoria remembered so well, a dimple deepening in one cheek. His grip tightened on Michael's bare hip, as if he feared Michael would next leap out of bed and flee. With a visible effort, he relaxed his fingers.

He bent his head, and Michael met his mouth without hesitation. The kiss was a gentle one at first, an almost hesitant brushing of lips, as if Dominic could not quite trust that Michael would not push him away this time.

Michael pulled him closer and deepened the kiss, touching his tongue to Dominic's lips. They kissed for a long time and without urgency, Dominic's mouth sweet and smoky.

"I've been thinking," Michael said, finally, his mouth still close enough to Dominic's that their lips brushed with every word. But before he could share his thoughts about Cecilia's unbinding of Robert's powers, there was a sharp knock at the door.

Sir Jean flung open the door, and strode in without waiting for permission. "Lord!" He came to a sudden halt at the sight of them in each other's arms, looked hurriedly away, and corrected himself. "Lords—there are Templars at the gate!"

* * * *

Michael sat up. "How many Templars? What do they want?" he asked, in the voice of authority, while his mind struggled to free itself from a morass of old guilt and present embarrassment.

Under his tan, Sir Jean's face was the yellowish-pale color of curdled milk. "Six Templar sergeant-brothers, and their mounts, under the command of a knight-brother, lord. They arrived about an hour ago, and demanded entry to search the house," he replied, his voice shaking at first, then gaining confidence as he spoke. "Which I refused them, of course. We paid them in cash and jewels for this property,

and owe them no fealty. But they did not leave. In fact, my daughter Alinor looked down from the walls, and reports that they are setting up camp in front of the gate. They have also posted two guards at the kitchen gate." He paused, and eyed Michael, who was all-too-conscious of his naked state. "And the knight-brother had a message for you."

"For me?" Michael said, his earlier unease congealing. Over the years, he had dealt with Templars from time to time, and had wondered if—or when—he might be recognized as a deserter. But who would know to ask for him by name—here?

"Yes, lord." Sir Jean gave a nervous half-bow. "I told him that I was acquainted with no such person as Sir Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, but he insisted." He stopped speaking, profoundly uncomfortable.

Michael forced words around the leaden lump in his chest. "Yes?"

Sir Jean coughed. "He said to tell you: 'Sir Aumery de Ivel knows without a doubt that you, formerly known as Brother Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne, are alive and presently within the walls of Villeroze-sur-Orb, and in the company of the notorious sorcerer Menelaos of Pergamon. You are to present yourself by dawn. Know also that we Brothers shall not depart this place, nor permit anyone to depart this place, until you surrender yourself to us. You have betrayed your oaths and deserted the Order and we shall extract just punishment for your crimes. If necessary, we will dismantle this house stone by stone, and kill all who oppose us.'"

Aumery! His faithful squire. For ten years after the battle at Mansurah, Aumery had been his walking stick, his

sounding board, his good right hand ... and his friend. Michael tried to think of a response that would inspire confidence in the obviously-panicked Master of the House, but all that came to mind was that it would be impossible to disguise himself in a way that could deceive one who had served him so long.

Dominic, who had been listening in silence until this point, shot him a swift, concerned glance. "This is surely Cecilia's doing. There is no other way that the Templars could have known you were here, Michael. She has betrayed us."

"I—I agree," Michael said. *Aumery!* It was the last thing he ever expected. He had not heard from his former squire since his knighting ceremony, ten years ago. Michael had thought of him often, in the beginning of his service with the House, wondering whether he had married the woman who had waited for him to finish out his temporary vows, and what happened to them. Why—and when—had Aumery returned to the Templars?

"We should leave as soon as night falls," Dominic advised. "If we're not here..."

"No!" Sir Jean yelled. "Lords, don't abandon us! They'll kill us all, if they can't find you."

He did not need to invoke Beziers. All of them remembered that terrible day. And Michael also knew that Aumery's threats were anything but idle. "I won't leave you," he said, just as Dominic exclaimed, "Michael! Don't be foolish."

He ignored Dominic and continued speaking to Sir Jean. "I swear to you, on my oath as Protector, that I will not abandon Villerose-sur-Orb or its inhabitants until the Templars are gone and Cecilia has been dealt with."

"Thank you, lord," Sir Jean said. "But ... what are we going to do now? How will you rid us of these Templars?"

"I will stay, as well," Dominic said.

"We will devise a plan by dawn," Michael said, with more confidence than he felt.

Sir Jean nodded, gravely. "I chose this manor because of the stoutness of its defenses. After Beziers ... it was difficult to return to this land. I wanted to ensure the safety of my family, and my kin." He bowed deeply, his hands clasped at his waist, his eyes closed. "You have always protected us, lords. We rely on you."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

"And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept."

—*Book of Genesis, 33:4*

Beziers, County of Toulouse Feast of St. Jerome, Tuesday,
September 30, AD 1270

Through the late afternoon, Blanche struggled to rise higher into the air, to ignore her burden and her heavy heart, but the sky mirrored her tempestuous emotions, full of contrary winds and fast streaming clouds, like the gasping breaths she exhaled. She had discovered she could fly along the boundary of clouds. This was half a blessing. The clouds were cold and damp, and she couldn't see well. But they provided cover against any mortal below who might see her flying. Soon enough, just as she feared, the clouds wept.

Her wet skirts and Roland's sodden misery were a burden, one that seemed would never end. She thought longingly of climbing through the cloud layer to the sunny territory up above. But then, she wouldn't be able to see where she was going, and they had already gotten lost too many times.

She followed a river through a broad valley between rough hills. She was beyond weary, her aura wings on fire with phantom pain, so they shone red as the bloody sunrise. She and Roland ought to stop and drink, but the lure of her sons drew her on. They were already out of her control, under her mother's roof. After so many years of neglect, what could Mathilde want them for besides hostages?

She flew on, southeast. More than once, she was ready to land, and lie down and rest on dirt and wet leaves. At last the clouds before her thinned to wisps at the horizon, where sunshine glinted from the waves of the sea. She had reached the border of the territory of rain. She saw a hilltop town by a river winding from the hills to the north, some miles inland, golden stone buildings glowing in mellow afternoon sunshine.

"This is it," said Roland. "It looks just like Sharibet's memories..."

She searched busily for a way to land without attracting attention. There were large tracts of cultivated land below. There had to be people there, too. She touched earth by a stand of trees, exhausted yet jittery with impatience. Roland stood, shoulders bowed, looking worse than she did. They were both wind-draggled, wet, and dirty, for the rain had made mud out of the dust that coated them. It was sheer comfort to stand on two feet and let her aura wings dissolve. The last of the rain on her face was warm.

The tattered storm dissolved like her wings, and a huge rainbow formed across the sky, bright against retreating clouds. She opened her Seer's eyes, wondering if she might see the hand of God placing the rainbow in its perfection upon the sky. But there was no divine aura. Only the brilliance of the steady, shining colors. It was gone in minutes, vanished as if it never existed. She treasured the vision, wondering how many colors made up that band; how it was that it formed a perfect half-circle; why the colors came in that order only; why rainbows only appeared when there was rain and sunshine.

She contemplated sitting down and napping when Roland's harsh breathing caught her attention. She glanced swiftly at him to ensure he hadn't been injured. "What's wrong?"

"You've carried me all this way and I can't even hunt for you! Christ's bones! I'm *useless*."

She thought of seven rebukes in an instant and thought better of saying any one of them. "It's true you cannot use your aura," she said instead. "But you're hardly useless. Are you hungry now?"

He groaned, but said, "You rest yourself. I'll wait."

She folded down, sitting on the ground, knees to chin. "I want to go on, but I can't, just yet." She wrapped her arms around her shins. And while her father guarded, her, she slept.

* * * *

Roland's grip pinched Blanche's arm as they walked up the shallow slope to the gate of Beziers. She guessed it was more to keep her from running headlong after her children than to hold himself upright. As disreputable as they both looked, they earned suspicious glares from the city guards, who didn't speak much *langue d'oil*.

"Did he just say 'no vagrants'?" Blanche whispered to Roland. "Or 'wander freely'?" She fixed the guard with her own fierce gaze, cutting through the language barrier with a penetrating, "Hotel de la Rose?"

The guard scowled harder, then called for a burly compatriot. He sauntered over, scruffy-bearded, thumb in belt, unimpressed. "Looking for the House of the Rose is not a

smart thing to do today," he jeered in colloquial langue d'oïl. "The Templars in Pezenas sent notice that they want to arrest some renegade they've been hunting for more than ten years. There's a big reward, and House is on their bloody shit list, no question. Who are you, and what's your business?"

The last, official, questions were probably because the chatty guard noticed an officer looking on from inside the gate. "Come on, now. Haven't got all day."

"I'm S—Roland D'Agincourt, and this is my d—sister, Blanche," Roland said, stumbling over his title and her relationship with him. As if they hadn't practiced this before. "We're ... looking for the House. My ... sister, she's very good with herbs and perfumes, and we thought..."

"Well, give it up for now," the guard advised. "The folk of the Rose don't usually hire except for field hands and occasional domestics. They certainly don't do favors for gentry down on their luck." He looked them up and down with disinterested contempt. "And they're—" he looked around to see if anyone was listening. "—uncanny. Keep to themselves, know what I mean?" He winked. "Got to be a reason the Templars are after them, after all. You look like nice, fair folk. Don't get mixed up in this."

"But sir," Blanche said girlishly, with a bold flutter of her eyelashes. "Who is it that they're searching for? This is so interesting!"

"Some escaped knight-brother with a long fancy name. Michel de La Roche something. Got to be old enough to be your father." He leered at her while Roland gave a swiftly suppressed start.

—They're after Michel!—he sent to her.—How would they know...?—

She leaned closer to the guard, surrounding him with her aura. He looked stunned as she asked, her voice low, "How did they find out he was there?"

"Sir Aumery, the preceptor in Pezenas, he got word of it. And he's one of the few anymore that would even recognize the felon. Used to be his squire, on Crusade in Egypt, they say."

"Oh," she breathed, all amazed adoration.—That must be Uncle Michel's squire! I knew him when I was a little girl. Maman gave him a horse—how ungrateful of him!—

"I've never seen Templars before," she said, wistful. "How can I get there? Can you take us—me?"

"Sweetheart, you don't really want to go there," he said. "You can come with me. I have a room—" He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her close. He was bouncing off her aura when Roland spoke up.

"Sirrah! Unhand my sister!" Roland put his hand on his sword.

The guard started to draw his own weapon. Blanche hurriedly smothered him with her calming aura, and sent to Roland,—I'm perfectly able to handle this.—

Roland stepped back, palms out to show non-threatening intent.

Blanche, having soothed the guard to a more peaceful frame of mind, gave him a disappointed pout. "He's so strict!" she said, for any onlookers. "Where are the Templars now?" she asked, using the voice of coercion.

"They've gone to Villeroze-sur-Orb, a half-day's ride upriver." The guard shook himself as she withdrew her aura from around him and stepped away. "What the—" He looked at her hard. "Get along. You're not wanted here."

—Michel ... Roland's thought was a little nervous.—We haven't seen each other for twenty years.—Hurry! I don't want to miss him now!—She only wished she dared fly in cloudless daylight. She'd be there in a few minutes.

* * * *

It was weary walking. The river jiggled and jogged northeast, through fields and pastures, vineyards and patches of oak forest, or pine. The afternoon passed in humid heat, and sunset painted the sky wild colors of gold and rose. They took a rest at twilight, flushing a deer from a coppice and drinking from it after she caught it.

Roland was glum. He said he found the experience of the death, without access to his aura, more uncomfortable than invigorating, so he let her have the honor. She had to wonder if he was telling the truth. The times she had watched him, at the kill, he had stiffened and relaxed just like a man in the throes of lust; but he said it wasn't the same.

Finally, flying into the night, they came to a high escarpment—and realized they'd gone too far. Wearily reversing, she finally found a valley east of the river, set between low hills crowned with rustling bushes whose leaves gave off a dusty, spicy scent. Villeroze-sur-Orb. There was a fire burning before the gate, and a party of fighting men snoring around the fire. Were those the Templars?

Well, it was obvious that she couldn't approach the front gate with men-at-arms there, even if the people of the House were willing to grant them entrance.

The wall around the estate was high, and solid, but not any sort of effective barrier against her ability to fly. When they'd circled around to the east face of the wall, and she spotted the third floor window with a small lamp burning, she knew that had to be the nursery where Giselbert was trying to sleep. He couldn't stand darkness, and his voice of protest was rather piercing, if she dared to admit it. That's where they would be—if they were kept all together, please God.

She landed on the top of the wall and searched for signs of dogs. It would be a shame to have to kill loyal animals whose only crime was announcing the presence of intruding strangers. But there were no dogs in evidence. Were the people here so confident in the protection of their tame djinni that they thought they needed nothing else?

Roland trailed behind her as she hurried past a hulking chapel, then across the kitchen garden, dodging leeks and cabbages. Lavender bloomed somewhere near. Piercingly, it brought to mind Mathilde's crisp linens, and the cap Blanche used to wear to Mass when she was a child.

At the kitchen building, they paused, listening. There were no sounds except the rustle of leaves in the mild breeze. She opened her Seer's eyes. The garden was dimly illuminated by the life-force of the plants. The stone walls were dark, the unshuttered windows blank, except for the little one shining with lamp light—and the unearthly glow of djinni wings.

Oh, Blessed Virgin. Was one of the Apkallu guarding her children, even in sleep? She didn't want to have to fight so soon.

—There's a djinni up in that room. Let me look, first.—Go ahead. I'll just stand watch here, and distract anyone who comes for a moment so you can get away.—

He sounded so defeated already! But she didn't have time to reassure him. Her heart pounded with the excitement of seeing her sons again after so long.

Very carefully, and very quietly, she climbed the wall to the little window, her hands of air finding minute crevices in the old stonework, while leaving a slender stalk planted on the ground to prevent her from falling. Before she reached the window, she paused, trying to think how she could look inside without calling any attention to her blazing pink aura. Could she pull her aura down away from her head as she peeked over the sill? Now she wished she'd taken more time to experiment before embarking on this rescue.

Well, there was only one way to test it.

She placed her aura along the bottom edges of the stone window, holding it in place with her will. Cautiously, she inched her head sideways past the side of the window until she caught a glimpse of the room, hoping that part of her right eye only would be visible, if anyone were watching.

The room was lit by a single oil lamp suspended on a brass chain. The hangings of the big bed against the wall were open in the warm night air. A young, dark-haired woman slept on a bench by the door. The nursemaid? But the insubstantial

shimmer of an Apkallu aura did not come from her. It covered the four small bodies curled together on the bed.

Pieter was at the outer edge, facing the door, as a good guardian should. Even in sleep his forehead creased with worry. Reynaud, the next in from the edge, clutched his toy sword as a monk might clasp salvation's cross. Giselbert, on the inside, was sucking his thumb, his face turned toward the lamp. Toward the bottom of the bed, Baudouin slept on his back in a relaxed sprawl, completely at home. When she looked hard, she could see how the aura that covered the boys came from him.

Her son, another Apkallu?—It's Baudouin,—she sent.

—Poor boy!—Roland groaned, his emotions a roiling mixture of shame and self-recrimination.

She wondered why he felt that way, but it didn't matter at the moment. She tested the size of the window to see if she could get through it. No, it was too narrow, barely wider than her hand. Her head and shoulders would not fit no matter which way she tried.

Breathing through her nose in frustration, she climbed back down the wall.—They're in there. I can't get through the window. We'll have to find another entrance.—Through the buttery.—He pointed.

She let herself down to earth and scrambled for the door. It was bolted, as was sensible with armed men camped before the gates. She passed her aura through the wood, found the bolt, and lifted it. She held it tight, so it wouldn't fall and make noise.

The well oiled hinges of the door didn't groan or squeak. The buttery was crowded with barrels and casks and smelled strongly of oak, wine and spilled beer. There was a lingering scent of citron, blood and wet clay as well. She pointed out a dozen clay jars on a sturdy shelf to Roland.—If you're hungry...

He shuddered.—Let's get the boys and go.—

They climbed narrow stone stairs ending at an arched entrance to the great hall. She paused. There were many mortal auras in various locations along the walls, all of them with the distinctive flares that Roland had said meant they remembered their past life memories. If she only had her memories back, she wouldn't feel so incomplete, even with all that Roland had shown and taught her.

She walked softly through the hall toward the far stairway to the third story, using the Voice of Sleep on every mortal she found. At the far end of the hall, an arch to the left opened onto a candle-lit chapel. The scent of lavender lingered there. She peeked in to see several sleepers guarding a body laid before the altar, blonde hair in a long braid pooling on the stone floor. Shockingly, there was still a residual aura glow, and shallow breath moved her chest.

Blanche approached to see why they had laid out a living woman as if dead. The sleepers settled more deeply into sleep as she neared and touched them with her aura. In the light afforded by beeswax tapers she saw the face of the one they held vigil for.

Maman, she thought, in a state of shock.

The face was different. Ten years ago her mother had been thin and ill. Now her mother's skin was waxy white, smooth and fleshed-out. She was beautiful. Blanche touched her mother's cheek. It was cool, but not yet cold. No reaction trembled Mathilde's lashes, no change occurred in her breathing at Blanche's touch. There was no bright aura surrounding her, either of an Apkallu or of a living mortal. The mark that should have showed her Raising and Naming was also gone. The dim light that shone from her quiet body was no greater than what came from the plants in the garden. How had her aura disappeared?

She hurt as though a mule had kicked her in the heart. A thousand, two thousand questions occurred to her, the first one being: Why was her mother nearly dead? All her questions dwindled to a single, child's wail. *What happened?*

She ached to *know*. She wanted time to mourn, and to shriek her anger at her mother's abduction of her sons. She wanted many things, but the most important one was to get her children and be gone from this house of doom.

—Why are you stopping?—asked Roland, waiting by the stairs outside the chapel.

—It's Maman,—she said to him.

—No.—His denial was absolute.—No. I don't believe—

She stood aside to let him see.

He stumbled in, to stand before the bier, his hand clasping hers.

She turned to go to her children, who still needed her, but Roland's hand, holding hers, tugged her to an abrupt stop. He was immovable.

—We have to go! My sons—You go. I'm useless anyway.—
His body canted toward Mathilde, off-center. His skin had gone almost as white as hers.

—I'll be right back. Be ready to run with us.—She walked away from him, worry and sorrow following.

* * * *

Roland stood alone by the nearly-lifeless body of his cousin, his lover, the mother of his only child. He had spent so many years not-thinking about Mathilde; how her eyes smiled, her biting wit when annoyed, the softness of her arms and her ardor ... He had spent his wrath against her during their last meeting in Constantinople, and turned his sights to the duties of his life as part of the House, and his one remaining passion: Blanche.

How could it be that she was dying? How could she die, and forbid him a farewell? The pain in his heart rivaled the agony Cecilia had inflicted when she tried to coerce him into being Raised and Named. A thousand lashes of punishment would have been sweeter. Of all the errors he had committed in the last twenty years, this seemed to him to be the greatest: arriving too late to save her, or to say good-bye.

He took her hand. It was small, light, and unresponsive. Her nails were buffed and clean. The fragrance of lavender surrounded her. She still breathed, though shallowly. But her aura, that visible manifestation of her spirit, was gone. Her light was gone.

He thought he might die, too. He groaned aloud, then bit his lip, ashamed of his lapse. Had his noise caught the

attention of any waking kin, it would go hard on Blanche. And on him? He welcomed the thought. He had lost the use of his aura, but not his skill at arms. He defied anyone human to best him. The blood beat in his chest and he gripped Mathilde's hand tighter. What matter if he could best a mortal? He, no more than any other man, could cheat death. And they had dared to call themselves gods.

Weight like stones crushed his chest so he couldn't breathe. And in that silence, he heard a footfall behind him.

* * * *

Blanche climbed the stairs soundlessly, her senses alert for any movement other than her own. Though her heart was heavy at what she had left behind in the chapel, she worried. Why was it so quiet, when there were Templars at the gate? Where was everybody? Would they suddenly spring upon her, as she rounded a corner? Where were Uncle Michel and Sir Dominic?

She paused at the top of the stairs, listening. There were murmurs and rhythmic vibrations coming from behind a door to the left. She grimaced at the thought of lovers seizing the moment during a siege, but it gave her the advantage, so she thanked them silently and continued to the next door.

There was silence here, but it was a living silence. Which room was hiding her children? Well, of course: the one where lamplight shone under the door. She rushed to it, lifted the latch, and stepped within the chamber.

Everything was just as Blanche had seen from the window: the bed, her sons, sleeping. the nursemaid. On the other side

of the room the boys' clothing hung on pegs, and a table held the burning oil lamp. With a brush of her aura, the nursemaid fell into a deeper sleep.

She knew she had to hurry, but she rejoiced in the sight of her sons, safe. They smelled the same, of dust and little-boy sweat, but they were changed almost as much as she herself had been changed by her Crusading journey, having gained inches and weight since she had seen them last, at the beginning of spring.

How was she to wake them, without waking the entire house?

Baudouin solved her problem by opening his eyes. "Maman! You're an angel, too!" he whispered. In his eyes shone the pink and scarlet light of her aura.

Reynaud, his eyes still closed, said, "Shut up, cub. You're dreaming. Go back to sleep."

"Shhh," said Blanche, bending over the high bed. "I'm here."

"Maman?" Reynaud whimpered, sitting up abruptly, then throwing himself at her.

"Ow," said Pieter, starting to wriggle, then holding very still as his brothers clambered over him. "Is it really you?" he asked, with grunts as little knees knocked his ribs.

Before she could answer, Giselbert gasped. Before he could expel that breath in a cry that would wake the dead, she snatched him up with her hands of air and brought him to her breast, holding his mouth and nose closed. "Shh, shh, baby. It's Maman. Quiet."

Her two middle boys, already clinging to her waist, didn't see what she had done, but Pieter had. His eyes widened, and she could almost hear his thoughts tumble. *Giselbert flew through the air...*

She didn't dare gather him into her arms, which were still full of Giselbert gasping for air to scream, so she spoke with the Voice of Coercion, "Be silent." Young as he was, Giselbert obeyed, even after she let go with her hand of air. "That's my baby, my good baby," she crooned. If her need had not been so dire ... She vowed to she would never use this power again in vain.

"Maman, how did you get here? Where did you come from? *Where's Papa?*" Pieter whispered, having found his wits.

She opened her arms for him to come to her, too, and rejoiced in her squirming bundle of boys. Tears in her eyes, she told them, "Papa is dead. He caught a fever and died."

"He didn't die in battle?" Reynaud sniffled.

"No, dear one. But he died on Crusade, so his soul went straight to Heaven, with Jesus and all the saints."

"And the angels," Baudouin said, eyes tracking her aura's ebb and flow. "Pretty. I have wings, too!" His rudimentary aura writhed in demonstration. It was a transparent green in color, with edges of brown, dark as fertile earth. She couldn't feel it with her hands, or her hands of air. And he didn't seem to feel it, either.

Against Pieter's and Reynaud's denials, she said, "I can see that. Listen, I've come to take you away from here."

Instantly, she was on the receiving end of four independent opinions: yes, let's go right away; no, I want to

stay!; but Grandmaman said we shouldn't leave; I'm hungry. Where's breakfast? She had almost forgotten, in the months away from them, how infuriatingly dear they were. "Quiet! We're going now."

"But, Maman, we're under siege by Templars." As Pieter said this, the tilt of his head told her that it had just occurred to him to wonder how she had gotten in past them.

"I know. We're going over the wall."

"Maman," Reynaud sniffed, stiffening. "We mustn't go. Somebody killed our Great Aunt Theodora yesterday. We don't know who—"

"She went to Alexandria, Maman!" Pieter interrupted. "She told us stories. And Grandmaman is sick—"

"Everybody was upset," Baudouin added.

"No supper! Hungry!" Giselbert had the last word.

And how would she feed them, except on stolen venison over hidden campfires?

Time enough for those details later. First: escape.

"We're leaving now," she declared. She could carry Giselbert and Baudouin down the stairs, and Reynaud and Pieter could walk by themselves. Once she met up with Roland, he could help carry the little ones and she could rig some slings by tearing strips from her chemise.

"Time to go. Baudouin, on my back." He clambered up, and was much delighted when she wrapped him in her aura. "Quiet," she reminded them. She kept Giselbert in her arms, and told Pieter and Reynaud to hold her skirt. "Though you are big boys, I don't want you trying to fight anybody. Leave it to me."

"But, Maman, you are a woman," Reynaud whispered, scandalized. "Yours is not to fight. That's what Uncle Henri always said!"

"Yes, but I've been on Crusade," she said. "Believe me, I can fight now."

"Yes, Maman," Reynaud capitulated.

"All right. It's going to be dark. Gisel-dear, no noise from you, no matter what. Whatever happens, don't let go."

"But, Maman," Pieter protested, luckily in a whisper. "What about Grandmaman? And Grandpapa Dominic? We have to say goodb—"

She clapped a hand of air over his mouth, and saw his eyes grow wide as he was abruptly silenced. At her ear, Baudouin giggled softly. She snuffed the oil lamp with a hand of air, garnering more gasps of shock and delight, and lifted the door latch.

* * * *

Michel walked down the stairway toward the chapel, hoping a quiet period of reflection might calm the raging storm of his conflicted emotions. It was late, and the house lay in deep stillness, but love, hate, joy, grief, pleasure and self-loathing battled within him as he came from the bed of his lover to the bier of his sister. His wife and son's ashes yet stained the ceiling of the parlor, yet he had made love with Dominic as if they might both die on the morrow.

He leaned against the cold stone wall. They might indeed die. Hours of discussion had not developed a practical plan for ridding themselves of the Templars besieging the house,

despite Michael's intimate knowledge of how the Templars would proceed, and his and Dominic's extensive military experience. They were unable to find a way that did not involve Michael leaving—which would break his promise to Sir Jean—or killing the sergeant-brothers, which would result in dire consequences for the estate.

But if he could not find a way to protect the House and drive off the Templars, he and Dominic would die. And if they died, Cecilia would win her ancient, undeclared war. He wasn't willing to accept that outcome, yet he had no plan to prevent it...

His only refuge from these unbearable tensions was the chapel.

Inside, the air smelled sweetly of frankincense and myrrh and beeswax from the candles placed near the altar. They formed a golden bubble of light against the shadows crowding the spaces between the columns and at the top of the barrel vaults. The kin had covered Mathilde's unconscious body with a blanket, and placed a pillow under her head as if she could recognize the kindness. There was a beautifully-executed fresco of the Virgin on the white-plastered column nearest the head of the bier, and it seemed as if the Holy Mother were gazing down at his sister with sorrowful compassion.

Of its own volition, Michael's hand rose, and he crossed himself. "*Pater noster, qui es in coelis ...* " he whispered, beginning the once-familiar prayer. How many years had it been since he had spoken these words?

He stopped short, his whispered words swallowed by shadows, as he saw the ghost holding vigil at Mathilde's side.

Roland ... who had been closer to Michael than his brothers. Who had loved Michael's sister, and nearly been killed for it. Who had given himself willingly to the House of the Rose, and to Sharibet.

"Roland." Michael wasn't aware he had spoken the name out loud until he heard the echoes in the white-washed vaults overhead.

* * * *

Dominic woke alone. It hadn't been long since Michael left their bed. The pleasure of his fingers brushing the nape of Dominic's neck in a swift, light caress lingered, along with the tingle of lips from their kisses.

It was sweet to savor the memories of this night, if one could separate them out from the sorrows that lay behind and before.... *As the hour draws close to midnight, Michael, exhausted from weeks of flying with his son, as well as the rigors of grief and the frustrations of failed planning, looks dazed.*

"You should sleep for a while," Dominic tells him, finally.

With a slight smile, Michael looks up from a detailed map of the Villeroze-sur-Orb estate. "I want to go the chapel, to sit with Mathilde for a while."—And to ask her forgiveness for bedding her husband.—

"You know she won't wake," Dominic says. "She's gone." His own grief pierces him. Ten years they have been man and wife. Ten years in the span of two millennia is not that long, but the length of time spent in a productive partnership has little do to with the amount of pain from parting.

Michel's expression betrays nothing, but Dominic feels his grief through their blood-bond. He rises from his chair, feeling his shoulders pop as he stretches, and bends to give Michel a lingering, affectionate kiss on his mouth. "You need some sleep. I do, too. We'll have a plan when we wake. Will you join me?" he asks, his tone perfectly neutral as to whether he is inviting Michael to rest with him ... or to participate in other activities. He stands back, hoping to convey his willingness for Michael to answer in whatever way pleases him.

Michael stands, and takes his hand, and leads him to their bed...

Dominic stretched, savoring the satisfaction of bringing his lover to climax, and to forgetfulness of pain, if only for those moments.

Then he heard whispers coming from the room where Blanche's sons lay sleeping. Hurriedly he dressed, and quietly opened and closed his door. He was standing before the children's door when it opened, and a blazing pink aura blushed crimson.

* * * *

The ghost in the chapel started, and whirled around, the shuffle of boots against flagstones nearly drowned out by the lingering, metallic scrape of a sword being drawn.

Michael realized that this was no ghost. Somehow, Roland was actually *here*.

His cousin's incongruously-young face looked pale and drawn under thick golden stubble, and there were deep circles under his eyes. His clothing was stained and filthy with travel-

dirt, and his hair was very short and tufted unevenly, as if it had been cropped in careless handfuls—or burned off at different times.

"M—Michou?" he asked hoarsely, astonishment spread over fatigue. "God's Nails, Michou, is that really you? You're *old!*"

Despite his own fatigue, and the weight of grief upon his soul, Michael was startled into a chuckle. "And you haven't changed a bit, cousin. You look as hung-over as you did every morning of the Crusade!"

Curious, Michael opened his Seer's Eyes, and beheld a dulled splendor of lapis and amethyst that covered Roland like a lifeless cloak. What had happened to make him look like that? A pang of grief for his murdered son smote him. But the pressure of other questions would not be denied. How had Roland come here? Did he know about Blanche's sons? Where was Blanche? Had they encountered Cecilia?

He didn't get a chance to ask any of his many questions because Roland was embracing him, his sword dropping with a ringing clatter upon the stone-paved floor. "Michou," he said, against Michael's ear, his arms fierce and strong around Michael's shoulders. His rough cheek brushed Michael's, and Michael felt tears. "Mathilde—what happened? Why is she ... gone?"

Michael didn't know how to answer this, so he simply returned the embrace, kissing his cousin gently on both cheeks, and patting his back awkwardly when the tears streaking the dirt on Roland's face showed no signs of abating.

Roland wiped angrily at his face, his eyes, cursing in Arabic, and Michael found himself chuckling again. "God's Nails, but it's good to see you, Roland. You don't know how I've missed you, though it was good to get your letters." He gave his cousin one last embrace, and stepped back. "But, more importantly—you know that the House has declared you and Blanche anathema?"

Roland nodded. "Sharibet promised us food and neutrality on behalf of the kin—surely, you received that message? As for why we're here ... the children. My daughter's children—my grandchildren," he said. "We know they're here."

"We ... your daughter ... Blanche?" Michael, his brain fogged with weariness, blinked. "The Cursed One is *here*?"

He spun on his heel, ready to raise the alarm, but Roland caught him. "Wait! Whatever you've been told about Blanche, it's a lie. Cecilia—"

That brought Michael up short. "Cecilia," he growled. "Have you seen her?"

Roland shook his head. "No, but she's been lying to us and to the House about Blanche—about Inanna—all along. I saw it in Blanche's blood. She's *innocent*, Michou. She didn't do the things Cecilia said she did!"

"I'm not surprised. Cecilia's been doing worse than merely lying." In terse phrases, Michael told him everything that Tirgit and Mathilde had discovered, and everything that had happened since Tirgit arrived here six weeks ago to conduct a seemingly-routine Raising and Naming ceremony. He ended his recitation with a dry account of Cecilia's murders this

morning. Concentrating on the event, and not the emotion, was the only way he could bear to speak of his losses.

Roland listened in silence for the most part, with only an occasional question or exclamation. When Michael finished speaking, Roland squeezed his shoulder with bruising compassion. "Ah, Michou, I'm so sorry for your losses. I knew I was right! me? I never trusted Cecilia to Raise and Name me, but I never had any real proof until Mathilde's Appointing in Constantinople..."

Then it was Roland's turn to tell Michael of Cecilia's attack on him in Constantinople ten years ago, and more recently the House's actions at the Tunis House. He went on to relate what he had seen in Blanche's memories that contradicted Cecilia's version of events.

Michael blinked at this. "Roland, I know that she's your daughter, but I also remember what Inanna was like, before she was banished. She always—"

"But Cecilia *lied!*" Roland scowled. "We need to have the chance to have a fair hearing. The kin need to know the truth."

"If they *want* to know the truth." Michael sighed. "She's the Cursed One, after all. They've invoked her name in fear at every Appointing ceremony since the destruction of Shinar." When Roland began to protest again, Michael held up his hand. "Peace, cousin. I'll do what I can to convince the Master of this house and the others to hear you out. But first, tell me how you got Sharibet to agree to order the kin to provide you and Blanche with food for your journey."

Roland told him of his meeting with Sharibet in Constantinople, and what really occurred in Venice, and of the long flight north. "...we arrived at Bressoux and found every living thing on the estate dead, and the children missing. We thought, at first, that Cecilia had taken them after she spoke the Word of Death, but Master Matthias told us that Mathilde, with Dominic, had come earlier. That relieved us, a little, but Blanche wants her sons. So we came here," he finished.

Michael, head whirling, remembered what he had to tell his cousin. "Roland, you should know ... Dominic is here. Upstairs. And I ... we..." His face grew hot.

The look of betrayal that flashed across Roland's face spoke volumes. "Why, Michou?" He looked back at Mathilde's body, and traced a finger down the back of a limp, pale hand. "Do you *know* how many sacrifices I made to keep you safe from him? From his unnatural interest in you?"

Even after all of these years, Roland could still find the chinks in Michael's armor.

Swallowing uncomfortably, he was all-too-aware of why he had come to the chapel in the first place. "I—I spent so many years running away from what I am, Roland. So many people were harmed by my cowardice ... I need him. We—all of us—have been damaged, by what happened in Beziers, by Cecilia. We can only be strong if we are together."

Roland considered this. His gaze dropped from Michael's. He shifted from foot to foot. Michael recognized the signs of deep discomfort and braced himself for more recrimination.

When Roland spoke, however, it was not what Michael expected. "If we stand together, against Cecilia, then my

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

daughter must be part of it. You must convince the kin to give her a fair hearing."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ... :"—*The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, 15:51-52*

Villeroise-sur-Orb, Wednesday, October 1, AD 1270

"Not a word," Blanche whispered fiercely, as she opened the bedroom door. She came to an abrupt halt as she realized someone was waiting for her, an Apkallu-sized bronze aura surrounding him.

Baudouin wriggled against her back. "Grand-papa Dominic," he chirped. "He's an angel, too."

Ninshubur. The name came to her with a wave of longing. "I can see that," she told her son, and stooped to lower both boys to the ground. She pushed them behind her skirts. "Pieter, Reynaud, take care of your brothers," she ordered. "And *stay there*," she added, fiercely.

"But it's only—" Reynaud began to protest.

"Yes, Maman," Pieter said, giving Reynaud a little shove to silence him.

"Yes, Maman," Reynaud echoed, sullenly.

"Good boys," she said, her gaze never leaving the Apkallu who stood calmly, arms crossed, waiting for her.

"Blanche of Bressoux?" Sir Dominic asked politely. "We weren't expecting you so soon."

His voice was deep, like her Uncle Michel's, only with a trace of foreign accent in the way he spoke. It was a beautiful

voice, as he was beautiful in a dangerous way. He made no threatening move, but she felt intimidated.

She forced her hands to unclench from her skirts. She dropped a belated curtsy and said, eyes lowered in mimicry of modesty, "Sir Dominic. I am interested to meet you at last." When she looked up into his eyes, she saw his recognition, and appreciation, of her calculated impudence.

"It is not good to meet again like this," he said. "You have come at a bad time."

"I know I'm not welcome," she said. "I'll just take my sons and go, and trouble you no more."

She opened her link to Roland, though he would not be of much help with his crippled aura should it come to blows. Her own aura was much greater than Sir Dominic's, she realized with surprise. But surely he had much more experience in using it for violence.

But before she could send to Roland, he was sending to her.—Michou is here! He's willing to listen to our side of the story. Come and parley.—What about my sons?—

"Your sons will be safe," Sir Dominic said aloud, as if he had overheard her conversation with Roland. "Put them back to bed and let them sleep."

"I *will* take them with me when I leave," she warned.

He bowed slightly. "Let us talk and see."

"Change in plans. Stay here!" she commanded her sons. Confused, but willing to obey, they settled back into the big bed, but not before demanding kisses and embraces from her. Once their eyes closed, she turned to descend the steps to the great hall with Sir Dominic, her mother's husband.

As they walked, she studied him. Just as she had seen in Roland's blood, Dominic's black hair was crowned by a streak of white. How often had she dreamed of him in her youth? Sometimes male, sometimes female, in daydreams and nightmares he had always been her friend, her stalwart knight, her protector. But in the waking world, he had never come to save her. Never rescued her from her father-in-law. No, she had saved herself and her sister-in-law, Genevieve.

And, now, when she had come to save her boys, this person who ought to be her own protector, her champion, stood between her and escape.

Why was her heart pounding so hard? Why did she feel such absurd joy at seeing him in the flesh, at long last? Ninshubur was not her savior. In fact, he was her enemy. That thought made her feel unutterably sad. It felt so strange, to be treating him as a stranger, when she *knew* bone-deep and soul-deep, that he should be standing at her shoulder, giving her his sage counsel.

"Why are you here?" His voice was quiet but firm.

She gave a huff of incredulous laughter. "You took my sons. You *wanted* me to come."

His mouth twitched. Not a smile, but a loosening of his solemnity. "Perhaps we merely wanted to ensure your good behavior."

"Did you know that Cecilia killed them all, the folk at Bressoux, after you abducted my children?" She needed to know if he had colluded in the slaughter.

But the shock on his face looked genuine. "All of them?"

"My folk," she said, her voice sounding strange in her own ears, as if she were growling the words. "After you and Maman departed, Cecilia spoke the Word of Death. She even killed the horses in the stable and the trees in the orchard."

He did not offer words of false comfort. "I believe you. She has broken the trust of the kin in the Raising and Naming ceremony. She has lied to us, betrayed us, and killed two Apkallu and a Crown of Service djinniah. She led the Templars here." Blanche saw deep shadows of sorrow dimming his aura.

"The Templars at the gate," Blanche said, then heard—really heard—what he had said. "Two Apkallu? But Pieter told me that only his cousin Robert and great-aunt Theodora..."

"Mathilde died trying to save Michael's son." Dominic sighed, his aura shadowed once more.

"She's not dead!" But hadn't she seen Maman's slumbering form in the chapel, stripped of her aura? Blanche ordered herself not to cry. But her vision swam, anyway, and her throat burned with the effort of holding back sobs.

"Her body is not dead, but her soul is gone," Dominic replied, gently. "It's only a matter of time until..."

Blanche tried to utter a denial, but grief was overwhelming as Dominic spoke a truth she had not prepared herself to hear. Strong arms and a bronze aura enfolded her, holding her close. Blanche wept, far from home, yet home at last.

* * * *

A confused reunion followed Blanche's arrival in the chapel, a jumble of greetings and impressions as Blanche

tried to fight her way through the thick blanket of shock and grief. Maman ... Maman was *gone*. But Uncle Michel looked unchanged from her childhood memories, save that he was clean-shaven now, and he no longer wore the white Templar habit of a Knight-Brother.

Glad for the distraction, she traded stories and a firm embrace of welcome with him, and learned he called himself Michael these days, after the English fashion. They didn't talk about what happened in Venice—Roland had shared the information with Uncle Michael already, and he had sent it to Sir Dominic mind-to-mind with amazing efficiency. To her relief, Dominic and Michael did not pursue any questions they had, choosing instead to focus on relating her Aunt Theodora's discovery of the memories that Cecilia had altered, and the inconsistencies between Blanche's and Cecilia's versions of the events surrounding Inanna's banishment.

Halfway into that story, they were interrupted by an arrival in the chapel—a middle-aged man with the aura mark of a Raised and Named kinsman, and an affronted air which turned to alarm after he recognized Roland and scrutinized her. She heard his sharp inhalation echoing off the vaulted ceiling of the chapel.

"Lords!" he cried, looking at Uncle Michael and Dominic. "How did the Cursed One enter our house? Why did you not raise the alarm?"

"We mean you and the kin of your House no harm, Sir Jean," Roland said, his old air of command returning. "I only want my grandchildren."

"But after what you did to the Houses in Venice and Tunis, how can we be certain—?" Sir Jean sputtered.

"I offer my bond for the good behavior of my niece and my cousin," Uncle Michael replied, before she could speak up in her own defense. "They bring us valuable information on other actions taken by Cecilia."

"She lied about Inanna, too!" Roland said. "All those things you curse her for—she didn't do!"

"Sharibet knows the truth of this. She offered us *her* bond, that the kin would not act against us," Blanche added, angrily. "A bond that the Venice House broke. If you do not attack us, we will not harm you."

Sir Jean stared, his gaze darting between Roland and Blanche. "We—we did get this message. We thought it was counterfeit. Why would Sharibet—?" He stopped his babbling. "Very well. I will not harm you, nor will any other members of this household as long as you harm us not. We—" his gaze shifted to Uncle Michael. "We trust in our Protectors."

"Good," said Roland, sounding much more forceful than he had since Venice. "Now, old friend, if you will excuse us, we Apkallu have much to discuss."

Old friend? Blanche wondered.

Sir Jean seemed displeased at the dismissal, but he obeyed.

* * * *

"We are agreed? Cecilia is our mutual enemy," Blanche said quickly, before the men decided to ignore her.

"She's the one who sent the Templars," Dominic said. "She also set the geases in our memories."

"Geases that forbade us from remembering that Inanna was innocent of the crimes imputed to her," Roland said, frowning.

"But the Templars are the first hurdle," Uncle Michael said. "The only outcome they'll accept is for me to surrender myself."

"Why can't we just use the Voice of Coercion on them to convince them they searched every room and cellar, and send them back to their preceptory?" she asked.

"We thought of that. Their stories won't match." Michael was adamant. "We can't implant enough credible details in their memories to get them to match up their accounts when they report that they searched and I wasn't here. Don't forget that the Templars are on the lookout for sorcery."

"My recommendation was that we kill them," Dominic said. "It would be easy enough—"

"No!" Michael nearly shouted. "We can't kill men who are merely doing their duty. Even if we did kill them, the Templars would send more men as soon as they realized these had gone missing."

"Well, why can't we speak the Word of Forgetfulness to everyone at the preceptory?" Blanche asked.

"They keep *records*," Michael said patiently. "Because of that, we can't coerce them to forget. They'll just read their orders again, or be reminded by correspondence from other preceptories. It would make them suspicious of every House of the Rose in Christendom—even more suspicious than they

are already. The Church's Papal Inquisitors might get involved, and could embroil all of the Houses in Christian lands. The Office of the Inquisition is *thorough*. As well, I promised Sir Jean I would not desert the kin here while our conflict with Cecilia is unresolved."

"Why not use the Glamour of Invisibility?" Roland asked. "Then the Templars can search all they like."

"Because we can't," Michael answered bitterly. "Since Beziers..."

"I can use it. Or—I could use it, before..." Roland ground to a halt.

"Yes, and he taught it to me," Blanche jumped in. "Let me show you how it's done. It takes a deal of concentration, it's true, but if you want to fly in daylight, you can make your aura the same blue as the sky and keep a thin sheet of it between you and the earth. Nobody will see you. Or if you want to hide in front of a stone wall, you make your aura look like the wall."

"What if they bump into us?" Dominic asked, sarcastically. "Or what if one of them can see through the glamour—as happened in Beziers? No, no, that's not a solution."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, out of suggestions to offer.

"What about exchanging places with Roland?" Dominic asked, his lips curled in a slight sneer. "He's hasn't promised to stay, and he could easily escape from the Templars once they got him to Pezenas."

Roland's gaze went to the floor and his shoulders drooped. "That would be difficult," he confessed. "I can no longer use my aura..."

Michael's gaze unfocused for a few moments, and Blanche knew he was examining Roland with Seer's Eyes. "What happened?"

"I think it was another of Cecilia's geases," Blanche said hurriedly. It might even have been true.

"Cecilia's gelded us all," Roland added, gloomily.

"I don't believe *that's* completely true," Blanche said. "The power isn't gone—it can't be, as long as you have your aura. It's just ... restrained somehow. Look, Uncle Michael, that's what you said happened to your poor son. His power was suddenly unbound. In Venice, Roland used his powers to the full—"

"To the full?" Dominic asked.

Blanche nodded. "I believe he could do this because when he looked into my memories in Tunis, a geas was invoked, and we both nearly died. It seems that each time that a geas is overcome, more of our power is freed. Roland learned how to channel the fire that is called when the geas is touched, and if we can—"

"We don't know how to do that," Dominic said, indicating himself and Michael.

"I can teach you," Blanche said.

Michael chuckled humorlessly. "To be tutored by you in Apkallu magic! Not a thing I would ever have expected."

"Are you willing to learn?" Blanche asked. "Because if you are not, I won't stay here. Cecilia *will* return, and she *will* speak the Word of Death to all of us."

At the sorrowful disbelief in the faces of the Apkallu, she added, "In fact the only thing we can do, the only hope we have, is that you Raise and Name me, so that I can remember all our lost powers, and how to use them."

"Then you'd risk yourself, along with anyone foolhardy enough to assist you!" Roland said, as she had expected. "Don't do it, Blanche."

"We need to know what has been forgotten."

"You said we need to know how to cast fire to survive it," Dominic said. "Teach us. The dawn won't wait."

Buoyed by Dominic's support, she showed him and Michael the skill that Roland had taught her, and they both understood the concept at once. Michael was quick to learn. Dominic's control of his aura was less precise, but, from what they'd told her, until yesterday's tragedy he'd been unable to fully employ his aura. That he could do as much as he was doing was a sign of his skill. In less than a half-hour they both had the knack of it, though the chapel's frescoes were blackened with soot, and a layer of smoke hung, curling, under the vault.

At last, they were ready. When she declared them proficient, she said, "Now who shall do this deed?"

"Who would you wish?" Michael asked gallantly.

"I wish Roland had done it weeks ago, but he would not," she said. "It matters not to me." He had refused out of

concern for her safety, she conceded, but she had not yet forgiven him for thwarting her purpose.

"I will do it," said Dominic.

Ninshubur, her heart sang.

"As I am the least of the Apkallu," he said with cold rationality, "I will attempt this. If I fail, we will not have lost the greatest of us." He did not look at Michael.

"No," whispered Michael, sounding as if Dominic's dagger had pricked his heart. "You can't! Beloved!"

Beloved? Blanche noticed Roland wincing at that. What was going on here?

"I am resolved," said Dominic. "Let us do it. It's less than two hours until dawn."

"Yes!" said Blanche. "What must I do?"

"Stand here," Dominic said, leading her to the end of the chapel farthest from Maman's body. "You two stand there," he said to Michael and Roland, pointing toward the pallet. "Away from the conflagration, should there be one."

Both djinni obeyed without demur.

With Dominic's strong arms around her, Blanche relaxed. It was strange. She didn't know him, and yet she did.

"I remember you, O Queen of Heaven," he said solemnly. "May you have more joy of your memories than I have of mine." He wrapped her aura with his aura. "I am the Opener of the Way. Will you let me in?"

"Yes, yes! Just do it!" she cried, on fire with impatience. "I want to remember. I want to remember *you*. I want to remember *everything*."

There was a smile in Dominic's voice, close to her ear, as he said, "Now, that's the Inanna I remember." She felt his mouth brush her neck, and sharp teeth draw blood. A thrum of desire pulsed through her body and she leaned into his kiss.

She felt his hand of air brush through her forehead and break the seal of her memory.

Memories overwhelmed her in a rush like a surging wave.... *sea the color of flax flowers ... the baby doesn't move in her arms ... clink, thunk, clink, thunk. Uncle Michel's hair and beard shine like gold ... she smiles as they stand by her deathbed, her beautiful golden sons and daughters, blue eyes awash with tears. She hopes her youngest, Mathilde, will make as good a marriage as her twin Blanche, who will marry Ulrich, Comte D'Agincourt, ... 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...*

And earlier: *... as her face and back throb with pain, she watches a group of mercenaries in Alexander's army gamble for the right to rape her first. Their arguing is interrupted by their captain, tall and beautiful in the Hellene way, dark wavy hair falling over his forehead, bold eyebrows framing serious gray eyes. "I'll wager my horse against your Arsinoe here." Paulus gapes as the captain produces a pair of ivory dice. He leans forward, saying too low for the assembled spectators to hear: "This is an order, not a request." She doesn't want him to win, but it's preferable to his losing...*

"Oh, gods, Arsinoe! That was you," Dominic breathed against her hair, as the earlier memories crashed down....
bound in golden chains, she stands before her siblings, accused of stealing knowledge. Can't they see how diminished they all are? she thinks, and screams in frustration. She reaches out to touch the sky for balance. There, she finds the rock, coated in ice, falling through the air. The air burns. The land buckles, smashed like a cup. She burns ... And earlier: she hangs on a hook in the halls of death while her sister Ereshkigal taunts: "Did you think you could steal my power?"

And earlier: Pacing back and forth between walls tiled in bright, colorful patterns, wondering until curiosity was a painful chancre: what is the word of death? How does it work? Why does Ereshkigal keep it secret, to herself? Why won't she tell me? What is it? I want to know...

And earlier: ... she stands before massive crenelated walls, and glimpses a priestess in her linen garment, shining white as the face of the moon, in her eyes round an unearthly light. The priestess shouts, "A shining one! A shining one!" It is just exactly what she hoped for and dared not expect. She is a Mountain Lady. A shining one. A goddess in disguise. Oh, yes. And when she meets the other shining ones, they greet her as a long-lost sister. They tell her she has a secret name. She wants to know it. When she meets the Undying Goddess, Ereshkigal's blue eyes burn with some strong emotion, but she, too, calls her 'sister' and welcomes her to the city of the gods, restores her divinity, returns her memories...

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."*

And earlier: *she stands by the bed, the royal bed, the bed of kingship, the bed of queenship, the bed that rejoices the heart. "The bed is ready. The bed is waiting," she calls to her king, to her bridegroom. He puts his hand in her hand. He puts his hand to her heart, to her soft skin. She sings: "Dumuzi, your fullness is my delight, My lord sweetens me always. My lord is the one my womb loves best. His hand is honey. His foot is honey. He sweetens me always..."*

...the water closes over her head. She's drowning! She's dying! How can she die? She's a goddess! There must be some way out! She reaches for power: fire from the air, from the earth, from the water, from the stone. Fire burns. Her aura burns. Her body burns...

—Blanche!—Dominic sent urgently.—Throw the fire away!—

She did so, remembering the exercises Roland had made her practice so diligently. The fire spiraled down the many arms of her aura, colliding with the cold stones of the chapel walls, and burning out. Then Dominic groaned as he thrust fire from his own aura into the walls.

At the same time, Roland was shouting, "No, Michel! Release it! NO! Beware Mathilde!"

Blanche opened her eyes to see Roland standing futilely between Michael, whose wings were burning, and her mother's inert body. Uncle Michael must have seen some triggering vision through their bond. She hesitated to cry out,

lest she distract Roland from protecting himself and her mother. But his aura remained thin and insubstantial, an indigo ghost of its former glory, and Michael's fire continued to flow too close.

How could she stop it? She looked desperately for an injury to Roland's aura, something she could fix, but there was nothing. Desperately, she flung out her hand of air and pushed against his aura, interlocking their powers like a dovetail joint. As if summoned to life by her will, his power flared immediately, cobalt and violet. She whispered in Roland's mind,—Shield. I'll help.—

Together, they redirected Michael's fire safely away from Maman's body, even as Dominic shouted, "Beloved!" and released Blanche to run toward her uncle.

Throughout this, Michael continued to twist the fire away, as they had practiced. When the flames burned out without doing more harm, Roland stood, amazed, flexing his aura, driving the lingering smoke into the corners of the room. His hair and eyebrows were gone again, but his aura was no brighter than the expression on his face.—I'm whole again!—

Blanche returned his smile, inwardly savoring the return of her knowledge. There was the lore of bees. There were poisons. There were her lovers and the arts of love—*oh, my!* There were the arts of war and governance and kingship. The different forms of writing. Poems and stories. Housekeeping. The arts of desert survival. She could revel in this catalog of knowledge for days, weeks, centuries!

But her enjoyment lasted only as long as it took to withdraw her aura from Roland's. Without the infusion of her

will, his proud wings collapsed into a faded cloak once more. *Why?* she asked herself, angrily. *Why couldn't I cure him? Why can't he use his powers? There was nothing wrong with his aura!*

Roland's eyes widened as he felt his wings dwindle.—It's no more than I deserve,—she overheard.

So, that was it! He was, quite literally, crippled with guilt. She wanted to shout at him that the kin of the Venice House had driven him mad with poison, but she knew it would do no good. Hadn't she already said all that, and more, during their journey here? But until *he* believed it, the smothering weight of his melancholy would continue to keep him earthbound, and there was nothing she could do about it. That galled her, more than anything. She could see the root of his problem, and how to fix it, but she was powerless to apply the cure.

She had no more time to consider the matter, because Dominic was speaking. "...just as you said: I saw it in her memories, too. Inanna didn't cause the Flood. She didn't cause the Fire from Heaven. It's the truth: Cecilia blocked our powers in addition to setting these deadly geases on all of us. She lied about the reason why none of us can remember before the Flood. She alone Raised and Named all of the Apkallu in order to keep her secrets."

All three men searched Blanche's face for an answer to Dominic's unspoken question.

"No," she answered. "I can't remember anything before the Flood. But everything after it—" She smiled, tasting satisfaction. "I remember."

Anger burned beneath her skin, where fire had tried to lodge. She flexed her aura wings, desiring the confrontation that must come. She had two thousand years of ever-increasing knowledge, and five thousand years of ignorance, repeated in mostly short, brutalized lives, with only here and there a bright spot of learning or love. Athens. With Menelaos, in Alexander's camps. Alexandria. As Eleanore, wife to Ivor de la Roche en Ardennes ... She looked at her Uncle Michael. At Roland D'Agincourt, her father. Were these men also her ... grandsons?

Michael shook his head, looking dazed. "But ... but if Cecilia lied about the Cursed One causing the Flood, then who caused it?"

The question dropped like a stone in still waters.

"Who has the power of shaking the Earth? The elders in Jerusalem said it was a power held by Ereshkigal alone," Roland said.

"The question isn't *who*," Blanche added. "The question is: *why*?"

"Lady Blanche, Inanna-who-was," came Dominic's voice, sounding weary and smoke-strained. "May we leave that question for another day? We still have Templars at the gate. They have demanded Michael be turned over to them by dawn. They will not leave without him, or his body. We have used up our time. Have you thought of anything?"

She thought quickly over the resources she had to answer this present puzzle. Three Apkallu. One body. *Maman!*

The anguish flowed through her, another strand of sorrow amongst many. There was no time to mourn. She had

mortals of the House. The house itself. The trellised grapevine, the desires of the Templars for Michael or his body. Michael's promise not to desert the people of the House. Dominic's love for him, and his for Dominic. Ha! The love affair started so many centuries ago under her nose yet flourished.

She counted up her pieces, including the odd, fitful sparking of Michael's Raising Mark, another sign of Cecilia's cruelty. What would be the most elegant solution?

The Templars needed a body. It didn't have to be Michael's body, it just had to look like it.

It would be easy to sculpt Maman's empty body to look like Michael. They were already so similar. But it would have to weigh the same amount, or close to it, or the Templars would never believe it was really him. She couldn't bulk it up in the short time they had available. The body could never assimilate that much food ... Uncle Michael was at least four to five stone heavier than her mother' had been.

Maman! Her child-voice cried in her mind. She wished fervently that she could hear her mother's voice again, but all she had left were memories.

But Dominic was the right height and build ... "What if I changed Dominic to look like you, Uncle Michael? He could go with the Templars, and and escape. I could return him to his original appearance once he returned."

"You have the power of Transformation of Appearance?" Dominic asked.

She nodded, her mind working furiously on remembering the exact sequence of tasks.

"You can't!" Michael exclaimed, coming forward to seize Dominic by the shoulder. "Once they have you in custody, they'll punish you in my stead! If you escape they'll just come back here anyway."

"We need every Apkallu we have to fight Cecilia!" Roland added.

"I could change one of the kin..." Blanche offered.

"No!" Michael said. "I won't have anyone else suffer for my sins. We need another answer." He thought for a moment. "We cannot afford to have the Templars find Dominic here. They know of him, from the time he stayed with Sharibet in Alexandria. The white streak in his hair, his gray eyes..."

"His appearance could be easily altered," Blanche said. "Will you permit me?" she asked Dominic.

He nodded.

"No one would question it if one of my husband's liege men were found here, accompanying a grieving widow home from Crusade." Her mind racing with the possibilities, she stepped close to Dominic, studying him critically. "I can lighten your hair. Turn your eyes blue, or green."

"Young woman Inanna," he said in the old tongue. "Do with me what you will." His expression was wary, though.

"Ninshubur," she said, giving him a chaste and friendly kiss. She passed her flesh hands and her hands of air over his hair, turning it a rich chestnut color throughout, even the blaze that had been white.

Pleased with her success, she said, "Close your eyes, and don't move." Her hands of air remembered the minute, precise alterations that were needed, the motions required to

make the change. She set her thumbs upon his eyelids and worked magic. "Open your eyes."

He did. As she had willed, his eyes were a soft green with a jeweled band of brown around the outside edge. With another pass of her hands of air she softened his cheekbones, remolded his lips so that even in repose they smiled. She took away the tiny crow's feet from the corners of his eyes and stepped back to admire her handiwork.

"Now you need *another* name," Roland said as if he were teasing. But his expression was unhappy.

"How about Sir Gawaine de Walkington?" she asked, remembering the knight who had tried to force her into marriage hours after Evrard had drawn his last breath. Roland frowned thunderously at the mention, and she could see the questions gathering on Dominic's lips. "You'll do his name more honor than he did," she added, hastily.

"And what of Michael?" Dominic asked.

"I'll think of something!" she said. *What can I do?* she thought. *Can't kill the Templars (wouldn't really want to. I liked Brother Aumery.) Can't coerce. Can't transform. Can't ask Maman.*

Maman! her child-voice cried again.

Maman, who had been, per Roland's memories not restudied with full knowledge, Ninharsag. *Oh, wisest of my sisters, and most patient.* She had worked to transform Inanna's flights of fancy into fact, transformed animals into almost men, and men into almost-gods. She created new foods for people out of grass and sticks, and even perfected Inanna's wildest desire: the transference of souls.

Aha! The elegant simplicity of it delighted her. To use Ninharsag's own skill ... Yes. It answered all the requirements of the problem.

"I know what we must do!" she crowed.

"I dislike this," Dominic muttered, just as Ninshubur of old would have done.

"Uncle Michael, come stand with me here," she commanded, moving quickly to where Mathilde's body lay. "Put your hand here, on my—my mother's head." No time to think about the ramifications of the deed. "All the rest of you, stand back."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Dominic.

Roland stared at her as if he'd lost his only friend. But she was still herself. She was still Inanna—that is, Blanche. Only now, she had so many more of the answers that she craved.

She wrapped one aura-wing around Michael, and the other around Maman's body, its life guttering out like a candle-stub.

Maman, she thought. But Maman was gone, and Uncle Michael needed saving.

There was the spot where Michael's aura connected. There was the spot in Mathilde's head where her aura had once been.

Blanche made of herself a bridge. Carefully, quickly, she unhooked Michael's aura from his head. She moved it smoothly to the same place in Mathilde's head. Quick, quick, quick, she fastened the insubstantial connections. Stick, stick, stick, they came together smoothly. She made the last, tiny joining and let go, knowing she had done all correctly, yet, at

that moment, terrified that she had just killed Uncle Michael for nothing but her own hubris.

She stood back, watching with Seer's eyes. as Michael's aura blazed from Mathilde's body. Oh, yes! She knew how to do this!

While she had him newly joined to this vessel, and charged with the energy of the transfer, she took a moment to heal the wounds Ereshkigal must have made in his Raising Mark.

Mathilde's body spasmed on the pallet. Her flax-blue eyes opened wide. Surprise and outrage lit them from within, and then their focus changed, as memories overwhelmed Michael.

Of course, Michael's former body, left untenanted, crumpled. She caught it and lowered it to the floor, holding Dominic back by main force, and helped Michael sit up.

Roland shouted, "What have you done?"

Dominic tried to wrestle her with his smaller aura, all the time trying to approach Michael's fallen body. Michael-Mathilde looked wildly back and forth, struggling to rise and go to Dominic. She brought her well-tended hands, nails manicured and pink, to her cheeks, feeling her eyes, her nose, her lips and chin.

"Jesus Maria!" she swore.

The sound of her mother's voice uttering Uncle Michael's hoarse curse pierced Blanche to the heart. She could not afford to waver now, though. She took one of Michael's hands and spoke.

"What I have done, I, Inanna, have done for you—for all of you," she said, looking at them all. "May I present—" She stopped, as Michael's hand squeezed back.

The Shattered Crown (House of the Rose, Book Five)
by Michaela August

Michael spoke again, voice a smooth contralto. "I am whole again. I, who was once Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne. My True Name is Ea, Enki."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

"Loss is nothing but change, and change is Nature's delight."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, c AD 150

Feast of St. Remy, Wednesday, October 1, AD 1270

By the time the sky turned pink with dawn, Sir Jean and Lady Alais went forth to unbar the front gate and admit Sir Aumery and his men.

In the rush of preparations, there had been no time to debate the necessity of Blanche's unexpected action, nor even to become accustomed to wearing new flesh. Michael felt clumsy and constricted in his sister's body, and his awkward discomfort was obvious enough to the others that both Dominic and Blanche ordered him to stay as quiet as possible while strangers were present.

If questioned, they would say that Mathilde was ill with grief at her brother's passing.

Clad in a clean, soberly-colored gown that felt too-tight across his chest, and a dark-dyed headdress that itched with the generous starching used to stiffen its folds, Michael awaited the Templars in Villeroze-sur-Orb's chapel, hoping that his niece's audacious plan would work.

* * * *

After a brief discussion with the other djinni, Roland withdrew to the upstairs bedroom where Blanche's sons awaited.

He knew that it was necessary to keep out of sight of the Templars, who might raise uncomfortable questions about his presence here, not to mention his close resemblance to his cousin Michael. But it chafed his pride to hide away with the children, even if Blanche tried to soften the humiliation by charging him with the protection of her sons...

His grandsons. He found himself hesitating before the bedroom door. With a grimace for his own cowardice, he lifted the latch and entered.

All four boys were sleeping, curled together in the room's single large bed. The oldest boy, a slender, brown-haired lad who must be Pieter, woke as soon as Roland entered the room, and he nudged his brothers awake.

A young woman of the kin, asleep on a pallet bed against the far wall, stirred and opened sleepy eyes. Her gaze widened as soon as she saw him, and she scrambled up, to stand before the bed, her arms spread wide, as if trying to shelter the boys behind her.

"Who are you?" she demanded, in a sleep-roughened voice.

Roland spread his hands to indicate he was unarmed. "I'm Roland d'Agincourt, cousin to Lady Mathilde and Lady Blanche," he said, smiling at her with all the charm he could muster. He looked over her shoulder at the boys, who were watching him warily from a tangled nest of sheets. "I'm escorting your mother home from Tunis."

The young woman's eyes widened again. "Lord Arjumand," she breathed in terror, but his introduction had the desired

effect on his grandsons. The wariness in their faces was instantly replaced by curiosity.

"Mama came to us last night," said a blond boy who looked a year or two younger than Pieter. "She told us to wait here. Can we go see her now?" He turned to the young woman. "Please, Cousin Elise?"

Roland shook his head. "Not now."

"Is it because of the Templars, l-lord?" Elise asked.

Roland nodded. "Not to worry," he said, as cheerfully as he could. "Your maman devised a clever stratagem to foil them." He indicated the door. "Elise, if you will please fetch us some refreshments..."

"Yes, lord." She bobbed, a little awkwardly in her long chemise, and scurried out of the room. No doubt the tale of how she had faced down a renegade Protector would shortly be known to every member of the kin under this roof.

"Are you the same cousin Roland who lives in the Holy Land?" Pieter asked, studying Roland thoughtfully. "Maman used to tell us stories about you."

Roland saw his opportunity. "Yes. I lived in the Kingdom of Jersusalem for several years."

"Are the streets of Jerusalem really paved with gold?" asked Reynaud.

"No, they are made of stone, but the dome of a church there was covered with gilded mosaic tiles on the inside. Everything glittered..." Roland began his tale, relieved that there would be no awkward silences to spoil this first meeting with his grandsons.

* * * *

Michael stood next to one of the pillars near the pallet, willing himself to present the perfect picture of a devoted sister mourning her dead brother.

Michael studied the tall, strong-limbed body that had replaced Mathilde's empty shell. Was that truly how he looked, sleeping? Like an effigy carved in ivory and gold? He searched for signs of breath and could find none, although the glow of living flesh lingered. Hope remained that Blanche could reverse the transfer once Aumery confirmed the identity of the corpse of his former commander.

The chapel doors opened, admitting morning light and the Templars, flanked closely by Sir Jean, Lady Alais, Blanche, and the newly bronze-haired and green-eyed Dominic. They were followed closely by two unsmiling sergeant-brothers in dark brown habits, one of whom carried the arrangement of poles and folded cloth that Michael recognized as a field-litter. Sir Aumery strode the length of the nave, his spurs ringing against the stone floor, and came to a halt before the pallet, his expression shocked.

His former squire had aged since they last met, Michael thought, noting the deep lines grooving the space between Aumery's auburn brows and around his hazel eyes, and the abundant silver in his tonsured hair and bushy red beard.

"So it's true," Aumery said, softly. He stooped, pressing his ear against the body's chest.

Michael hoped and prayed that the simulacrum of death would hold true.

After his inspection, Aumery rose, sighed, and crossed himself. "Ah, Brother Michel," Michael heard him murmur. "I had expected better of you."

Unexpectedly, those words stabbed Michael to the core. As a novice knight-brother, he had longed for Aumery's respect, and had been proud to eventually earn it. He must have made some sound, for Aumery turned, and crossed to where Michael was standing. As he drew close, Michael blinked, caught by the novelty of having to look *up* at him.

It's only for a little while, Michael reminded himself. The voices of his past selves had gone silent since Blanche's transference, but their knowledge remained. He drew on Honoria's experience, fighting to overcome a lifetime of male habits and mannerisms to play the part of Mathilde with conviction.

"Lady Mathilde," Aumery addressed her, with a respectful inclination of his head. "It has been a long time."

"Sir Aumery," Michael acknowledged, remembering to keep his head modestly bowed.

"Lady Blanche," Aumery added, nodding again. "I rejoice to see you again."

Blanche curtseyed, but said nothing, as per their plan.

Aumery turned back to Michael. "I regret to intrude upon your mourning, my lady, but I must know: why are you here? How did Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne come to be here, and *how did he die?*"

Michael folded his hands in his skirts and prepared to answer. As this longest of nights had waned, the djinni had debated fiercely how much Cecilia might have revealed to the

Templars. It would be a delicate balancing act, to withhold just enough of the truth that Sir Jean and his household would not suffer in the wake of any revelations.

"I came here to meet my daughter, who was returning from Crusade after her husband, Lord Evrard of Bressoux, perished in Tunis," Michael said, and Blanche nodded in support of this account.

Michael continued: "I was astonished to find my brother here when I arrived. I had not seen nor heard from him in many years—not since he disappeared in Ypres. We all believed him dead. Then, he and my—my husband quarreled after Lady Cecilia departed this house."

"I see," Aumery said. "What happened next?"

"We—my daughter Blanche, her liegeman, Sir Gervais—" Dominic gave a slight bow as his new name for his new face was mentioned, "and my hosts heard raised voices coming from the parlor. Then we heard screaming, and a terrible sound, as if a great blow had been struck. When we entered, we found Michel dead, the—the ceiling burnt as if by h-hellfire, and my husband gone." It was easy to make his voice shake, Michael discovered.

Aumery made a sharp gesture with one hand, and one of his men faced Sir Jean with a 'show me!' gesture. Sir Jean quickly ushered him from the chapel and down the great hall to the parlor.

"Speaking of your husband, is it true that you are married to Sir Dominic di Bergama, Lady Mathilde?" Ah, the Templars had indeed kept a close eye on Michael's relations in the wake of his abduction from the preceptory in Ypres!

Michael nodded. "We have been living apart for some time," he replied, as they had agreed. "But when I received word that Blanche was returning from Crusade, my husband agreed to escort me here, so I might visit with her."

Aumery nodded, and Michael saw that, so far, he believed the tale being spun. It did sound plausible, after all.

"I was told—that is, Sir Michel had a—" Aumery stumbled a little over his next words, "*—wife*. A wife and a son? How could he forget his vows so fully?" His last question was muttered. It was unanswerable, in any case.

The incense-scented air suddenly bristled with barbs that caught in Michael's throat. "Tir—" Tears choked him like salty floodwaters, and he had to stop, had to fight for control. "Her name was Theodora, and the boy was Robert. Cecilia betrayed us—*him*," Michael pointed at the body on the bier, "She—" Another deep breath, trying to dam the rising tide. "She killed them, and incited Dominic to strike down my—my brother, just before she fled."

"She killed them with sorcery? I suspected as much." Aumery's mouth, what Michael could see of it behind his bushy auburn-and-silver beard, was drawn into a tight line. "Where is Sir Dominic?"

Michael dared not glance at his beloved, who stood watchfully at Blanche's shoulder. "He has not returned. Nor do I expect him to, not after this."

Aumery had never been a fool. "Truly?" He turned his head to study the others with a frown. "I would have liked to question him regarding this matter, among other things."

The sergeant-brother returned with Sir Jean, and confirmed the presence of a burnt spot on the parlor ceiling.

"I believe our business here is settled, Lady Mathilde." Aumery bowed.

"But Brother Aumery, this woman—these *people*—abetted—" the sergeant-brother began to protest, and Michael knew he had to act, knew that whatever he did, it must be done subtly enough that no further taint of sorcery would brush Sir Jean and his household.

With infinite delicacy, Michael touched the tip of his aura wing to Aumery's forehead, willing certain memories to arise.... *on the day of his knighting, Aumery's jaw drops as Mathilde's groom hands him the reins of a tall Ardennais gelding.*

"Congratulations on your spurs, Sir Aumery. This horse—" Mathilde's voice dissolves into rough coughing. Long heartbeats pass before she is able to continue: "This horse—for all you've done for my brother, and for our family, I want to give—"

"Madame Mathilde!" Aumery chokes.

"Treat him well, Sir Aumery, and he will bear you to the ends of the earth," Michel says, with a smile. "Though I hope you will not go so far!"

Aumery blinked under the weight of the old memories.

"No," he snapped at the sergeant-brother. "I have known Lady Mathilde for many years. She is a good and pious woman. I would wager my soul that she was also deceived by her brother and her husband."

"Thank you, Sir Aumery," Michael whispered, bowing his sister's head, gauging the correct feminine response. Glancing sidelong at the pallet, he studied his body with concern, willing the Templars to hasten their departure. The faint glow of remaining life was becoming dimmer. If they waited too long...

"Lady Mathilde," Aumery's voice interrupted Michael's worried speculation. "Will you swear to me, upon your immortal soul, that you traveled here solely to reunite with Lady Blanche, and you did not willingly collude to shelter a renegade Templar?"

Michael placed a ringed hand over his heart, where the unfamiliar swell of a soft breast met his palm. "I swear by the Holy Virgin Mother and by the blood of Our Lord that I did travel here to reunite with Lady Blanche, and I did not willingly collude to shelter a renegade Templar." Ultimately both assertions were true.

"Very well," Aumery said, solemnly. "I wish our reunion had occurred under happier circumstances, Lady Mathilde. I hold fond memories of your hospitality to the members of our order during my time in Ypres."

"Thank you," Michael whispered, casting another glance at the guttering life-glow surrounding his body, and willing Aumery's swift departure.

"Brother Alexandre, Brother Richard, put Sir Michel's body on the litter." The two sergeant-brothers moved forward briskly, and lifted the body's arms and legs.

"What?" Michael exclaimed. "You're taking my bod—brother? Why?"

"All the preceptors in Europe have standing orders to return Knight-Brother Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne to the Order, alive *or* dead. Please stand aside, Lady Mathilde," Aumery replied, courteous but implacable.

Michael's fingers twitched, regretting the absence of the familiar weight of a sword at his hip. *Mathilde*, he reminded himself. *You are Mathilde*.

"Sir Aumery, my brother is dead. You and the other Templar brothers here have witnessed this for yourself. Can you not leave him, and allow me to bring him home, to be interred in our family chapel?"

Up until this point, the other djinni in the chapel had remained silent, allowing Michael to handle Aumery, as agreed. Michael saw Dominic step forward, and sensed from his stance that he was prepared to resolve the situation by force.—No. Wait,—Michael sent to him, afraid that any sign of resistance would bring the wrath of the Templars down upon the kin of the House.

Aumery frowned, and his next words confirmed Michael's suspicions. "Lady Mathilde, I must insist. Surely you don't want to make trouble for the people of this manor...?"

Sir Jean made frantic grimaces from his place in the back of the chapel.

"No, of course not," Michael forced himself to murmur. With growing horror, he stood aside and watched as his body was placed upon the litter. The sergeant brothers lifted the poles, and strode out of the chapel.

Aumery lingered a moment. "Truly, I am sorry, Lady Mathilde," he said, and departed.

"I'm sorry, too," Michael whispered, watching from the stairs as the dark-robed sergeant-brothers carried his body across the great hall.

Along with Sir Jean's palpable relief at their departure came Michael's horrified realization that he was now trapped in his sister's body.

* * * *

From her hiding place in a tree overlooking the temporary camp of the Templars (an extremely awkward and uncomfortable position, made even more difficult by having to maintain a glamour of invisibility against mortal and Seer's eyes, which only increased her ire), Cecilia watched as the Templar sergeant brothers carried an unmoving body on a litter out of the house. Early morning sunlight showed the scene in extraordinarily painful detail.

Under the sorrowful supervision of Sir Aumery, whose white surcote with its red cross shone almost as bright as an Apkallu's aura, the Templar sergeants rolled the body over, and lifted it with some difficulty—Michael was a large man—over the back of an unsaddled mule. That they didn't lash the body's hands and feet together, only securing the torso, told her that Michael was dead. As well, her Seer's vision discerned no golden wings covering the body.

Consternation filled her. Had they killed Michael? How had they done it? She saw no blood, nor any wounds nor bruises. Where was Dominic? Had the people of the House done this? Had they poisoned him? It was very good news for her, of course, but she could not suppress a pang.

She saw only Sir Jean and others of the House, standing silently in witness at the gates as the Templars mounted their horses and rode away.

Well! Michael dead. That left only Dominic, and the kin, in residence.

* * * *

The Templars had scarcely vanished through the gates of Villeroze-sur-Orb before Michael began planning how to retrieve his body. He feared what the rigors of a day slung over the back of a pack-mule might do to it. He might be dead, *truly* dead, before the Templars reached the preceptory in Pezenas.

Perhaps if they arranged an ambush ... They could not risk flying in the daylight, but surely, if they rode across the rose fields, they might intercept the wagon and its outriders further up the road ... Dominic would help him, and perhaps Roland...

Michael turned to appeal to his lover, and saw that he must have let his shields slip. Dominic shook his head with a sorrowful expression on his altered face.

"But—" Michael began, trying to muster logic and persuasion through the haze of grief, shock, and fatigue.

Dominic's hands, settling on his shoulders, stopped Michael's tongue. He swallowed heavily, staring at the center of Dominic's chest, and noticing, once again, that Mathilde had been damned *short*. It was a novel sensation, having to crane his neck to look up at Dominic.

"Beloved," Dominic said, gently, his deep voice at least unchanged at least. "If you go, then everything we have done this night and this morning will have been in vain. You know as well as I do that Sir Aumery will never give up the search if your body disappears from their care."

Dominic was right, of course, but Michael couldn't accept it, not yet. "They've seen a corpse. It shouldn't matter if we—"

"What if it's already too late?" Dominic's tone was gentle, but his logic was a well-honed blade, merciless. "Would you risk exposing our ruse, only to retrieve a corpse in truth?"

Since this did no more than echo Michael's own thoughts, he had no reply. But, he didn't want to remain trapped in this body—his *sister's* body. It felt wrong. *He* felt wrong. Off-balance, clumsy as newly-foaled colt.

"But—" Michael began again

To his astonishment, Dominic bent, and placed a swift kiss on Michael's lips. The body that had been Mathilde's reacted without thought, leaning into the kiss, rising up on tiptoes, surrounded by bronze light, unwilling to lose the comfort of that mouth moving tenderly against his—or the sizzling desire that ignited from that warm contact.

He was rewarded by a quick, teasing flick of Dominic's tongue against his, before the other djinn drew back. "Ea, beloved," he murmured, his lips brushing Michael's as he spoke in a voice too low for the others to overhear. "How many lifetimes, and in how many bodies, have we loved each other? As long as your soul remains intact, what garment of flesh you wear doesn't matter to me."

Dominic spoke true. But Michael thought he could sense a thread of uneasiness running beneath Dominic's reassurance. If Michael was discomfited by wearing the body of his sister, what must Dominic be feeling, to see the woman who had been his consort for a decade, reanimated?

In desperation, Michael turned to Blanche. "If we can't get my body back," he said urgently. "Can you at least Transform this one into a man?"

She looked startled, but then her face went blank and her eyes unfocused as she looked into her memories. Michael waited, scarcely able to breathe, and not because of the damned gown he was wearing, either. After an eternity of waiting, Blanche returned to awareness. He read her answer before she even drew breath to speak.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Michael. It's impossible to turn a woman into a man. It can be done the other way, but there's something ... missing ... from the fabric of a woman's body. I might be able to sculpt your flesh to look like a man's, but nothing would function properly."

"God's Nails," Michael said, wanting nothing more than to sink down and howl out his despair.

"Well, do you think I want you to *stay* in my mother's body?" she snapped, color rising in her pale cheeks. "I didn't intend—"

"Well, if you hadn't—" Michael countered, hotly.

"—did you really *want* the Templars to—" she shouted back, their words clashing like armored knights in the hot morning sunlight.

Dominic stepped between them. "Stop this. Now." His tone, cold and commanding, made both of them fall silent.

"It's not her fault," Roland added, coming up behind Blanche and putting a hand on her shoulder. "We didn't have a choice. If you want to blame someone, blame Cecilia. If she hadn't betrayed us—"

His cousin was right. And Dominic's steady regard, coming from those alien green eyes, made Michael's anger wilt and shrivel like a dying rose.

"Very well." He forced himself to step forward, to ignore Blanche's guilty flinch. He extended his hand. "Truce? I know you did the best you could, and you *did* save me." It took every ounce of his will to utter the words.

Her hand came to rest in his, palm-to-palm. Her fingers were icy and her blue eyes were shadowed by fatigue. Michael felt a little pity salt his simmering resentment. She had just lost her mother, after all, and had had no time to grieve. "I apologize," he added, softly, and felt her fingers close around his.

"I accept your apology," she replied.

Someone cleared his throat, and Michael raised his head to see Sir Jean, wearing the ill-at-ease expression that had haunted him for most of the past day. "Lord Ea," he said, clearly unsure whether he should address him as Michael, or Mathilde. "With the Templars gone, we need to decide what to do about Lady Cecilia, and whether to formally ally ourselves with Inanna and Enlil. I would prefer not to wait tamely for Cecilia to make the next move."

"I agree," said Blanche. "Let us drink the cup of friendship, and plan how we will achieve victory over the one who has lied to us and betrayed us all."

Dominic nodded.

Lady Alais looked doubtful, but she said only, "I will have the maids bring breakfast to the parlor."

"No!" Michael wasn't aware he had spoken, until everyone turned to look at him. "I beg you. Anywhere but the parlor." He couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought of having to sit underneath those scorched beams, where Robert and Tirgit had—

No, he couldn't think about that now.

Dominic came to his rescue. "Perhaps we could meet in the chapel, instead?"

* * * *

At Sir Jean's direction, the housemaids and lads carried chairs and padded benches to the chapel, and even set up a trestle table, supplied with a container of pens, and inkpot, and a stack of cut parchment. As the kin made their preparations, Michael was intensely aware of their curious scrutiny, though none of them asked questions. He wondered what—if anything—Sir Jean and Lady Alais had told them. Did they know Blanche's true identity? Or Roland's?

The weight of their assessing gazes roused acute self-consciousness. With the sudden switch from male to female he knew he was moving clumsily, as if he were this body's puppeteer rather than its owner. And it was not only the kin who were studying him. Both Roland and Dominic couldn't

seem to stop staring, even as they unrolled maps and sketched out rough plans of the house and its defenses. With his new features, Dominic's expression was mostly unreadable, and he kept his mental link shuttered. Roland was much easier to read—shocked disbelief, and an equally shocked fascination.

Blanche refused to meet his gaze at all, instead busying herself with spreading out a map of the estate and surrounding countryside. Despite the fact that she was the author of this change in his circumstances, he could sympathize with her unwillingness to confront the fact that he was wearing her mother's body.

"Mi—cousin?" Roland whispered, finally approaching Michael with every evidence of skittishness. "I was wondering—do you—I mean, can you see any of Mathilde's memories?" Color washed over his face, and Michael thought he understood at least part of the reason for his cousin's discomfiture.

He shook his head. "I might be able to see into my sister's memories if need arises, but, Roland, I don't *want* to see, and I haven't looked."

That much was true. What Michael omitted to say was that he kept getting explicit and distracting sensations of his sister with Roland, and (worse yet) his sister with Dominic. With an effort he pushed his discomfort, and his new body's yearning, to the back of his mind. He had to focus on the threat at hand.

Dominic spoke. "I believe we have all shared what we know regarding Cecilia and her crimes. We must try to

anticipate her next course of action. I, for one, do not think she will be satisfied while any of are left alive and in possession of our true memories."

"Some of our true memories." Blanche had seated herself next to Dominic, and jealousy struck a blow as Michael saw her aura mingled with Dominic's, like gilded rose petals. "I've tried remembering our lives as the gods of the Cities of the Plain. Can any of you remember?"

The confused swirl of his past lives had become, through Blanche's help, an orderly flow of memory, life to life, all its details sharp and accessible, except for the devastation of the Flood. Past that: nothing. But it was a nothing that triggered the now-familiar sharp warning throb of a geas headache. Subtle, and very well-done, Michael thought with unwilling admiration. How was it that none of them had noticed it until now?

Dominic rubbed his temple.

Only Roland, not yet Raised and Named, seemed unaffected. "I'm certain there's some truth about the time before the Flood that Cecilia wants to hide," he said, looking troubled. "Not only that, but I believe she's bound our powers, as well. I overheard the elders among the kin discussing how the Apkallu are growing weaker with every rebirth. We've already lost most of the major—"

"But your auras continue to increase in size," Blanche said, her eyes narrowed.

"And the powers that they say are lost, are just forgotten," Roland added. "After I spoke with the elders about the lost

powers, I began testing myself, to see if I could recreate any of them. When I succeeded, Cecilia was furious."

"Not to mention that young Robert, whose powers were scarcely stronger than a newly-Transformed Crown of Service djinn," Dominic said, casting an apologetic glance at Michael, "was still able to unleash enough destructive power at the moment of his death to slay three djinni."

Roland nodded. "I have come to believe that our original powers have not vanished, or faded, over time. I suspect that Cecilia's insistence on performing all the Raising and Namings for Apkallu has something to do with this binding."

"I heard her," Michael said, unsuccessfully fighting the flood of images from his son's horrible final moments. "I heard her," he repeated. "Just before Robert—" *Tirgit, her face contorting as she throws her arms around their son ... Robert screaming ... hours spent in conversation with his son, who nestles comfortably in his arms as they fly under the starry Spanish sky. The scent of Tirgit's hair, her glossy braid draping across his chest in their bed ...* "Cecilia commanded him to unbind his chains. She said something else, too, but I can't—can't remember."

"Another geas," Dominic said, quietly. "It has to be. When invoked, it unleashes a djinni's powers in a catastrophic surge, killing him and all those around him."

Blanche leaned forward, elbows pushing aside papers and maps, keen with excitement. "But if that's true—if the binding geas was unleashed when you Raised and Named me and we survived—haven't we been restored to our full powers once more?"

"It possible," Dominic conceded, just as Roland interrupted.

"It's true. When the Venice House attacked us, I was able to—" He stopped, deeply uncomfortable, and after a pause, continued. "I fought with a hundred times the strength of the lightning that I pulled down upon the Mongols at Ayn Harod." He sighed. "But we still don't know how to fully use our powers, even if they have been restored. The lost *mes* remain lost. We might recover some of them if we work on it, as I recovered the art of pulling fire from heaven."

Michael risked a gingerly inward look, cautious about stirring up the geas, and sorted through Ea's memories.... *linen-clad worshippers. Molding figures in clay. The music of flutes and harps, enjoyed while drinking beer, sipped from tall, glazed jars through gold straws. Experiments in alchemy and the rage in his sister's face as she sees what damage he has wrought in her garden ...* But of his actual powers ... nothing. He looked deeper and saw only blankness, as deep and impenetrable as the depths of the sea. A wave of pain began to gather, so he brought his attention swiftly back to the chapel.

"We have had our powers restored, and we are sworn to seek vengeance on Cecilia for the harm she's done," Blanche said, rising to her feet, her aura blazing. "We should not wait meekly for her to make the next move."

Michael thought about her four sons, his grand-nephews, who were helping Jean-Phillippe with chores in the stable. Even if he had failed to save Tirgit, Robert, and Mathilde, he had to try. He had sworn to stay at Sir Jean's side as long as

danger threatened the house. "I agree," he said. "If Cecilia does not know how strong we are, then we will have the advantage over her."

"What do you propose we do?" Dominic asked, warily.

His attention was directed to Blanche, but it was Michael who answered. "Capture her. Capture her and make her give up her secrets."

"Agreed," Blanche said promptly.

"Sir Jean, what say you?" Dominic asked the Master of the House, who had been sitting quietly to one side, his wife next to him, as the djinni deliberated.

He frowned as he considered his answer, his weathered face stern. "I believe the kin are owed an explanation for why Lady Cecilia broke her sacred covenant regarding the return of intact memories during a Raising and Naming. If you are confident that you can capture her without further harm to the house or the kin, then I, too, wish her to answer for her deeds."

"Well, how do we propose to find and catch Cecilia?" Roland asked, running a hand through his uneven hair. "It's all very well to beat our shields and raise the clamor for vengeance when the criminal has fled the scene of her crime."

"I don't think she's fled—or if she has, she hasn't gone far," Blanche answered. "If she realizes that I'm here—well, the Ereshkigal I remember would never pass up the chance to confront me, especially if she thinks that I am weakened."

"I have another idea," Sir Jean said. "One that would bring Lady Cecilia here without advertising the fact that we are

sheltering the Cursed One within our walls, begging your pardon, Lady Blanche."

Alais's eyes widened. "No," she whispered, her fingers clutching at her husband's sleeve. "We can't. Not now."

"We must," Jean replied, grimly. Their gazes caught and held in swift, silent communication. Alais sighed at last, and released her hold on her husband. He gave her a tiny nod before turned to address the djinni once more. "One thing troubles me, lords. If we succeed in luring Lady Cecilia here by my plan, then what? She is—" he swallowed, and drew a deep breath before continuing. "I don't want further harm to come to this house."

"If you can bring her here, we will surround her, and immobilize her with our combined auras," Blanche said confidently.

"Agreed," said Dominic, after a moment of thoughtful consideration.

As Michael listened to the plan unfold, he wondered whether he could master this new body in time to confront Cecilia. From the greensick look on Roland's face, his cousin was harboring doubts, as well.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

"And she hath changed my judgments into wickedness more than the nations, and my statutes more than the countries that [are] round about her ..."—*Book of Ezekiel*, 5:6

Pezenas, County of Toulouse, Feast of St. Remy,
Wednesday, October 1, AD 1270

"Lady," said one of a pair of dark-clad sergeant brothers guarding the gatehouse of the Templar Preceptory. He inclined his head with chilly courtesy, silver strands in his brown hair glinting in the afternoon sunlight. "Sir Aumery sends his regrets, but says you are not to be admitted within these walls."

Cecilia blinked and considered her response, aware of the intense curiosity emanating from the girl standing behind her. What was her name again? Ah yes, Emmeline, one of the young Raised and Named maids from the Pezenas House. Not nearly as capable as Tirgit had been.

Cecilia pushed aside a pang at the thought of the Berber girl who had been her companion for many years. Tirgit had abandoned Cecilia of her own will, choosing to side with Michael and Dominic. Her fate, while regrettable, had been of her own doing.

She came back to the matter at hand, and decided that innocent confusion was her best ploy. The sergeant-brother was a man, after all, despite his vow of celibacy, and men usually responded to a girlish face and manner.

"Oh," she said, summoning an expression of hurt confusion. "I only wanted to know about Sir Michel—"

"Dead," said the sergeant-brother, curtly.

"God save his soul." Cecilia crossed herself, studying the two men through her lashes for something she could exploit without tipping her hand.

The second of the pair, also middle-aged, was completely bald. He also refused to meet her gaze, staring stonily off into the countryside while blocking the entrance to the gatehouse with his considerable bulk. She turned her attention back to the first sergeant-brother. "Please, I beg you—how did Sir Michel die?"

"Struck down by sorcery, says Sir Aumery," he replied grimly. "He'll be buried here—not on consecrated ground, you understand, but he'll be given a shroud."

The bald sergeant-brother hawked and spat at this. "Better'n a traitor deserves," he muttered.

"If I could only see Sir Aumery for just a moment..." Cecilia clasped her hands to her breast, and put on her most piteous expression.

"Not possible. Sir Aumery appreciates your aid and all in locating Sir Michel, but he says that given the, um, sorcerous overtones to this matter," the sergeant brother intoned, sounding as if he were repeating a lesson learned by rote, "it's best if you didn't put him in a position where he was forced to ask the Inquisition for help. The House of the Rose having an uncanny reputation and all, and you at least forty, but looking like, er, *that...*"

The bald sergeant brother finally looked at her, and gave a low whistle. "Forty? I wouldn't've put her a day over eighteen," he muttered.

They're threatening me? Cecilia pushed down rage. She could level these stone walls with a single sweep of her aura! However, since the kin were already in an uproar over the charges of memory-tampering leveled at her, she had quite enough to handle without additional attention from the Templars—or the Church's ecclesiastic institution for the suppression of heresy.

She didn't need them, she told herself. And she was wise enough to weather petty insults from mortals who would be dead and dust in a few short years.

"Tell Sir Aumery that I am disappointed in his courtesy," she said, and signaled a nervous Emmeline to follow her back to where one of the kin stood patiently holding their mules.

* * * *

When she returned to the Pezenas House, she found the kin in a new uproar. A pigeon had arrived while she had been away. His hand shaking, Master Armand de la Rose handed her the thin slip of parchment—but only after she asked for it.

"From Jean de Pezenas, True Name Utusagila, Master of Villeroze-sur-Orb, on October 1, AD 1270. Lady Cecilia, recently known as Sitt Rasheeda, True Name Ereshkigal, is summoned immediately to face a Council of Elders here to defend herself against the following charges: unsanctioned speaking of the Word of Death at Bressoux. Murder: Crown of Service djinniah Theodora de la Rose, True Name Lal-hamun;

Robert FitzMichael, True Name Utu, a minor child of the House; Sir Michael de Murat, True Name Ea, a Protector of the House; Mathilde de La Roche-en-Ardennes, True Name Ninharsag, a Protector of the House. If Ereshkigal does not appear in good faith before the council to be convened at Villerose-sur-Orb by October 4th, she shall be Forgotten."

Even without a blood bond, she could read his thoughts: *Four djinni dead, the Word of Death spoken, and the accused under our roof!*

"I will go defend myself against these falsehoods, of course," she replied, keeping her voice low and sweet. "As I defended myself against a treacherous attack by those I thought dear to me. I remain loyal to my covenant with the kin, and I wish nothing more than to clear my name. After all, I have come in response to the earlier summons to council, to refute other false charges made against me by those I trusted. How soon can we depart?"

"Tomorrow morning, lady. The journey will take at least two days," he said, looking marginally reassured by her calm manner.

She could see him starting to doubt. Doubt was good. She could have asked for nothing more convenient to her plans than a council of elders.

It would make her task of manipulating everyone's memories much easier if they were all gathered in the same place at the same time ... let them only come into range of her aura, and she would find a way to exonerate herself, and to blame Dominic for everything. Everyone knew he was unstable, a child-killer ... with Michael and Mathilde dead, and

Arjumand outcast, if Dominic, too, was Forgotten by council order, she would ensure that none of her betrayers would ever be Raised and Named again. Let them pay the price for their ingratitude!

In that case, she would have no distractions when the time came to deal with Inanna, her newly-resurrected sister. The sibling she had both loved and hated the most deeply. Charming, brilliant, jealous, and greedy, Inanna always wanted more, and *more*, until her infernal curiosity pulled fire down from the sky and in an instant obliterated everything that Ereshkigal and the others had labored to build. Well, djinniah she might be, but without her memories and without her *mes*, Inanna would be defenseless against Cecilia.

* * * *

The rest of the day passed swiftly, as the surviving djinni worked to carry out Sir Jean's plan. Pigeon-borne messages had been sent to the Beziers House and all the neighboring rose farms, summoning a second council of elders.

Would they really be able to take Cecilia captive? Michael wondered for the hundredth time as the blazing sunlight of the long afternoon died down into red embers of dusk, and he followed Dominic to his—*their*—bedroom.

It was good that he would have a few days' grace to become accustomed to his new body, he thought, before he was called upon to use his sister's flesh in battle. His powers seemed unchanged, although his control over his aura was as unsteady as a newly-Transformed djinn's. Thanks to whatever Blanche had done while transferring his soul to Mathilde's

body, Michael felt whole inside of his head for the first time since he had awakened into the life of the Apkallu. He was finally able to bring order to the previously-disordered jumble of his past-life memories, but, strangely, he longed for Honoria's acerbic presence in his mind, advising him and commenting on his follies. Her memories finally felt like his own, but he *missed* her, foolish as it seemed.

Dominic had said little as they left the chapel and climbed the stairs up to their bedchamber, knowing Michael well enough to give him time to think. His hand was closed firmly around Michael's, his touch anchoring, reassuring.

Michael emerged from his reverie to find himself standing on the colorful carpet next to the huge bed. Dominic shut the door firmly behind them, and his hands settled on Michael's shoulders, making Michael's mouth go dry with anticipation.

Dominic drew him close. The comforting smells of roses, mingled with the faint smoky scent of incense, made Michael long to hide his face in Dominic's chest, but guilt and unease kept him stiff, his arms at his sides.

He wanted ... how he *wanted* this! But how could he—in Mathilde's body? In her bedchamber? With her husband? He longed for the taste of Dominic's mouth, and the feel of his tongue. He needed the comfort, the rapture that Dominic's touch would bring. And yet, did he deserve what he had wanted since he was old enough to be haunted by dreams of his lifetime as Honoria? At this moment, Tirgit, Robert, and Mathilde were passing through the Underworld, preparing to enter new bodies and new lives, their fates uncertain.

Especially poor Tirgit, who had so feared being reborn outside the shelter of the House...

"Ea, beloved. I can *hear* you worrying, even without opening our bond."

Michael felt a callused fingertip trace the line between his brows, smoothing out his frown, and caught a glimpse of his lover's wry half-smile.

At least Blanche had let Dominic keep his dimple, Michael thought, a little dizzily, as Dominic drew him closer, and bent. His heart pounding, Michael closed his eyes as Dominic's lips touched his forehead, his eyelids, his temples, and even the tip of his nose in light, teasing kisses.

Just when Michael thought that Dominic might press one of those deep, sweet kisses onto his mouth, he felt hot breath move across his cheek and tickle his ear. Michael inhaled as the sensation sent bubbles of aching heat through the pit of his stomach, and his breath turned to a gasp as sharp teeth fastened gently on his earlobe.

The teeth relented, and Dominic's kisses turned light again, barely brushing the sensitive skin of Michael's throat, raising shivers of desire, as he continued to the corner of Michael's mouth, and away again, kissing him everywhere, in fact, but on his lips, which craved touch.

Michael heard his soft moan and raised his arms at last, looping them around Dominic's neck, drawing him close.

His beloved chuckled, breath heating Michael's skin, and rewarded him by finally capturing his lips. But his kiss remained infuriatingly light. Michael's fingers sank into Dominic's hair, and he took control of the kiss, deepening it,

teasing him in turn, savoring the taste of tongue against tongue.

Time vanished, and the frantic circle of Michael's thoughts quieted, until he was aware only of Dominic's touch, his scent, his taste. Dominic's mouth had not moved lower than Michael's throat, but Michael could feel each flick of his tongue, each delicate nibble of lips and teeth like tiny shocks against the tips of his breasts, and lower, in the warm, aching pulse between his legs. Michael had forgotten what it was like to experience desire as a woman, less overmastering than a man's desire, yet no less urgent.

Dominic placed a final, lingering kiss against the hollow of Michael's throat, making him arch, silently urging him lower, and then he drew back.

Michael felt the loss of nearness, and sighed in protest.

"Better?" Dominic asked, in a hoarse whisper, touching his forehead to Michael's, his breath ragged.

Michael nodded, feeling dazed, already missing Dominic's mouth, and found his voice, husky with desire. "Better." But as the intoxication from Dominic's kisses faded, Michael's doubts returned. He had loved Tirgit, and he had loved his sister. Was it too soon? He closed his eyes, torn between guilt and passion.

"You gave me a gift beyond my hoping, when I had long since resigned myself to living apart from the one I love," Dominic murmured, each word caressing Michael's skin, sending warmth and want spiraling through him. "You forgave my trespasses against you, and turned to me in your darkest

hour. Tonight is a gift, and one that our loved ones would not begrudge us."

Michael found himself beginning to yield to his siren song.

Dominic snatched away the dark-dyed wimple with gentle, inexorable strength, unpinning the heavy braids that crowned Michael's head, loosening the thick golden hair so that it fell in waves past his waist. Dominic placed light kisses on the nape of Michael's neck, raising pleasant gooseflesh in their wake.

He loosened the gown next, his hands moving with the sure grace that Honoria remembered. The kisses moved to the tops of his newly-bared shoulders. "I cannot restore your son, or Tirgit—my sweet daughter, Tirgit—" Dominic's voice roughened, and broke. "—or our beloved Mathilde from the Underworld, but what I can give you is myself. All of me," he finished in a whisper.

The last of Michael's resistance crumbled like fortress walls undermined during a siege. "I have always been yours, no matter how hard I tried to deny it."

Michael shrugged off the gown, stepped out of the heavy fabric pooled around his feet, and pulled the long chemise over his head, dropping it carelessly on the floor next to the crumpled gown. He turned, feeling the soft brush of his hair tickling his hips, his lower back, and saw how Dominic's eyes kindled to green-gold at the sight of his nakedness.

"I love you." Michael kissed him, tentatively at first, feeling awed and a little frightened. " *... now I am yours, forever,*" Honoria says, smiling up at her husband from the disordered heap of their clothing, feeling the length of her scarlet

wedding veil tangled around one wrist, and the rough surface of Menelaos's gold-embroidered tunic scratching against her hip.

Dominic yielded with a groan, his hands sliding greedily over the bare skin of Michael's back and buttocks. He allowed Michael to undress him, and to cover each inch of newly-revealed skin with sweet kisses and the occasional bite to add spice.

Gasping, laughing a little, they stumbled to the bed and lay down together, skin-to-skin, learning and re-learning each other's bodies with a gentle urgency free of the frenzied, frantic escape from overwhelming grief that had marked their joining the previous night. Grief remained, part of them, but only a thread, not the entire tapestry. Tonight was a celebration of life, and of love rediscovered.

With every kiss, every slow, deliciously-tormenting caress, Michael lost himself in the sensations that Dominic awakened in his new body. He sought to return the favor, tracing the familiar path of old scars from his lover's mortal life, tangling fingers in unfamiliar bronze hair, finding the same texture. He reveled in the urgent press of Dominic's hard phallus against lips, fingers, and belly.

When Dominic finally entered him with exquisite slowness and care, breath deserted him. He writhed helplessly around the welcome invasion, filled, stretched ... one flesh at last.

One heart, as their bodies moved and touched, striving to come ever closer.

One soul, when Dominic's mouth closed hard over his throat. An instant of pain opened a flood of sensations, thoughts and feelings as their auras merged.

Dominic shuddered, hard, in Michael's arms, groaning. Then it was Michael's turn to taste his lover's blood, and his answering quiver joined them both in a bright, tumbling flood of pleasure, honoring love with love in the sharing of blood and memories, as Dominic gifted him with the recollection of an afternoon at the House of the Rose in Damascus: *Shadows gather in the corners of the high-ceilinged room. The sun presses against the closed shutters, scattering needles of hot light over the blue-tiled floor.*

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

He sits next to her, as naked as she, bent over the lute in his lap. She can't see his face. "What will you play for me?" She reaches to trace a henna-tipped finger down his nape, where his dark hair curls a little.

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

Michael felt mingled tears of joy and grief flow in a hot trail from the corners of his eyes. Dominic's next memory was almost unbearably poignant, his first glimpse of a young

Honorio and her twin brother Marcus, as they tried to escape his pursuit in Constantinople.

Michael wrapped his arms and legs and aura around Dominic as he offered memories in return, of the first time that Honorio kissed Menelaos, six years later, in the garden of the House of the Rose: ... *with a sudden burst of shyness, Honorio realizes that she is nearly as tall as her tutor now. She has changed so much since the day she was brought here as a skinny, starving twelve-year-old runaway slave. All of the good fortune she has known since, she owes to Menelaos. He has been endlessly kind, endlessly patient, nourishing her mind and spirit as the kin of the Rose have nourished her body, bringing her to womanhood.*

In return, she has become increasingly fascinated with the mysteries that he holds. There are secrets that the kin are withholding from her, of course, but she also wants to know why she has been dreaming of him recently. Dreams in which they are different people, yet the same, sometimes men, sometimes women, but always together. Always lovers.

"Master Isidore wishes to know whether you are willing to become a Protector of the House," Menelaos says. "I can tell him to wait another year, or longer."

"Will—will you stay here, if I become a Protector?" Secrets or not, she is observant, realizing that Menelaos and the other Protectors do not age as normal men and women do, and that they are frequently posted to new cities to avoid uncomfortable questions. But she can't bear to be parted from him, not when he has become the one person, other than her brother, that she fully trusts.

"I will Transform you, and instruct you until your Appointing, of course. But afterwards..." Is he blushing? She finds her own face reddening in response. "I would like to ask you ... that is, Protectors generally work in pairs. Will you be my partner? My consort?"

"We'll always be together?" She dares to put her hand on his arm. "They won't send you away from me? Then, yes!"

He gives her one of his rare, bright smiles, and a dimple appears in his cheek. He draws her closer, and her heart is pounding madly. Will he...?

He does. His fingers brush her cheek first, and he gazes at her tenderly. She is almost shaking with anticipation as he leans forward, and—finally—his mouth touches hers, warm, gentle, and loving. It's nothing like the sloppy, brutal kisses that her first husband. Thiudabold, assaulted her with, when she was eleven. She won't ever have to be afraid of Menelaos's touch, she thinks hazily, as he deepens the kiss, all the while holding her as if she is the most precious thing in the world...

Gradually, like the fading of the last, echoing notes of music in the soaring vaults of a cathedral, the pleasure stilled, leaving them both sated and deeply fulfilled.

Separating slowly, languorously, with soft kisses and lingering, affectionate touches, they curled up together in the bed.

"What shall I call you?" Dominic asked, sleepily, his voice a comforting rumble against the back of Michael's neck. "I don't want to call you Mathilde, but it will seem odd to address you by a man's name from now on."

Michael put his hand over Dominic's, where it lay curled against Michael's bare stomach, and thought. The answer, when it came, was absurdly fitting. "Call me Honoria," he said, lacing his fingers through Dominic's.

"Honoria," Dominic breathed, moving closer, so that every inch of his skin pressed close, surrounding Michael with the welcome scents of musk and smoke. "Honoria."

It felt like coming home.

"I love you," Michael—no, Honoria—said. "Whatever happens with Cecilia—if the worst happens—I'll look for you. I'll find you, just as you found me. I'll find you," he—she—repeated. "Even if I can't remember you, I'll search for you. You are the other half of my soul."

Dominic pressed so closely against her that Honoria felt the moment he began to tremble, even before the first hot, wet drops fell across the back of her neck.

She turned in his arms, and drew his head down to her breast, stroking his hair tenderly. "Shh, love. I'm here. I won't leave you again. I'm only sorry that my pride—and Cecilia's meddling—kept us apart for so many years. I love you."

I love you.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

"Hold it to the greatest wrong to prefer life to honor, and for the sake of life to lose the reason for living."—Juvenal, *Satires*, c AD 100

Thursday, October 2, AD 1270

Blanche—Inanna who was—drummed her fingers on the scarred wooden table under the vines on their trellis outside the manor house. Her gaze idly wandered over the grapes, which glowed with health and promise, but she wasn't paying attention to them. Her mind was very far away.

The people of this House were not at all comfortable dealing with her yet, which was only to be expected. They preferred not to encounter her as they went about their daily chores. So she sat here, thinking how they might win against Cecilia, once she received her summons. What did she need to know?

The last thing she remembered as herself, as Inanna, was the rock, falling from heaven. But before that ... she had been seeking the truth about the Word of Death. All the urgency of that obsession returned to her. She knew in her bones that it was the key to the mystery. Why had they, her siblings, become as gods? How had they accomplished it? Where had their powers come from? What was Ereshkigal hiding that was so overwhelming that she felt she had to suppress their memories by geas?

Only knowledge would untie this knot. Only her memories, unlocked.

She had not been able to overcome Cecilia's damned geas by herself, no matter how hard she had tried. The memories went back only to that final moment in the underground council chamber, and the rush of water, and dying...

She made another effort, but the barrier remained impenetrable. Damn.

She had to get at those memories! If she couldn't get at them by herself, she would get Ninshubur to go after them for her. He would find the truth, or it couldn't be found.

—Ninshubur,—she sent.—I need you. I'm in the grape arbor.—She didn't expect a reply. He had not let her taste his blood, so she couldn't hear his thoughts.

Her sons were happily helping in the stables with the children of the house (except for her eldest, who was reading in Sir Jean's library). She loved them very much, but she was finding it hard to remember their names amidst the memories of all the children she'd had during her outcast lives. What was...?

Pieter. That's right. Pieter was her eldest.... *He stands patiently in the garden a short distance away, holding two-year-old Giselbert's hand, listening to her conversation with Evrard and looking sullen, because she had locked away his book ...* She tore herself away from that memory, and sighed. Knowledge, finding and having it, was her passion, had always been her passion. But perhaps there was such a thing as knowing too much.

Her musing was interrupted by a terse sending from Roland in the parlor.—Dominic's busy. What do you need?—

She explained what she wanted. Roland's silence along their link was colored with reluctance.

—I know you think it's a bad idea,—she conceded.—But without this information, we're utterly at her mercy.—All right,—he said.—I'm coming.—You are? That is, I'm glad!—she replied, though she didn't know how effective he would be at helping her overcome her geas. He had refused to be Raised and Named, and by that act, had forgotten more than he would ever know again. It grieved her that he was so adamant about denying his memories. She wished he would return to the power and fearlessness that he had shown as Enlil, whom she remembered fondly, for the most part.

She looked up and smiled as Roland approached. He didn't respond, only keeping a grave expression and standing tensely before her.

"I know that you disapprove," she said. "But trying to open my memories is the only way I can see that we have any hope at all."

He sat heavily next to her on the rough wooden bench. "I know. That's why—" He swallowed. "I've been thinking about this. Dominic wasn't able to get through the geas to release your earlier memories, and I ... can't use my aura to try. You're not the only one with memories of those days before the Flood," he said, hand raised to forestall her next comment. "So ... I think you should Raise and Name me, and break the geas that way."

She put her hand on his knee, feeling the warm strength of his body. "I'm honored, my brother," she said, in the old tongue, knowing what a concession this was for him.

"And I'm the only one you have to test," he said glumly.

"You forget Ninurta," she said.

"Baudouin?" he asked, appalled. "But he's only four years old!"

She nodded. "Trying to Raise and Name him would be ... unkind, at best."

Roland dropped his head into his hands. "At best," he echoed. "Just don't ... talk to me about my memories afterward, if you please," he said awkwardly.

"I won't," she said, having some idea of the kinds of memories he did not wish his daughter to share.

"So, how do you wish to do this?"

She took a moment to consider. "You turn this way," She made him face the house, legs straddling the bench. She sat close behind him, lips to his neck and aura surrounding and binding his—inasmuch as she could. His aura was slightly larger than hers. They pressed so close that she could feel his slight trembling. She wanted to comfort him, to tell him that it would be all right, that he would like having his memories—himself—back. But she respected his misgivings.—Ready?—she asked.

He nodded.

—I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?—Though I do not like to, I will.—

Having already an active blood bond with him, she had only to reach for the seal of his memory.

...He carves the rune for djinn upon the roof of the Tunis House with lightning ... His daughter lies in deathlike sleep in the cave by the sea. Will she wake? ... He fights with Dominic

... The shining ax rises high, and severs Nadira's slender neck, biting into a slab of wood positioned underneath to keep the blade from shattering on the pavement. Blood fountains ... He moves slowly, his limbs heavy, joined to Sharibet above him by a liquid thread of mutual ecstasy. She laughs again, a low, wild laugh, her hands in his hair ... Riding through a papyrus swamp as Michel sights an ibis ... Mathilde's rosy breasts ... eating cherry pies ... The dazzle of light on stone as the Crusaders attack the cathedral in Beziers ... Calling lightning against the genie chasing him and his sister ... She stands, tattered but lovely, in front of the barred door of the Jezreel perfumery and bows to him. "Lord Zayoös, I wish to join the house. I know perfumes, and the keeping of bees, and the weaving of wool ... Watching in grim amusement as the besiegers invest the city of Troy for a decade—just long enough to get interested in the action before it goes away—and playing bored games with both sides to keep it going...

And earlier: Standing in an airy chamber, roof held up by red, spare columns, walls painted with sea creatures in lively colors and poses, he argues with Ereshkgal. He had only mentioned in passing seeing the shadow of Inanna's aura on one of the temple priestesses—one of their best bull-dancers—and suddenly his consort is shrieking with rage. "She cannot be Raised and Named! She cannot be restored to her powers! She has been Forgotten! She must not be allowed to destroy us again!"

As he tries to soothe her and assure her of his agreement with her ban, her immense aura plunges into and through the floor. A moment later the tips reappear, as if she had been

holding onto the rock their palace had been built upon in order to keep her temper. She speaks, coldly. "The earth has spoken to me. The mountain will explode."

He feels the tremor under the soles of his feet. The odor—or his remembrance—of sulfur makes his stomach churn. "How soon?" he asks, but she is already running toward the door, and taking flight.—Can we not warn them?—Stay and die if you please,—she responds.

He follows Ereshkigal into the sky, straining his lesser wingspan to catch up to her. But she flies faster and faster as if demons chase her. Below and behind, startled shouts from the city are drowned out by a low, barely audible groaning of rock as the earth shakes and walls crumble with loud crashing.

A roar like the father of all bulls begins behind him. As fast as he is flying, something small and furious shrieks by his ear. Another one punches through his aura-wing, and yet another, a red-hot splinter, pierces his thigh. He forms his shields, losing air-speed as he shifts the amorphous mass of his aura to protect his back. Soon he is riding a hard wave of red-hot stones like a dolphin on the breast of the wine-dark sea.

He flexes his wings and takes a chance, turning to look at what lies behind him. The island has disappeared into a pillar of smoke that rises into the sky, taller than he can comprehend. More stones zing by and he renews his shields, though he loses height by doing so. A rock in the shape of a skull catches him in the midriff. He lets it push him farther away from the monster that has eaten his home, his friends.

At the base of the pillar the island is invisible, wreathed in an angry red mist which belches visibly. The sea around the pillar ripples. A circular wall of water, small from this height, spreads out in all directions.

As he watches in horror, imagining the devastation of a wave of water that size coming to land on the inflexible shores of the islands in the Middle Sea, the base of the pillar belches again, eerily silent, gray and white, roiling like demons rubbing their hands in glee.

Then, out of time, a wall of sound louder than anything since the fire called by Inanna fell from heaven, staggers him in the air and sends him rolling and tumbling like a stick thrown for a dog. As he tries frantically to right himself, to ride this new wave of noise, a rock the size of a horse hits him. Although his shields are up, the concussion breaks bones. For a moment he senses them all; the shattered bones in his face, in his neck, in his back. His control over his aura vanishes and he is only falling, and falling, and falling down to the pitiless sea...

And earlier ... filled with wrath at the men of Sodom, who have cruelly used a bridal party of the House, he passes judgment on the cities of this degenerate plain, and draws upon his power. He extends his aura, seeking the lodestone points, the damp earth that calls like a lover to the potent sky. Lightning crashes, and crashes again, splitting into a forest of columns, each column brighter than the sun, each strike of lightning murderous and deadly hot. The columns lose form. They merge, until all is brightness, all is death, with himself as the spoke of a wheel that turns and grinds all

within its compass to dust, to ash, to glass. And when the last dazzle dies away, he stands at the center of a desert. Sodom, Gomorrah, and eight sister cities are no more. Only the sour tang of lightning-transmuted sulfur rides the roiling air.

—No!—Roland shouted.—No! I didn't do that! I couldn't have done that! That wasn't me. That wasn't my hand ... Shock destabilized him, and he was flung further into the hateful past.

...hearing the bard chant: "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...

And earlier. *His name is Kur-gal, Great Mountain, but his title will be Enlil, Lord of the Air, in the fullness of time. A single lapse of his hard-learned discipline burdens his heart with shameful memory: The maiden Sud bathes in the river, enticing him with her shapely limbs, her bright and welcoming smile. She doesn't say 'no' until after, so the gods of justice will condemn him to marriage. She follows him to hell, protesting her love for him, who wronged her. She sings at each gate as he tries to disguise himself, entrapping him three times, "Enlil is indeed your lord, but I am your lady. If you are my lady, let my hand touch your cheek. The seed of your lord, the all-bright seed, is in my womb. The seed of Sin—of Ninazu—of Enbilulu—the all-bright seed, is in my womb." As the mother of his children, he will not desert her...*

And earlier, *in an underground room tiled in mother-of-pearl, the waters rush over his head...*

Blanche pressed him hard, to see if he could remember earlier. She tried to feel the shape of the geas. Was it a seal? Or a wrapping? An invisibility? Did it exist here at the moment of the memory of the flood, or was it located at the moment Ereshkigal had installed it?

She scanned Enlil's memories for imperfections, for miscorrelations, time missing, for any indication at all of something hidden. There was nothing at the flood. All was as expected, except for the barrier to memory scant minutes before that death. So where could it be..?

Where would I have put it if I were hiding it? she asked herself. The answer came to her and she found it:

Ereshkigal honors him. He, Kur-gal, has been Transformed into a god. He eats the food of life, he drinks the water of life: blood sacrificed for his glory. Ereshkigal, praised be her name, brings him by the hand to the Holy of Holies. In the sacred bed, covered in red-dyed linen, she makes love to him like a leopard, biting and wild. Their auras mingle with a sensation like harp strings singing. He plunges within her and she gasps his name, no, his title, "Enlil!" He is Lord of the Air, Lord of Lightning, Thundermaker, Father Enlil, with sons and daughters that Sud has borne him, to her glory as Ninlil, his queen. He forgets Sud and her ambitions, and thrusts upward as Ereshkigal rises above him. Her hands caress his throat. Her aura suffuses his aura and his body with erotic lightning. He whispers her name, "Irkalla!" and a sheet of brightness,

whiter than her aura, links them, bows his back and drums his heels against the mattress...

"There!" Blanche said, under her breath. "That's where she did it." She held the memory in the palm of her mind and delicately picked it apart. Here, he was conscious. Here, he was overwhelmed with pleasure. Here: *Ereshkigal speaks to him.—Find forgetfulness. Pain blocks your memories before:* In an underground hall, tiled in mother-of-pearl, gray-eyed Ninshubur speaks in defense of Inanna. He rises to add his voice, and the earth groans, the walls shake, and a mountain of brown water slams through the chamber. There is nowhere to flee. Inanna screams Ea's name, but the waters batter them, stealing breath and life....

Ereshkigal speaks again:—Look anywhere else but Here. There's too much pain to remember. Fire burns if you look..

Blanche unwillingly admired the cleverness of the trap, just before the geas descended to pulse her own aura with sudden fire. She thrust it away, above the roof of the stone house, hoping the fire would spare the ripened clusters of grapes. She rolled Roland's aura into a tight tube, like the straws used in Shinar for the drinking of beer, doing it for him because he couldn't.

Fire erupted from their auras everywhere, not just from the tightly furled tubes she had so carefully crafted. The smooth-worn bench and table, and the grapevine on its arbor sizzled. Soot splashed the stone wall of the house. Shouts erupted from the house as the flames leapt high into the air. She was feeling the first pain of the burns across her body, smelling the awful stench of burned hair, wondering where

her eyelashes had gone, when the second part of the geas hit, summoning fire from heaven.

All at once, she realized exactly how much larger Roland's aura was than hers.

She felt, with him, the pool of power particles that massed in the air. She knew, with him, how similar tiny things in the earth attracted lightning from the clouds, from the air itself. The power from the air surged through him, through her. Lightning coupled with the earth, a long-denied lover finding release. It was power beyond her imagining. The least hint of resistance, and they would both be left nothing more than blackened, smoking bones.

So she did not resist the rush that hurtled through her and Roland. She channeled it through her aura, though it hurt—oh, yes! She guided it to pass, mostly harmless, into the earth—mostly harmless, except for a wisp of smoke that rose from Roland's body.

She watched it with sick fascination, and the next phase of the geas began before she was ready to cope with it. Another pulse went through Roland's aura and his heart stopped.

"No!" she screamed. "You can't die!"—Ninshubur!—she howled along their blood bond.—Come here! I need you *now*! Roland is dying. Bring Michael, too!—

She tried to quickly remember all the remedies she knew—any remedies she might have ever known—for stopped hearts. But her memories were jumbled, almost as sizzled as her hair. Roland's hair, too, was all gone again. She pounded on his chest in frustration. "Don't die on me!" she

commanded. "Don't. Leave. Me." She hit him each time, but he did not respond.

She was about to hit him again when piercing soprano voices cried, "Maman! Maman!" Her two middle sons, tearing from the stable, ran toward her with anxious little-boy snuffles.

"Wait! Wait for me!" squealed Giselbert, toddling after.

"Boys," she said. "Find Lord Dominic *right away* and bring him here as fast as you can. *Go!*"

For a wonder, they listened and obeyed, Reynaud sprinting in the lead, and Baudouin and Giselbert toddling after them, both squalling, "Wait! Wait for me!"

Roland's aura was coming unbound. Terror pierced her like a thrown dagger. She reached for the shredding connection of his aura to his body, trying to bind nothingness to something with her hands of air. At the same time, she pounded on his chest with her hands, to rekindle his life.

His faded aura dimmed.

"NO!" she screamed.

Booted feet raced up behind her. Dominic clicked his tongue—the only sign of his disapproval.

Michael's golden aura surrounded them all in furious silence, lending Roland his life. "What have you done?" Without waiting for Blanche's reply, he began muttering Paternosters.

"Devil of the Earth! Have you killed him?" exclaimed Sir Jean, from some distance away.

"Maman!" Piping voices cried. Other voices shushed them, and carried them away.

She didn't waste time on a reply.

Dominic's aura disappeared into Roland's chest. "I'm going to tickle his heart. You blow breath into his mouth."

She lowered her lips to Roland's, and breathed for him, kissing her father's lips, holding his aura, plaiting it back into his body, over and over again.—I will not allow you to die!—she sent to him.—Stay with us!—

He did not respond, except for: *He stands at the top of a man-made mountain in the center of a city on a vast plain of grass. Great trees grow in straight rows along the wide streets, and bear astonishing amounts of fruit and clouds of birds, singing like angels with brass trumpets. People in simple kilts and golden ornaments wave, and bow, praising him. On the platform behind him the scent of fresh-spilled blood, willingly sacrificed, piques his hunger...*

He was remembering! She had broken the geas!

She had a sudden horrible vision of how their fight with Cecilia would go, if Roland died. Her ignorance, unrelieved, would provide no clever stratagem to get them out of her vicious trap. Cecilia would speak the Word of Death and they would not be able to counter her. "You can't let her win! Live, damn you!"

"Live!" Michael commanded, his aura dimming with his effort.

"Live!" said Dominic, caressing Roland's heart.

—Live!—sent Blanche, weeping.—It's a unanimous vote!—

Dominic withdrew his aura. "It's no good. It won't beat on its own."

Blanche felt the last of the delicate connections binding soul and body together fray almost to nothing.

"No!" she swore, filling up the space of Roland's aura with her own.—Roland D'Agincourt!—she sent, along a tenuous link.—Father Enlil! Don't leave us alone without your guidance! What will we do without you?—

Weak as the whisper of a dying man, he replied.—Better.—Fool! Better your failures than a hundred other men's successes!—Sycophant,—he said.—Everything I've touched, I've shattered.—He remembers at her: ... *the Venice House, pulled off its foundation ... the Tunis House, burning ... Nadira and Kobegun's headless bodies ... dead citizens of Beziers ... sacked Byzantine cities ... cities of the plain, reduced to column of smoke rising from the desert ... the gates of Troy open for a horse ... a column of smoke rises and rises and rises from a turbulent ring of smoke ... dead sacrifices, their blood warming his stomach ...* —Someone else must do this. I can't ... Who do you suggest?—she challenged him.

—Someone who won't fail you. Someone who won't ... *Thousands lie dead in windrows, fallen all at once. Men. Women. Children. Hollow-cheeked, but not yet starving. Dressed in their funeral best, bleached kilts and massive golden ornaments. They all point to him, and power fills him with a pleasure more profound than orgasm. He hungers for more ... want to do that again.*—His thoughts fell silent.

When was that memory from? She didn't recognize the city, or the clothing. Was it from before the geas?

Roland's aura shivered, and faded away entirely.

She didn't believe it. She couldn't believe it. "NO!" she cried. But denial changed nothing.

"He's dead," Dominic said, his tone unnaturally even. "Now we lack his strength."

"Cursed One, you have slain him!" Sir Jean pronounced.

"Roland?" Michael spoke with Mathilde's voice. "Blanche, why did you—? Hasty, *stupid* girl..."

"I had begun to doubt your reputation," Dominic said. "I thought perhaps you had gained humility in your long exile. Instead, you may have doomed us all. Again." He stood and picked up Roland's body with his hands of air. "Sir Jean," he said, "I'm taking him to the chapel. Please have someone ... lay out the body." He looked down, where Michael knelt in a welter of skirts, tears running down her face. "Beloved, stand up. Come inside."

He left, stepping around Blanche as if she were unclean, and walked resolutely away.

Blanche watched him go, dumb with shock. How could that have gone so wrong? How could Roland be...?

Her own tears caught her by surprise.

* * * *

Loss piled upon loss—it was more than Honoria could bear.

Staggering in Dominic's wake, she fled Blanche's shocked expression, so like a child who has just pulled the wings off a butterfly.—*Why did it die, Mama?*—She fled the dreadful black smear of Roland's death blazoned against the golden stone of the wall, wanting only to escape before the sharp grief

building in her chest tore through skin and bone, leaving her to bleed tears and rage.

The chapel seemed leagues away as she followed Dominic's irregular shadow, made inhumanly large by the burden he carried.

Roland was dead.

How *could* Roland have trusted Inanna, the Cursed One? Was it because he, among all the Apkallu, had chosen not to be Raised and Named?

Honorio remembered too well what Inanna was. Intelligent, heedless, arrogant. Not malicious, perhaps, but certainly never thinking of *consequence*, oh no. She never *meant* the evil she wrought, but she caused great harm, nonetheless. And now, piling on to all his other losses, she had killed Roland, who had been like a brother to Michael in this lifetime.

Ahead of her, Dominic opened the great hall's doors with hands of air, and carried his burden inside. Honorio followed him through the hall and into the cool, incense-scented dimness of the chapel.

She had wept more in these past seven days than she had during all of her years as Michel de La Roche-en-Ardenne. Her tears continued, like the overflowing of a bitter salt spring, as Dominic lowered Roland's body gently to the pallet that had lately been used for Mathilde. Now it was truly a bier.

Honorio sank down on her knees, welcoming the ache of unyielding flagstones pressing through her skirts.

"Beloved," murmured Dominic. His hand rested on top of her head, a warm, welcoming weight. "I must go. The arriving kin ... but you should stay. Keep vigil."

"Go," Honoria said, hoarsely, grateful for his understanding.

He departed quietly, leaving her wrapped in shadows and stone.

She drew her sleeve across her eyes, and stared at Roland's pale profile, marred here and there by smudges of soot. His golden hair had burned away, leaving his head bare, reddened, and blackened. Despite all this, he looked peaceful.

He had not struggled against death. He had simply ... dissolved like dawn mist. *What happened? What did Inanna do to you?*

Had it only been two days ago that Michael had entered this chapel to find Roland holding vigil over Mathilde's body? With the memory of his boyish features, unaged but nevertheless tarnished with the years and deep regret, came other recollections: *They meet in the stableyard of Uncle Jan's manor. It's three days after seven-year-old Michel's arrival to foster with his Aunt Alys and Uncle Jan van Scheldehuis. Two of the older pages have found Michel's hiding place. "Look at the cry-baby! Let's give him something to cry about!" Michel is sure he will be badly beaten. "You leave my cousin alone!" Michel blinks as another boy runs into the stableyard, blond and skinny and gangling with new height. The newcomer moves to stand protectively in front of Michel, facing down the bullies. Afterwards, Michel finds out the other boy's name is Roland, he's eleven years old, and that their mothers are*

sisters. Roland and Michel both sit down in the great hall for supper that night with bruised faces and black eyes, but Michel's homesickness eases with his tall, laughing cousin at his side.

More memories followed as Honoria's tears rose to blur the sight of the unmoving body. She remembered years spent training together as squires, competing in horsemanship, fighting mock duels; the solemn grandeur of Roland's knighting ceremony, where Michel was permitted to attend and to hold Roland's spurs; Michel's own knighting, and the hot summer day when Roland was unseated and badly injured at his first tournament; their departure on Crusade, laden with everything that Aunt Alys thought two young men might need on a long journey; that idyllic sojourn on Cyprus, with its warm blue seas and beautiful women, before the crusaders had continued on to Egypt. Before everything had gone so horribly wrong and they found themselves parted for years, each thinking the other dead...

And there were other memories, too, from other lives.... *in Constantinople, when the city is new, the dark-haired genii closes the distance on the two runaway slave children in a heartbeat and seizes Marcus. Honoria, hiding in a nearby insula, bites her cheek as her brother squirms, unable to free himself. The genii reminds her of the pagan sculptures decorating the city: the strength and god-like beauty of marble painted to resemble warm flesh. Then he smiles, looking unexpectedly kind, and tousles Marcus's hair, just as Father used to. "Please, sir," Marcus begs. "I didn't hurt the lady. We were hungry!"*

Honorio did not know how much time passed as she knelt in the church, mourning Roland, mourning Tirgit, mourning Mathilde, and mourning Robert, each of those wounds opened anew.

Outside, she heard the gates of the manor opening and closing at intervals, the slow clop of hoofbeats and the muffled sound of voices in the courtyard. No one entered the chapel to disturb her, so Dominic must have ordered them to give her a measure of privacy. She felt gratitude sting like myrrh on a raw wound.

Soon, she would have to struggle to her feet, dry her tears, and leave Roland's body to the ministrations of the kin. She would have to face Blanche—Inanna—and find the strength to deal with her niece calmly and courteously, so that they could stand united and defeat Cecilia. Blanche was their ally, but Honorio would never trust her again. What if Inanna destroyed Dominic too, snuffing out her beloved as innocently as if she were stepping on an insect, unseen and unfelt beneath the soles of her slippers?

Blanche was, Honorio realized, a chill moving through her battered heart, very much like Cecilia in that respect.

Inanna had been bright sunlight and rushing wind to Ereshkigal's shadows and moonlight, impulsive where Ereshkigal spoke no word without careful consideration of its effect, and yet, they were alike in their ambitions, in their ruthlessness. Between the two of them, they had cost Honorio nearly every important thing gifted to her in this lifetime, even Michael's body. Hour by hour, it was becoming easier to think of herself as Honorio, rather than Michael, but she still

missed her male body, its strength, the ease of movement granted through long familiarity, and the respect others granted to a man in a man's world.

Tirgit ... Mathilde ... Robert ... Roland. Honoria made a litany of those names, stringing them on the chain of her memory like a rosary. All deeply beloved. All lost. She could not bear to lose the last precious person that remained to her.

Once they had dealt with the matter of Cecilia—assuming they were victorious—Honorina would take Dominic far, far away from Inanna, where he would be safe.

* * * *

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Saturday, October 4, AD
1270

Dominic found himself giving the same answers to the same questions, over and over as the Masters of the other rose farms in the area convened upon Villeroze-sur-Orb for the second time in two months. They asked who he was, how he came to be there, and when he told them who he was, what had happened to change his appearance. Who had transformed his features?

Every visitor was very inclined to berate Sir Jean for his laxness in providing the Cursed One the hospitality of the House rather than the keen edge of a sword; but that was nothing to their consternation upon learning Roland's fate. "She killed him?" was the invariable expostulation. "Wasn't he her ally? Her dupe?" "It just goes to show her true colors!"

And they trotted out all the old stories about Inanna's perfidy, her impetuous search for dangerous knowledge, and her carelessness. And every time he had to tell the story again, fresh confusion and grief rose in his heart.

He mourned Mathilde's death. Tirgit's passing left a hole in his heart in a place that he hadn't known was filled by her presence, by her life. How could she be gone when he had expected centuries—or more—of laughter, mischief, and flattering devotion? He couldn't think about any of it much; it was too hurtful.

The only bright spot was the love he had regained with Honoria. And yet, even that had been a close contest between a blessing and a hideous mistake. As always, Inanna was the agent of great changes, both joyful and unthinkable.

He had spent so much of that long-gone era as Innana's vizier, helping her, laughing with her, defending her, keeping her flights of fancy grounded in some version of reality. He had fought monsters for her, and defied gods. But he could not remember what it *felt* like, nor why he had laughed.

And now to discover that she had been his concubine, won after Alexander's victory at Issus. For many years after Sharibet's betrayal, when she allowed Arsinoe to die in childbed, he had refused to play his 'oud. He'd taken it up again only after he had Found Honoria and Marcus, and stopped again after their deaths. At the time he Found Michael and Roland, losing Michael to the Templars, and returning Roland to the House in Alexandria, Dominic had thought his rekindled passion for music had been thanks to

Michael, but he discovered now—so strange!—that Roland's death had extinguished his music again.

He hadn't even liked the arrogant puppy! They had fought almost every time they'd met. Roland had been implacably hostile to the idea of Michael and Dominic becoming lovers. But Roland's presence, near or far, had also been a relief. It meant that it wasn't just Dominic and Cecilia who stood as Apkallu in defense of the House. Roland's strength as a Protector had been one more barrier between the House's survival and Dominic's fallibility. And now he was gone again, all because Inanna had no patience!

But also because Inanna always knew, he admitted reluctantly to himself, the key information she needed to win a war. Too bad she couldn't always get that information free of cost. This time, the price had been Roland's life, and even that sacrifice hadn't been sufficient. The Word of Death remained a mystery.

"Do you mean it? The Cursed One is here? Is she confined?" exploded Master Amadeus of Villerose d'Fleury; the ninth time he had heard similar sentiments today. "And the traitor, Arjumand? What? She killed him? Gods! Is that her?"

His dogs, trotting at the heels of his mule, barked wildly as Blanche came from the well, carrying a yoke and two buckets over her shoulders. Dominic caught their collars with hands of air, and restrained them.

She looked neither to the right nor to the left, holding her head proudly. But he knew by the set of her shoulders that she did care what people thought of her, and he also knew by

her task—washing the soot from the wall of the house with water she carried in her own hands, and carefully trimming and healing the burned vines and trees—that she wanted to show the kin how deeply she grieved for Roland's death.

She also thought it might make a kinder impression on the visitors if they saw her, thus humbled.

She kept her shields mostly tight, but he caught, from time to time, uncomfortable glimpses of her furiously-working mind. Her skills as an Apkallu—Actually, he realized, she never had borne that title, since it dated from after her banishment, when the gods began to serve as mere Protectors of the House of the Rose. As Inanna, her skills as a newly-transformed goddess were almost unbelievable. But she was still newly-come into her power. And her control, as had been so devastatingly proved, was less than perfect.

"There has been doubt cast upon Cecilia's assertion that Inanna was responsible for the Flood and that she deliberately called the fire from heaven." And Dominic wished again that he'd had more time to share those memories with Roland.

He'd certainly seen Blanche's viewpoint during her Raising. But she might have altered her own memories, convinced of her innocence, or to hide her guilt.

He lacked enough information to decide. But that Cecilia had laid geases and triggered them to kill Robert and Tirgit and Mathilde—of that he had no doubt. His conviction in this matter was utterly firm as he welcomed the returning Masters and their wives.

He wasn't sure if he believed in Blanche's somewhat hysterical assertion that Cecilia would come here only come to speak the Word of Death. After so long an acquaintance with Cecilia, he could probably predict how she would react, but the millennia elapsed since he had known and understood Inanna left him unsure which way she would jump.

As another Master and his wife rode through the gate on dusty mules, he welcomed them, and answered their questions. "Yes! I am Dominic. Yes, my features have been changed. Yes, even my eyes. This was done by Blanche de Bressoux, Mathilde's daughter. Yes, she is Inanna reborn. Yes. She's over there, washing the wall. Yes, to our sorrow, Mathilde is dead, with young Robert, and Elder Sister Theodora. And Roland, known also as Arjumand. Yes, they are all dead. No, Inanna has not been confined. She is not accused of any willful wrongdoing or harm to the House."

"She's not? How can this be?" they cried, in the same tones of disbelief as all the rest.

"Her innocence of the major crimes she's been accused of since the Flood *is* at issue here. Yes, you are welcome. Yes, you can have the same room that you used when you were here before. All has been arranged for you. We will convene the council as soon as Cecilia arrives."

He watched them walk away, dumbfounded, and hoped he had told them the truth. Soon they would find out.

For the first time in his existence, he was not sure what he would do with the truth.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fourteen

"A reed pipe of dirges—my heart wants to play a reed pipe of dirges in the desert!"

—*Lament for Dumuzi*, Sumerian dirge

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Saturday,
October 4, AD 1270

Someone who won't want to do that again.

Blanche chewed over this thought as she washed the wall. Grief was a hard lump, coated with remorse. Roland's Raising should have worked. It *had* worked. But something in those memories ... *Someone who won't want to do that again* ... had made him willing to die.

The thought made her shiver. And the only two glimpses she'd had into what might make him feel that way were ... *People in simple kilts and massive golden ornaments wave, and bow ... and ... the thousands dead lie in windrows, fallen all at once. Men. Women. Children.*

If only Roland hadn't died, she might have seen more of those memories, gotten more clues. But this was all she had to work with. People dead in windrows. It had to be the Word of Death. It was so similar to what Cecilia had done at Bressoux.... *No shifting auras cloaked the bodies of the servants, lying in the hall as if sleeping* ... With not a mark on them.

So. Something that killed many at once, that separated auras from bodies without grossly damaging them. There were not many things that could do that.

She thought back to when she, as Inanna, had challenged Ereshkigal in her own domain. Inanna had wanted, had *needed* to know the secret of the Word of Death. But Ereshkigal had not used that power where any of the other gods could see it; she had refused to teach the power, saying it was too terrible a weapon.

Blanche snorted. She had always believed it was merely Ereshkigal's way of reserving the most powerful magic for herself.

She had to *know*. And for the first time, she had some information.... *the thousands dead lie in windrows ... the servants, lying in the hall as if sleeping ... dogs, cats, cattle, fleas, trees, grass, all dead ...* What would kill all those living things at once? Because within the range of the Word of Death that Cecilia must have spoken, nothing had run way. No one had woken.

She thought of the many ways one could kill with an aura, especially Cecilia's great aura span, as glimpsed in Roland's memories. One could simply use an aura inside a body to scramble or crush any organ. One could sever or pierce arteries or heads or limbs. And when one did this, the aura disengaged as the body died; and as the aura—any living thing's aura—disengaged with the body, it gave off the death energy that fed the gods a food even sweeter than blood.

The spiced and potted blood the House fed its Apkallu contained only an echo of that energy. And the auras of the existing djinni—if Sharibet was any example, even after seven thousand years—showed the effects of stunting. No wonder Sharibet had made her bargain with Blanche. Ereshkigal must

have suppressed the fact that the energy of death increased the aura of djinni.

So ... death energy increased the aura of djinni.... *the thousands dead lie in windrows* ... must increase the aura of a djinni quite a lot. But what could make those thousands fall all at once? What would make Roland fear so much to do it again that his own willed death became the safer choice?

Whatever it was had to be more intoxicating than beer, and more powerful than fresh blood, drunk from a living victim. Something that you might desire to experience, but with the weight of a mortal sin. She knew it had to be the death energy. What else felt so wonderful, but left such bitter indigestion, besides a sordid affair, or a self-serving betrayal, or an undiscovered murder of an enemy?

She thought of gaining the energy of so many people at once. She couldn't imagine it. One person at a time, one djinni at a time ... The thrill from one death was overwhelming. How could you stand to be linked with so many at once? You'd go mad from the pleasure. And who was to say this hadn't already happened to Cecilia?

Blanche washed the last stubborn spots of soot from the stony wall, her heart heavy. Gods, or djinni, they had power. They had the ability to create and move power. She felt the weight of her body on the soles of her feet. The earth drew all things to itself, except for air and clouds, and the heavenly bodies. It pulled rain down from clouds, and apples from trees, toys from babies' hands. It pulled lightning, too. Could it be made to pull auras? She didn't know how that would work. She needed some way to test the idea. But the thought

of wandering into the kitchen and saying, "I need something to kill. What are you making for dinner?" didn't bid fair to endear her to the people of the House.

But wait—hadn't her sons chattered to her yesterday about the kittens in the stable? With all the excitement yesterday, perhaps no one had gotten around to drowning them yet.

She bundled her brush, her buckets, and the yoke, and crossed the courtyard to the stables. She found herself in luck. The mother cat was nursing her kittens, and no one else was around.

She picked up one of the little furballs, earning a good hiss from the mama cat. Blanche held the kitten dangling by its round stomach over her thumb and forefinger. It was brown- and cream-striped, with wide yellow eyes. Its fur was soft and full of fat fleas, and its little claws were sharp.

"I'm sorry," she said to it. "You die for a greater cause. I hope." And she proceeded to tear its aura away, using much the same technique as she'd used to transfer Michael's aura into Mathilde's body. Only there was no other cat body to transfer this kitten's aura into.

The kitten spasmed, squalled in protest, and fell limp. She held it in her hand, and a sick feeling of shame in her heart as its mother yowled. That was not the reaction she'd expected. Where had the flare of death energy gone?

She reviewed her action. She'd torn away the aura ... Oh! She hadn't blood-bonded with it first!

She dropped the body of the kitten at her feet, and picked up another. This one was livelier than the last, wriggling and trying to bite her. She didn't want to put her mouth on its fur

and find fleas in her teeth, so she made a straw out of her aura and, crafting a narrow sharp end to it, plunged it into the kitten's shoulder and sipped a few drops of blood. Bond established—she felt the little creature's pain—she ripped its aura away, just as she had with the first kitten.

The backlash of its death was immediate, sweet—and sickening.

This kitten had also moved after she ripped the aura away. That was not the same effect as ... *the thousands dead lie in windrows, fallen all at once*. The kitten had protested as it died. Those thousands just ... fell down. The people at Bressoux had died without ever waking.

What could cause that effect? There had to be some way to cause it, but she couldn't imagine what. First of all, blood-bonding with all those people, even if they only donated a single drop, would take too long. It would be a lot of blood, a lot of collecting. And the blood would dry before one could drink it off in a single draft, like the ceremonies of the House Roland had told her about, during their hasty flight to Constantinople to confront Sharibet.

She'd have to test that thought, too, to see if a bond would develop if you took the blood out of the aura field.

It was so frustrating! She felt so close to having an answer, yet so far away from being able to figure out what it was.

A horrified gasp jolted her from her thoughts. She looked up to see Sir Jean's daughter, hand pressed to her mouth in shock. The girl—what was her name? Alison? Alinor?—flinched

as Blanche's gaze met hers. "Lady, I apologize for disturbing you!"

The girl fled as if pursued by demons, leaving Blanche standing in bemusement.

She sighed, and stooped to gather the kitten corpses to put on the midden.

"What did you do to Alinor?" Dominic demanded harshly, behind her.

"Nothing," she answered. "I was merely working through some guesses, in private."

"Trying to figure out the Word of Death?" he asked, shrewdly, looking at the two dead kittens near her feet.

"I saw something ... interesting ... in Roland's memory. Just before he..." Her eyes began stinging with tears, and she wiped them angrily with her sleeve.

He waited patiently for her to regain her composure, before asking, "What did you see?"

"It's difficult to explain," she said. "I think it would be better if we had a blood-bond and I showed you what I saw in Roland's memories."

She held out her hand for his. He gave it reluctantly, so she waited.

He gathered himself to speak. "I don't ... that is, I have not always been..."

Recognizing the source of his discomfort she said seriously, "Ninshubur, my friend, my minister who speaks truth, you know that no matter what you've done, what I may see in your memories, I will always love you."

"I know," he said in a choked voice, his aura vibrating with tightly-checked grief. "I only wish I ... could have done the same." His fingers tightened around hers.

She returned his grip, and kissed the palm of his hand to accept his apology, however badly stated. Just as she prepared to bite, she realized that he had dropped the ability to make the next test of her ideas into her hand as well. Quickly she explained what she needed.

Shaking his head at her, he moved back toward the door, and restrained his aura just as she directed. She made the sharp straw out of her aura again, extended it over the several feet between them, pierced his finger, drew out the blood, and brought it back to her mouth, careful to keep their auras from mingling as she swallowed it.

The blood was merely blood. With their auras separated, no bond formed.

She beckoned him close. This time she bit his finger, tasting the blood on his skin. The blood was suddenly smoky-tasting, resonating with Dominic's bright aura. The bond formed, and his memories washed over her. If she hadn't already been stifling a teary response, she would have cried rivers at his painful memories. And worse, at the memories where the imprint of pain was like an invisible hand marring every surface, skewing every interaction. How she wanted to fix it all, like a tidy housewife, squaring things away, polishing to make them shine again. But that was not the healing he'd asked for.

"I can't fix your memories. The technique Sharibet used cannot be undone." *But I will find a way, once we defeat Cecilia*, she thought.

"I—suspected that," he said. "So, what did you want to show me?"

Quickly, she sent him the images from Roland's memories, of a crowd of people, struck dead where they stood. She followed it with her memories of the horror she and Roland had encountered at Bressoux.

"This is what I've established..." She stooped and reached for another kitten.

"What are you doing?" he demanded as the mother cat yowled and crouched, claws extended, eyes narrowed in rage. "Don't kill a cat's kittens right in front of her! Even I know better than that! Here, come away, out of the stable." He steered her smartly out of the door and around the corner out of sight of the mama cat. "Now, tell me."

She described her experiments so far.

"Gods, what a tangle. No, no. I see what you're doing, and why you're doing it. But I certainly don't relish the thought of explaining it to anyone else. But since Alinor has seen you..."

She shrugged. If the kin complained to her, she would tell them the truth. "Well, we know that death energy increases one's aura," she started to say, then stopped.

He reeled as if struck. "We do? It does? So *that's* what Cecilia was doing, when we traveled the Silk Road!" He sent images of that time to her.

"She made you do kill all those slaves and never told you *why*?"

"She gave me a reason, but it was a lie," he answered, tightly. "And when Mathilde agreed to heal me, they conferred! But Mathilde's methods never worked!" He closed his eyes, only the tension in his eyelids expressing pain.

"And what happened to you in Beziers," she traced the broad smoothness of his forehead and the line along his skull where the damage within manifested in a blaze of white hair, "was due to your connection with the other djinni who died. Since you were unable to close your mental links, all that death energy had to go somewhere; and you couldn't absorb it, or redirect it." Her flesh hands followed the graceful curves of his wings, where there used to be scars.

"And Mathilde's death ... healed me?" He opened his eyes, shaken to tears.

"Yes. So, death energy can either heal or destroy. But I can't discover how they just fall down!"

"And if you don't know how it's done...?"

"I won't be able to stop her when she tries to do it to us!"

"Yes, I see," he said. "Well, what are the methods for detaching an aura?"

It was so good to work with her Ninshubur again.

An hour later, after extensive discussion and several more experiments, he came back out of the stable, shaking his head. "There are only two kittens left. If we take them before they're weaned, the mother cat will suffer from an excess of milk."

She scowled, disappointed that she was no closer to a solution. She took off toward the scorched grape arbor, confident that he would follow. "At least we know what it

can't be, and what's unlikely. We just don't know yet what the Word of Death is. So I want you to open my memories, just as I was going to ask you before Roland—before Ro—" She closed her mouth and swallowed futile tears.

"You can't mean to try that again?"

"It's the only way I can see for his death not to have been in vain."

"No! I won't do it!"

She raised a haughty eyebrow at him. "You won't?" She turned her face from him. "I'll do it myself—"

"No!" he exploded. "Have you learned nothing? I understand your reasoning and I even agree that it's necessary to try, but I won't do it without alerting Honoria, so she can be here to stand watch to aid us in case of another disaster."

"My wise vizier," Blanche said with a smile.

After Dominic nodded to mark the completion of his communication with Honoria, Blanche sent him the memories of Ereshkigal's Raising and Naming of Enlil, and Inanna's memory of being Raised and Named. "If the geas is anywhere, it's there," she said. "It's in the very first Raising and Naming after the Flood."

"Once you've opened my memory, I want you to close your shields and move away. I don't want you struck by fire from heaven."

"Blanche," he said, exasperated. "If you die, we have *no* chance of winning against Cecilia!"

"We have no chance now. So what difference does it make?"

"We're going to trap her, imprison her, and drug her so she can't fight back. We'll force her to answer any questions you have."

"Yes, that's such a good plan," she said sarcastically, "assuming we can actually capture her with only the three of us, or that she won't have shields too thick to penetrate, or some other secret power tucked away. I know it's the best plan we have, but there are a lot of risks. We're assuming she can't speak the Word of Death while drugged. But we don't know that for certain."

And at that, Uncle Michael, now calling himself—herself—Honorias, ran up to them. He—she stood, hands on hips, looking so like Blanche's mother that Blanche's breath caught in her throat. "What foolish thing are you attempting now?"

"Good morning to you, too, Uncle Michael," Blanche said with tart courtesy. "What I'm doing is trying to save our lives the best way I can."

Honorias growled with frustration and closed her fist as if she wanted to box Blanche's ears. But she didn't swing. Her hand dropped back to her hip. "I know you always *mean* these schemes for the best, but you never discuss anything with anybody!"

Blanche winced. "I'm discussing it now. From what I saw at Bressoux, the Word of Death kills instantaneously, so quickly that the dying person, or animal, or plant, has no chance to struggle or protest. They just *die*. And nothing I've been able to reproduce achieves that effect. Cecilia can kill us before we even see it coming. And I believe, every time she

uses it, she *gains* power from it. So she has all the more reason to use it."

Honorio's eyebrow cocked skeptically. "So why has she never used it in all the years since you caused the Flood?"

"Since she *said* I did that," Blanche returned. "I didn't do that. I didn't cause the Fire from Heaven, either. In fact, I was trying to move a rock bigger than a house, so that it didn't fall straight on our heads. It fell miles away, but there was no way I could have foreseen its damage. My failure shouldn't negate my intention. Just as this attempt may be fruitless as well, but you shouldn't stop me from trying!"

"We're supposed to let you kill yourself in order to try to save us?"

"Do you want to meet Cecilia unarmed?"

Honorio threw up her hands, and stood grimly between them and the house, guarding them.

Blanche arranged herself on the bench. Dominic straddled the bench behind her, holding her securely in his arms and wings as she opened her mind to him. "Here's the memory where I think she put the geas on me. I want you to sift through it, find it, release it, and jump away."

"As you wish," Dominic murmured against her ear. "Are you willing for me to open to door of your memory, young woman Inanna?"

"Anything you like. Let us just get to it." She brought that memory to mind, the sumptuous room, the scarlet linen sheets upon the soft bed. Chalice of gold. Jewels of every hue. Walls tiled in screaming patterns of color. Sheepskins soft as clouds underfoot.... *to her Seer's eyes, open all this*

lifetime, Ereshkigal's aura is immense, white as the full moon. The goddess smiles and says, "My sister, I will be the Opener of the Way for you. Will you let me in?"

Remembering, Blanche noticed that her incarnation of that lifetime had not yet been Transformed into a goddess. She was mortal at that moment. She wondered whether Ereshkigal had forgotten to Transform her, or only changed the sequence later.

But she filed that question for later as she felt Dominic within her mind, remembering that next half hour with her.... *Ereshkigal draws her down upon the soft scarlet bed and makes love to her with hands and mouth and hands of air.... At last, Ereshkigal drinks her blood and her caressing fingers move with exquisite intelligence, until bones turn liquid, and Inanna cries out, wordless, thoughtless. At that moment, the Undying Goddess breaks the seal of her memory. She can feel it tearing, then she's swept along in a searing rush of memories: ... lifetime after lifetime after the flood spent in poverty so dire, and conditions so primitive that survival is a burden, and death a quiet relief ... the water rushes over her head as Ea and Ninshubur call her name ... a voice she cannot hear commands her: 'From goddesshood to flood you may not remember. Her sweet voice rings like the echoes in a cave, coming slightly after the voice that speaks. She can only hear the echoes, because...*

She realized that Dominic was listening to the memories for her. The voice continued speaking.

...—Pain blocks your memories, too much pain to remember. Fire burns if you look beyond the pain: fire

channeled from the earth eats you up if you dare to see what must not be seen, what must not be spoken, what must be forgotten.—

Her aura convulsed. Was this what Roland felt? She wondered frantically if Dominic had escaped the coming fire. Or, with fire everywhere, if she would have a lock of hair left.

She spiraled her aura upward, meeting no resistance but sky. Fire flared from the tips of her wings, and vanished. Stunned, she wondered why that was all there was to that punishment. Was it the first time Cecilia had laid that geas? Did she devise more elaborate punishments for the Apkallu she Raised in later centuries? Subsequent traps, death after death after death, to build the peril higher and higher? Witness Roland's fiery fate...

Once she thought she would survive her sorrow, Blanche dove for her earliest memories, seeking the secret of the Word of Death.

...it was a life lived in paradise. Abundant game, wild fruits and grains fed them so they never went hungry. Even in their kin band with twelve children, no one died of lack of food, or lack of love, either ... they traveled, and learned, and finally settled, much increased in number, by a lake.

Inanna's eldest sister, Irkalla, was fascinated by the process of dying. Inanna was equally fascinated by the process of healing. And they both had much to study.

One day, an ailing patient died with Irkalla's hands upon her. In the moment of death life evaporated like a pot of steaming water. Like steam, she found she could collect that

departing life and breathe it in, giving her more life to live. And she could see life shining from every living thing.

Eventually Inanna discovered Irkalla drinking the lives of the dying and growing stronger—and younger. And she was wroth and accused Irkalla of committing heinous acts. But Irkalla marshaled her arguments, and, at length, convinced Inanna that she did no harm, but only harvested that which would otherwise go to waste; but which collected, did much good. So Inanna grew fascinated as well at the possibilities. From that day on, they bent their heads together to share all they had discovered about the powers of life and death.

The family reacted in their individual ways, but once the fever of discussion calmed, they all wanted to know more; they all wanted to be shown how to see auras, and how to live forever.

They all could drink death; all could see auras; and they all lived far far beyond mortal years. Though they separated, each going to a different settlement around the lake that was the center of their homeland, they came together at least once a year to share the new things they had found that they could do. They could coerce obedience, and command love, and confuse the perceptions of others; they could speak with one another at a distance; they could manipulate matter, call fire, divine sources of water and metal; they could heal, or kill with their auras. They could, and did, seek to outdo each other in these new powers.

The people of the plain prospered and grew in population. The Shining Ones, as Inanna's clan was known, for their ability to make their auras visible even in daylight, ruled

sizable towns in all directions. They accepted gifts, and sacrifices, and dispensed wisdom and healing and beer. They had relations with whomever they wished. They ate the finest food, slept on the finest beds, had the finest furniture and houses, the best of everything; and some of them wanted more.

They survived this way for hundreds of years. And when some Shining Ones died by accident, it was with amazement that the survivors discovered, in the next generation to be born, babies with the enlarged auras of Shining Ones. They brought those children into their own households and saw that they learned the skills and powers quickly, as if remembering them, rather than learning them anew. Further observation showed that each of these children had the same aura color, and same particular skills, as one of the dead Shining Ones.

From that point on, they kept watch for the reborn. Irkalla, fascinated by this puzzle, discovered where the barrier to memory resided. She it was who first Raised a mortal, screaming and crazed with the overwhelming pain and confusion of past become present. She persisted until she found exactly where to tear the aura to release the memories; and share in the memories so released. The failures ... fed her aura.

And when the memories of the reborn Shining Ones were released, they proved indeed, they were the ones who had died. Rejoicing was intense. They had conquered death, and they could see at a glance those whose auras had been marked with the sign of a Raising.

Ages passed and the weather grew worse. Drought increased. Food became scarce. The villages of the plain no longer flourished. Then gold-wearing invaders from the sea of grass to the east came with fire-hardened spears and bone-tipped arrows and insatiable hunger. They killed and killed, even Shining Ones, who could not fight so many.

Soon, only Inanna, Irkalla, Ea, Kursaga and her brother, Kurgal, and his son, Emesh, were left to defend the last city in the west. They discussed the ways they might resist the invaders to save their people, their chattels.

Kurgal reported that he had not seen the signs of Raising or any auras belonging to Shining Ones amongst the invaders; Kursaga reported that she and Inanna had looked inward into bodies and had discovered a way to change the structure and function of animal bodies directly, without the time lag of breeding; Ea reported that he had examined the nature of their mental links and that they worked by resonance, one with the other; Inanna told how she had organized her people to fight back; and Irkalla reported that she had found the seat of the aura, and a way to affect the auras of many people at a time.

They agreed that they had the pieces of the puzzle to defeat the invaders, and they went to sleep that night, to gain the strength to do what must be done to save themselves, and their people, on whom they depended for food...

And Blanche woke up from her dream of that far lifetime. "No! No! I need more—" But there was no more to see. The geas held. "Damn her! I was so close!"

Dominic delivered a jar to her, its seal broken, the scent of preserved blood rousing her to hunger of the body. Once she had drunk it all, she looked up. Dominic and Honoria waited for her to speak, standing out of easy aura range. They looked tired, but well; and most importantly, unscorched. "Did you see it too? Did you share the memories with me?" she asked them.

They nodded.

"You were there," she said to Honoria, Ea-who-was. "But you were not," she said to Dominic.

He spread his hands. "Least of the Apkallu."

She narrowed her eyes. If she ransacked his memories, what might she learn? But she caught sight of Honoria's face, paler than Dominic's, her mouth pinched, her brows frowning. "Unc—" She bit her lip. "Honoria, what is it?"

Dominic steadied her with his arm around her shoulders.

"Death," Honoria said, voice strangled. "We drank death. You and she and I. And you" Her free hand gestured at their surroundings, pointed at Inanna. "You invented war!"

"I didn't call the invaders to our land!" she retorted.

"We killed innocents!" Honoria clasped shaking hands together. "No wonder it came so easily to me..."

Baffled by the lack of context, Blanche appealed silently to Dominic, who relayed horrific images: *The knights overtake the fleeing soldiers and camp followers—screaming women and half-naked children—almost under the rounded crenellations of the city walls. His sword swings indiscriminately, and the next few minutes are a jumble of brightly colored images from a Book of Hours: red stains on*

golden stone; broken bodies of women and children sprawl on the ground...

Blanche's stomach rolled at the memories. She took a deep breath and said, "Roland once told me, 'There are no innocents.' I'm afraid he's right. We have all lived too many lives, done too many things. We can roll over and wallow in our guilt, say 'Woe is me, how evil am I,' but I, for one, am not about to let that bitch win and kill us!" She stamped her foot. "I have done plenty of penance, while she hasn't paid a thing, not a silver penny, for killing all of my people at Bressoux! She's coming here, and we still don't know how to protect ourselves!

"So, Dominic, you're next. When did she first Raise and Name you? When did she Raise you a second time? If we can lift those geases, we should have the whole picture."

"Oh, *no*. No, no, no," Honoria said. "You've done *enough*—"

But before she could flesh out her accusation, Sir Jean's eldest son, Peter, came pounding up. "Lady Cecilia's been sighted! She's coming up the road from Beziers!"

"Oh, hell," said Blanche. "Hell and the devil take her! She's early!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fifteen

"Lust for power is the most flagrant of all the passions."—
Tacitus, *Annals*, ca AD 100

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Saturday,
October 4, AD 1270

Cecilia rode her tall palfrey down the dusty Via Domitia from Pezenas to Beziers, en route to Villeroze-sur-Orb. She passed orchards, vineyards, and merchants, their beasts loaded with wool from the September trade fairs, raising more dust. She tried to ignore it all, while in her head she made plans and laid strategies.

If she could muzzle Dominic and dominate the council of elders—all would be well. She foresaw no problems with that scenario. If she couldn't ... well, everything else meant more work for her.

She would have to coerce Dominic to sleep, since she was barred from killing him. But she could convince the elders to execute him for all the crimes she had been accused of. She spun plausible stories for a while, concoctions with varying amounts of truth in them, gauging what the elders might be enticed to believe.

What if unlikely possibilities occurred, such as Sharibet's arrival? If her chief priestess added her voice in accusation, it would be a cold day in the Underworld for her, Cecilia vowed. And if Basil and Leila also arrived? Cecilia laughed. She'd hold them both down with one wing and go on about her business.

Less likely, what if Blanche showed up? She was still at large. She might come for her children, if she knew where to find them. And then there was Roland. He had become more formidable over the last two decades. And he had never let himself be chained from using or finding his powers.

She thought through everything. Meeting them face to face. Meeting Blanche with Roland hidden. Meeting Roland with Blanche hidden. Either or both of them hidden in various places. Either of them brought forward at strategic moments. She toyed with these possibilities until she was certain she could win, no matter what happened.

The summons had been very specific about who she had killed, but it was just a piece of paper. She hadn't seen all the bodies, not even Michael's. The Templars had been very certain he was dead, but she knew how easily anyone could be coerced into saying anything. So—what if Michael were still alive? And could come from hiding to surprise her? What if Mathilde were still alive? She made plans for each case.

She knew for a fact that Robert could not be still alive. His power, unchained, would have killed him in moments. And Tirgit had been in such close proximity that only a miracle would have allowed her to survive.

Well, and if they were all arrayed against her, what would she do?

There was only one outcome.

* * * *

Still musing, Cecilia followed Master Armand up the lane framed by olive trees to Villeroze-sur-Orb. She had had no

leisure on her last visit to notice the charming vista this estate presented, set amidst rolling acres of rosebushes. Children's voices announced their arrival, and heavy gates swung open to reveal a tall, square building built of golden stone.

The large courtyard was crowded with horses, mules, and kin. Despite the presence of multiple animals, the courtyard was clean-swept, with an arbor at one end, shaded by the charred remnants of a large, trellised grapevine. Clay pots nearby were planted with Sharibet's late-blooming damask roses.

What had happened to the vine? The char was remarkably similar to a geas-flare. *Who else died?* Her lips quirked.

Sir Jean came rushing out of the house, followed closely by Lady Alais, whose face showed the dark-ringed eyes of sleepless nights.

"Sir Jean," she said, pitching her voice to carry to all corners of the courtyard. The buzz of speculation that had accompanied her arrival died abruptly as everyone stopped to listen. "I have come in answer to the summons to council, and to defend myself from the vile lies being circulated about me."

She heard the murmurs start again, but the level of hostility among the watchers had, as she planned, decreased with her tone of careful respect.

Indeed, the coming conflict with her Apkallu siblings concerned her less than the need to salvage her very useful relationship with the kin of the Rose, who had provided her with shelter, servants, and nourishment for millennia.

Sir Jean bowed, though he did not fold his hands at his waist, as he should have. "Be welcome, Ereshkigal, known in this age as Sitt Rasheeda and Lady Cecilia."

Lady Alais, added, "Let it be witnessed that you have come in good faith to testify, lady."

A young man, his aura showing the marks of a Raised and Named kinsman, approached, took the reins from her, and led her mount away.

She approached Sir Jean and Lady Alais, putting on her most demure mien like a hauberk, wondering when ... if ... the other Protectors would show themselves. A nervous flick of Alais's eyes, gazing over Cecilia's right shoulder, alerted her.

She whirled and saw Dominic's familiar bronze aura. He emerged from the stable by the gate, and was running across the courtyard, the kin opening up a path before him. But something had changed. *He* had changed, altered beyond the ability of dyes and cosmetics. *Impossible!* she thought, shocked into momentary inaction. No Apkallu currently incarnated remembered how to use the *me* of the Transformation of Flesh.

As Cecilia hesitated, Dominic raised his hands and shouted, "NOW!"

A net of rose and gold entangled her aura and weighed down her limbs. She felt as if she were submerged in deep, cold water, her thoughts slowed by shock. *Rose colored aura? She's here!* Her dearest sister, her worst enemy: Inanna.

Sir Jean and the kin of this House had known this plan. Known, aided, and abetted. In none of her calculations had

she figured that the kin would betray her. The Apkallu, surely. The Crown of Service djinni, perhaps. But the kin...?

There was no time to mourn this betrayal. She pushed out with her aura, strengthened by the lives she had fed on at Bressoux, and broke the paltry binding. She formed a sword of light and faced Blanche, a grown woman now, almost as pretty and innocent-looking as she had seemed as a girl in Ypres. Yet vastly more dangerous. At Blanche's shoulder stood Mathilde ... but ... cloaked in Michael's golden aura?

The sword in Cecilia's hand flickered, its edges wavering. What on earth was going on here? What had Inanna wrought?

The moment of distraction proved fatal. Before she could recover, a heavy blow to her head sent her reeling, her mouth flooded with the taste of her own blood from a badly bitten tongue. How had she forgotten Dominic's presence? She rolled, damning her heavy skirts. Coming to her feet, she swung with her aura-sword, intending to sever the flame of his soul rising in a blaze from his forehead.

Agony pulsed through her own skull, and she missed. Too late, she remembered the geas—his damned geas, laid upon her the night he Transformed Michael.

Then the hilt of his sword, a real and heavy thing made of polished steel, drove into her stomach, sending her down with a jarring thump. Unable to breathe, pain washed over her in nauseating waves. The net of light returned, rose and gold and bronze, unbreakable this time. Wheezing, trying desperately to gather her strength—and a lungful of air—she sprawled helpless on the ground, disbelieving. *You hit me!*

"And now, sister Ereshkigal," said Michael—in Mathilde's flesh?—said coldly, "you will tell us the truth. All of it."

And thus, they played perfectly into her hands. Despite the pain from her bruised stomach, despite her humiliating position on the hard-packed dirt of the courtyard, she laughed inside.

It was a sign of their misplaced confidence that they did not bother to tie Cecilia's hands. She went without resisting, even when they shoved her unceremoniously onto a hard wooden stool in the middle of the parlor. Up until the moment that she saw the soot streaked ceiling over her head, she had cherished some hope of salvaging the situation. Her middle aching, her mouth filled with taste of blood and the grit of dirt from the courtyard, she understood at last that they truly hated her.

Why couldn't they understand that everything she had done, she had done because she loved them? Throughout thousands of years and many lifetimes, she had protected and guided them, to save them from repeating mistakes made in the time before memory. Of them all, only she remained, undying, in her original body, so only she bore the burden of all their memories. If they were the Protectors of the House, then she was their Protector. But they couldn't see it.

The low murmur of shock that ran through the room forced her out of her self-pitying thoughts. The large parlor was crowded with kin. All of them stared at her, grim and unsmiling. She was all-too-aware of the dirt on her gown, and the dust and blood smeared on her face. With cold anger,

Cecilia contemplated the damage wrought by Inanna, who, in less than a week, had apparently managed to subvert relationships Cecilia had spent millennia cultivating.

She had to convince the elders of the House that she was innocent of the charges against her. She recognized them from the blood that Master Armand had shared with her, and tried to guess where their sympathies might lie. Through his actions this day, Sir Jean had shown that he was firmly in Inanna's camp. She should not have been surprised: his past incarnation, Jehanne de la Rose, had been Utu's concubine in Beziers. Of course he would not have reacted well to young Robert's death. Jean's wife Alais, however, had been born and spent her childhood in the Venice House, once terrorized by Dominic and lately destroyed by Inanna and Arjumand. *She* might be willing to give Cecilia a fair hearing.

What other allies might she find among the council? Berengar and his wife Hyacinthe of Villeroze-sur-Azille had both served Emesh, which meant they might be neutral. Fabrice of Villeroze-sur-Agout, whose True Name was Ninmahbani, had served Ereshkigal's temple as Chief Vintner through several lifetimes. He was sure to be an ally. His wife Bibiane, however, was doubtful. She was a relative newcomer to the House, having only heard of the Cursed One, and not witnessed the Fire from Heaven. Amadeus de la Rose and his wife Columba of the Villeroze d'Fleury had always been Enlil's followers. It was difficult to say whose side they would take; Cecilia had overheard an interesting rumor regarding Arjumand's demise, just before her betrayal and capture. Elderly Master Guibert of Beziers had apparently hauled his

aged carcass on a mule and ridden out from the city. Remembering their conversation several days ago, Cecilia doubted that he could be persuaded to take her side. The tenth elder was, of course, Master Armand, and he at least had sounded sympathetic.

She perched on the hard wooden stool and tried her best to look innocently puzzled, even though her ploy held little hope, not when they had deliberately seated her directly below the scorched beams and plaster where Robert had blazed out of control. But any little grains of doubt she managed to plant would aid her later.

As she waited for the council to begin, she shifted her attention to the Apkallu in the parlor. Even in Mathilde's body, Michael towered over her, his golden aura smoldering with rage. His expression kept that fact well concealed—his Templar discipline asserting itself again, she thought—but she might be able to bait him into unwise action.

Dominic's aura was whole and unscarred—another surprise in an afternoon filled with far too many of them. How had he finally healed? It had to have been Inanna's doing. And—she studied Michael again, noting that the flicker of his Raising Mark had steadied. They *must* have Raised Inanna and foolishly returned her powers, reaping the whirlwind.

The young woman stood a little apart from the others, because those elders standing nearest had discreetly edged away from her. If the kin of this house had indeed allied themselves with the Cursed One, it was only grudgingly. *All the better for my plans.*

These kin, when Raised and Named in their next lives, would remember that Cecilia upheld her covenant with the kin and presented herself to answer their questions, and that Inanna's malice caused disaster to strike the House once more. Indeed, they were all playing neatly into her hands.

Her confidence lasted until Lady Alais entered the parlor, bearing a large earthenware goblet that reeked of the potion used to immobilize djinni who had transgressed. The mixture would not kill her, but it would leave her completely incapacitated. How could they do this to her! Why were they treating her as if she had already been found guilty? She had only been accused, not judged!

Lady Alais approached with soundless steps, carefully cradling the glazed clay vessel between her palms. Involuntarily, Cecilia closed her eyes and turned her head away. If she was unable to move her body, unable to move her aura, it would be the ruin of all her meticulously-made plans.

Sibilant whispers rose all around her as the kin saw and judged her actions.

Cecilia was trapped. She could not, *could not*, drink the potion. But if she did not drink it, Sir Jean would remove her head from her shoulders with the large axe he was cradling against his shoulder. She readied herself to sing, though it would ruin all.

She was startled out of her dilemma when Michael seized her arm roughly, and raised her wrist to his lips. "First, we will re-establish our blood bond, so that the accused may answer once the drug has taken effect," he announced, to the

watching kin. His teeth sliced carelessly into her skin, and his mouth sucked at the wound roughly. It was nearly unbearable to be manhandled in such a fashion, but Cecilia knew better than to protest with the kin eagerly watching every move.

Dominic followed suit, his clear eyes now green and dull as moss. He grabbed her with callused hands and bent to drink from her. "Why did you kill Tirgit?" he murmured. "Was it because she discovered what you did to our memories?"

"If she's dead, it's because Robert killed her. He couldn't control his powers," she couldn't resist taunting. And it was even true...

Last came Blanche, looking both reluctant and intensely curious. "Sister." She took Cecilia's hand much more gently than the other two. "Why do you hate me so?"

"Because you are dangerous," Cecilia said in a voice everyone in the parlor could hear. "Disaster follows in your wake."

As Inanna bent her head and drank, murmurs of agreement with Cecilia's warning rippled through the watchers. Cecilia was satisfied to know that Inanna had not seduced *all* of the kin as she had seduced the Apkallu.

Lady Alais stepped close, holding the cup for Cecilia to drink. She steeled herself to take the first, bitter mouthful. At the taste, she realized that two vital ingredients were missing from the mixture. She met Alais's measured gaze, and understood immediately that the omission had been deliberate. Relief swept through her. She needed access to her powers ... and now, she would have them. When Cecilia

found Alais's reborn soul again, she would demonstrate her gratitude for this act of dangerous loyalty.

Cecilia lowered her eyes and forced herself to swallow the remainder of the potion. She had seen its workings often enough in her long lifetime since the kin discovered it to simulate its effects. First, she slowed her breathing, and let her shoulders sag. Next, she made her head loll, and blinked frantically, as if her vision were clouding. After a suitable interval, she allowed herself to slump from the stool onto the bare floorboards.

The final step was to relax her aura to drape motionless around her. Controlling her aura would be the most difficult part of feigning the potion's effects, and the most vital in convincing Michael, Dominic, and Inanna that she was helpless and harmless.

Master Guibert, clad in what looked like his best robes, with a thick, gold chain weighing down his stooped shoulders, shuffled forward to stand directly over her prone figure. He cleared his throat and croaked the traditional opening formula of a council: "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 inclined his head, wispy white hair flattened by a gold-embroidered cap, gravely toward Sir Jean.

Holding the Ax of Judgment high, Sir Jean said, "Lady Ereshkigal, you stand accused of causing, through direct and malicious action, the deaths of three Protectors of the House: Mathilde le Pelletier, True Name Ninharsag; Robert FitzMichael, also known as Rafi abd al-Warda, True Name Utu; and Theodora de la Rose, also known as Tirgit abd al-Warda; True Name Lal-hamun. You also stand accused of breaking your covenant with us in regard to keeping our memories inviolate. We give you now the opportunity to defend yourself, and to explain your actions."

With Dominic speaking aloud the words she sent him through their link, she replied,—I declare I am innocent of malice. I deny the charge of murder, though I admit a fault of grave misjudgment that led to their deaths. I deny absolutely that I have broken my covenant with the House.—

As the kin whispered, she damned the charade that prevented her from donning an appropriate expression of sorrow and deep regret to accompany her words. However, Dominic, punctilious as ever, faithfully served as her mouthpiece. And her barriers, preventing any transfer of her thoughts she did not wish to send, held firm.

"Explain further, if you will," Guibert said, taking the bait.

—I admit I made a bad decision to Transform Rafi—that is, Utu—prematurely. But I beg you to keep in mind that I had just received news of the destruction of the Tunis House. Arjumand abd al-Warda had forsaken his vows as Protector to side with the Cursed One. I—I thought, with the ranks of the Protectors still sadly thinned, we would need every Apkallu available. Rafi was—She blessed Dominic for accurately

reproducing the calculated break in her voice!—Rafi was remarkably mature for his age, and showed great promise as a Protector. However, his powers proved to be highly unstable. I left him behind at the Malaga House, where he should have been safe from the conflict.—

"Liar! I saw how you bound him!" Michael's snarl emerged with a squeak from Mathilde's mouth. It was almost amusing.

—It was for his own good,—Cecilia replied.—You doomed him yourself when you subjected him to the rigors of travel and the emotional travails of an unexpected reunion with his mother.—

Doubt flickered in the flax-blue eyes that had once been Mathilde's, and Cecilia pressed her advantage. If she could make *him* question what he had witnessed, then perhaps she might be able to sway the elders to her side.—I tried to stop Rafi's destruction when I saw him losing control, but it was too late.—

"I saw you kill him," Michael's voice rose, his aura no longer merely tinged with scarlet, but washed blood-red. The kin standing nearest him flinched as his wings brushed them. "I *heard* you invoke the geas that killed him!"

—You heard me trying to restrain him,—Cecilia countered, Dominic's deep voice echoing her thoughts.—You misinterpreted my actions.—

"If innocent, why did you fly as if the very devil were chasing you?" Michael shouted.

—You had already decided my guilt. I could sense your will to murder me.—Cecilia kept her mental voice calm. She might be able to win this confrontation, after all, and keep the good

will of the kin!—I knew I would be unable to reason with you in your blind rage, so it seemed prudent to retreat until you had regained your senses.—

"You poison-tongued serpent! You killed him—you killed them all, and you know it! Lying bitch!" Michael launched himself at her, and a horrified gasp swept through the onlookers. Dominic caught him before he reached Cecilia. It was hard not to laugh as Michael struggled and swore. He was proving her account with every incoherent threat he made from the restraint of Dominic's embrace.

Guibert stepped forward and Sir Jean thumped the handle of his ax against the floorboards to gain Michael's attention.

Michael subsided, sullenly, in Dominic's embrace.

"We have asked, and you have answered, Lady Ereshkigal," Guibert said, his voice quavering a little. "We have heard you, and will take your words in solemn consideration. Next, please answer the accusation that you have betrayed your sacred covenant to return to us *all* of our memories, inviolate, during a Raising and Naming."

Her answer was swift.—Since the House of the Rose was founded out of the ruins of the land of Shinar, I have abided faithfully by my covenant to the kin. I have kept your sacred trust in the ceremony of Raising and Naming.—

"You say you have kept your oath to the kin," Sir Jean said, shrewdly. "But before their untimely deaths, Lady Mathilde and Elder Sister Theodora both testified before Council that they had uncovered proof that you tampered with Theodora's memories, as well as those of Lord Michael and Lord Dominic, and that you bound them all with a geas of

crippling pain to conceal your deed. If this is true, you harmed Theodora and altered her memories *before* she earned her Crown of Service."

—Again, I plead misjudgment, not malice,—Cecilia replied.—As you all remember, Lord Dominic behaved erratically in the years after Beziers, and his Transformation of Michael was highly ... irregular. I couldn't bear to lose two Apkallu at once, not when there were only three of us to protect the kin—Arjumand, Dominic, and myself. When I saw what Dominic had done, I confess that I tried to ... smooth things over. But I only wanted to save them. I only wanted Michael to be happy as an Apkallu, and to serve the House as Protector, which he has done, and done well. I did not tamper with any memories of the kin in Raising and Naming.—

The elders whispered together on that for a while, until Blanche grew impatient. her earnest face coming into Cecilia's restricted field of view. "If that's true, sister Ereshkigal, then what of the sealing-away of our earliest memories? Why have you laid sole claim to the Raising and Naming of Apkallu, and protected that claim with a deadly geas? And why have you lied about my deeds and blackened my name?"

So she had figured it out! Had she already been Raised and Named? Cecilia felt cold terror seep into her spine. This could undo her. Time for a counterattack.—Before I answer you, Cursed One, where is Arjumand?—

Someone drew a sharp breath at the consternation and guilt in Inanna's face.

—I do not see him among you, and yet, by all report, he was your constant companion, choosing even to forsake his vows to the House for you.—

"He's dead," Inanna said, quietly. "We found a way to defeat your geas of fire, and he requested that I Raise and Name him, but he saw something, and..."

Ah, sweet victory, to have my enemy hand me a weapon to use against her!—I've known for millennia that some memories are too difficult to bear. Believe me, sealing some things away was an act of mercy.—

Blanche gave an incredulous snort of laughter. "That's convenient, especially if you're trying to hide something." Her expression sobered. "Roland discovered by himself, and I know, that you've ... *pruned* the powers of the Apkallu."

—Indeed. You were once able to destroy an entire land in the blink of an eye,—Cecilia said, brutally, pleased at the distraction.—I will not deny that I have sealed away some powers, but I did so at the bidding of a House council called in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Pharaoh Unas, in the land of Khem, where the survivors of Shinar took refuge after you called the Fire from Heaven. That council consisted of ... She paused for a moment, as if searching for their names.—Ku-bat-tum, Adad-duuri, Kiruum, Suumuu, Shamshi, Nirauri, Ousirhat, Antef, Meshesh, and Bakenkhonsu. The House elders at that council felt that having gods as Protectors was a double-edged sword.—

Some of the kin gasped, but Inanna, Dominic, and Michael waited in stony silence.

—I was reluctant to do this, of course,—Cecilia continued,—but faced with the prospect of being outcast, with no offering of shelter from the surviving kin, I agreed that the gods had abused their powers, and that the elders' request was not unreasonable.—

"And can the Record of Councils support your claim?" Michael asked.

—It should,—she said.—If you have a complete record.—

"Do you have a copy of the Record here?" Dominic asked Sir Jean, in his own voice.

Sir Jean nodded at Alais, who scurried off to retrieve the volume from its secret storage place. The council meeting was recessed until she should return.

It was difficult to feign complete immobility and helplessness while the kin discussed her answers and chewed noisily on spiced almonds. Their refreshment included goblets of chilled wine laced with the juice of oranges and lemons. Nothing was offered to her, but she could wait. The tide was turning in her favor.

Finally, Alais returned, her slender arms wrapped tightly around the huge, dusty scroll. The Record of Councils was thumped down on a slanted writing desk, and unrolled to the correct entry at the beginning as Berengar scanned the entries. Finally the young Master from Villeroze-sur-Azille straightened up, and the parlor fell silent. "This is the record of the establishment of the Appointing ceremony," he said. "After the Fire fell from Heaven, and most of the gods, save Ereshkigal, died, and Shinar was smashed like a cup, and flooded, and invaded, the surviving servants of the gods, led

by our Mother Sharibet, gathered to form a new covenant, as the House of the Rose.

"It was agreed at that time that any of the gods who might be Found again could be Transformed with their consent, if they would give their oath to keep the secrets of the House and to refrain from taking any blood not willingly offered. After a suitable period of probation, they would be Raised and Named only by Ereshkigal, and presented to an assembly of kin who would accept their oath of protection, after Ereshkigal vouched for their identity, their consent, and their mastery of their powers *as a djinn*. Lady Cecilia has spoken the truth. The council and resolution are recorded here, just as she said."

Once the reactions of the Council members had all been exclaimed, Cecilia added,—I thought it was a mercy. The House was not, originally, in favor of having Protectors at all.—Cecilia allowed her unfeigned weariness to seep through her link with Dominic, and dutiful mouthpiece that he was, he even sighed for her, before continuing to speak aloud her thoughts.—I bear the burden of that decision now, and it is a heavy one.—

"As the Undying, there was no one to trim *your* powers, was there?" Inanna said. "But you still have not explained why you stole our memories from before the Flood! Why would you do that, if you were not the actual cause of that disaster?"

—But I am not on trial for that,—Cecilia said, striving to keep smugness from her voice.

"As you remember us, so shall we remember you' is our covenant," Sir Jean said. "Please answer Lady Blanche's question. Why have you laid sole claim to the Raising and Naming of Apkallu, and protected that claim with a deadly geas?"

—Haven't I always said that the powers and memories of the Apkallu are too great—and too unstable—for the untrained to Raise them?—Cecilia replied swiftly. She had to keep the advantage here, keep the elders on her side.—After all, Raisings and Namings are difficult enough to perform successfully even when it's only the kin.—

The council elders nodded and murmured. Cecilia overheard "...Elder Sister Theodora ... Lyon ... lost one..." and knew that she had them firmly in her hand.

But Michael stepped in. "Prove it," he challenged. "Unlock those memories so that we can judge for ourselves. We're not children or ignorant peasants that you need tell fairy tales to. Let us remember the truth."

This was the moment Cecilia had been waiting for. Only a little more, and they would play into her hands. But she didn't dare move too quickly.

—I cannot,—she demurred.—It would be too hard—like a Raising and Naming, only all the memories would be of the worst things that you've ever done. Believe me, you are better off without those memories.—

"Show us," Inanna demanded, and Dominic added his assent. "Show us, or we'll know that you're lying to us."

Sir Jean thumped his axe to restore order. When a grudging silence had fallen, Guibert cleared his throat. "Lady

Ereshkigal, please grant Lady Ea, Lord Ninshubur, and the—uh, Lady Inanna what they have requested."

With this, she could agree without seeming too eager.—I could have performed a modified Raising and Naming to restore those particular memories, if you hadn't drugged me,—she said to her three captors.

"If you tell us what to do, we can do it ourselves," declared Inanna, as reckless as ever. Just what Cecilia wanted—and needed.

—Very well. One of you give me some blood for a two-way bond, and I will direct you.—

The three Apkallu huddled for a hasty conference. Cecilia could hear their discussion perfectly well, even if their voices were pitched too low for the kin.

"I don't trust her," Dominic said, frowning.

"But how else can we disprove her?" Blanche asked, with a shrug. "We *know* she's lying, but it's difficult to prove by words alone. Look at the elders—they're halfway to believing her, so far. We have to do something!"

"Then I'll—" Michael began.

Blanche shook her head. "No, I'll do it. I remember all of her tricks—if she attempts to deceive us, I'll know."

Michael started to protest, but Dominic put a hand on his—her—shoulder.

Cecilia noted with interest that she subsided immediately. So it was like *that*, was it? Too bad. She had wagered that Michael would spend decades nursing the grudges against Dominic that she had so carefully fostered.

Blanche knelt next to Cecilia's head. It was difficult for Cecilia to restrain herself, and to keep her aura folded tightly around her body as Blanche scored her wrist with her own teeth, and raised Cecilia's head so that her blood could drip into Cecilia's mouth.

At last, all the pieces had moved perfectly into place. She had won the game, though none of them knew it yet. Her moment of triumph was at hand.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Sixteen

"Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake."—*The Gospel of Matthew*, 24:9

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Saturday,
October 4, AD 1270

Her wrist still smarting from the cut, Blanche listened as Cecilia began to speak. But instead of a tale of long ago, she spoke with the aura-powered Voice of Coercion.

—Inanna: Irkalla, Ereshkigal, commands you. Unbind your chains.—

She tricked us! How did she throw off the effects of the potion so quickly? Blanche's aura convulsed, surrounding her with fire. Reacting with desperate speed, and by-now-familiar skill, she flung the flames toward the parlor window. The kin shrieked and scrambled madly to get out of the way. The parlor filled with choking smoke. When she had the liberty to breathe and think again, Blanche saw one of the elders—Bibiane?—beating frantically at her skirts, which gave off the acrid stink of singed wool.

Dominic was extinguishing the fires which had taken root in the parlor's wooden shutters and benches by smothering them with his wings. Honoria checked over the elders for injuries and still smoldering sparks.

"She tried to kill me," Blanche panted, hardly caring how Jean and the others reacted to her words. "She tried to kill all

of us!" Through their newly-forged link, Cecilia's astonishment at Blanche's survival of her nasty trap was gratifying.

Amid the gasps of the kin, Cecilia spoke coldly with Dominic's voice:—I've harmed none of you.—

"What do you call that?" Blanche demanded, pointing at Bibiane, who was crying in shock and cradling burned hands against her chest. From the relief of having escaped death yet again, anger grew. "What are you trying so hard to hide?" Without giving Cecilia a chance to reply with another lie, Blanche embraced her, forcing open Cecilia's mental shields with her own aura, like a battering ram breaking down the gates of a besieged city.—I want to know *everything*. Where is it? Where is the Word of Death?—I've given you fair warning. You will not like the answer,—Cecilia sent, and suddenly Blanche's invasion became something else, as Cecilia's aura, quiescent until now, came to life, binding Blanche so tightly she could no longer move.

But her search through Cecilia's memories bore fruit: a whirlwind of images slammed through her mind: ... *Roland beneath her on the ancient carpet, her silver dagger poised at his forehead, growling, "Is this your precious tradition?" ... In Ypres, a nervous Mathilde, newly Transformed, holds Dominic's hand as Michel's traitorous lips brush her cheek, and his aura caresses hers ... and earlier ... she withdraws her dagger of light from Dominic's skull and plants her poison in Michel. "Ea, beloved. 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."* And then she pierces

his forehead, surgically removing the memories he should not have, and at last, breaks his ability to recall at will. Will it be enough?

"She did it! She did it—but why?" Blanche said, and then the whirlwind caught her up, seven thousand years of memories: *faces, hands, lips, stolen swallows of blood, triumphs, downfalls, falling empires, loneliness ...* and dropped her, feet first, into the distant past.

It was her own memory: *... standing on a flat rooftop, staring out over wheat fields which are being overrun with ragged people who pull up the shoots and eat them raw. As the people advance toward Inanna's city, which has no wall or moat, leaving brown, churned earth behind them, Irkalla commands,—Wait until they come closer. Closer. Now.—And under a bright blue sky filled with puffy white clouds, Inanna and her siblings sing the Word of Death.*

Blanche, shocked, thought, *The Word of Death is sung! We sang it!*

Then she was caught, living the memory as if it were new.

They find the exact pitch, inaudible to the human ear, which dissolves the aura's connection to the body. They do not sing with throat and tongue and lips. They sing with auras vibrating, filling the air with sounds higher than a flute, and lower than a ram's horn. It is a counterpoint to the song of the Creator, the Word of Life. Within the compass of that perfect note, that eerie vibration, the people bow, they fall, they lie down: where they bow, there they fall down dead. The remaining wheat loses its green.

And as the sound which cannot be heard travels onward, within the space of the next heartbeat, the backlash of a thousand deaths slams into her—into all of the linked siblings. They ride a wave of ecstasy and power greater than had ever been before. It sweeps her off her feet, but she does not fall. Instead, she is buoyed up into the air, arms and aura open, drinking and drinking and drinking the water of life that springs from death, and singing even more fiercely. The moment stretches to infinity, all that ever was, all that will ever be. She shudders from this ultimate pleasure, crying out, writhing upon the air, every particle of her being infused, dissolved, remade and ringing with the fierce joy of life from death.

When her vision clears, she looks out to see the invaders are all dead. Then she looks back, across her city. There is no movement. No crowds cheer her name as their savior, no happy children clap and sing her praises. No dogs bark. No birds chirp.

—My sisters! My brothers!—she sends to them, aghast.—What have we done? Do any yet live within our compass?—

One by one, the answer is 'no.'

Inanna feels the next shock like a spear in her belly. The auras of her siblings are visibly larger than they were before, surrounding their bodies farther than their arms can reach.

"We killed them all!" Kursaga, her sister, the healer, wails.

"Did you know your application of Irkalla's Word of Death would do this?" Kurgal growls at Inanna.

"I didn't know," she responds.

"But you suspected?" Irkalla asks. Her face is white, distressed.

Inanna shrugs. She doesn't hide her shock at the outcome, but she can't explain it. Yet.

"You should have told us!" Utu, her twin brother, complains. "We lost followers here! Our viziers! Our retainers!"

"The grain in the fields died, too," Emesh says.

Before Inanna can reply, Ea clears his throat. "Did anyone else notice in the areas where our Words of Death overlapped, that the bodies turned to dust?"

"How can you find that more interesting than the fact that we killed everyone and ate their life force?" Kurgal rounds on him.

Inanna says to Ea, "What an interesting phenomenon. What would cause it?"

"It doesn't matter. We should never do this again," Irkalla insists.

"I agree," Kurgal says. Emesh nods, while Ea, Utu, and Kursaga remain silent.

"No, you can't think to use this wicked power again!" Irkalla says.

"I'm not saying it should be used indiscriminately," Inanna says. "It is a weapon only to be used at great need."

"Nothing excuses—"

Inanna cuts her sister off. "An hour ago we were about to be overrun by barbarians. Now we're surrounded by dead bodies on all sides!"

"Bodies which will rot soon," Ea adds, "and nobody within walking distance to bury them. I, for one, want to know more

about turning bodies into dust before this place starts stinking."

Kursaga makes a sound of distress and disgust.

But Inanna agrees with Ea, and they puzzle their way through the process of unbinding flesh from itself. After they do it for a while, using the greatly augmented strength of their increased auras, they discover that this process, all on its own, increases their auras and gives additional strength.

By the time the full moon shines overhead, they are all tired and subdued after their horrid efforts. They wonder what to do next. None of them are sleepy in this empty city, haunted by wind carrying the scent of corpse dust. They must go somewhere else.

Hunger pinches their bellies as they bicker about which direction to travel. Consuming the bodies of the dead with the power they decided to call the Drinking of Life did not fill their stomachs.

They walk for hours from the fields where the invaders had fallen, finding no living grass, or insects, or game.

Inanna has killed before, to protect herself, and others; to mete out justice and punishment; and to accept sacrifices. She thinks that the only difference after today's actions is the sheer quantity of death, and the fact that she killed people she had not intended to kill, in a way she had not expected to kill them. And those things she does regret. But what if she—she and her siblings—may have killed the whole world?

She tries to come to terms with the enormity of such a deed, and cannot. So she tries to see if this deed has changed her. Has she become something different? A monster?

It is almost more horrible to answer, 'I don't know.' She feels regret and alarm for what she did, for what happened to the people of her city, to the animals, plants, and probably people outside it. But nothing she can do will change the past.

* * * *

They walk and walk. The afternoon is warm, the sun bright on the withered landscape. Everywhere they look lies death. The wheat is dead. The fruit trees. The game that had once been so plentiful. All the teeming plants and animals that provided so much food for so many people for so many years—all dead.

As they walk, clouds gather and let down tears. The rain churns once-fertile soil into gray mud. Even the worms of the soil are dead. As far as they walk that day, nothing sprouts. Nothing grows. The dead grains of wild wheat are ashes in their mouths as they try to eat them. The dead bodies of rabbits, birds, and deer, as they find them, are more horrible, not rotting at all, but so brittle they, too, turn to ashes in the mouth.

They do not speak much to one another, save bitter recriminations.

Inanna fills her mind with nostalgic memories of her city: its pleasant houses, full of busy people and the beautiful things they make; the paintings of vibrant sacred animals; of her temple, and the bull's-head offerings they made to her...

When they camp at twilight, by a pretty stream made foul by withered reeds and belly-up fish, they don't look at one

another before they fall down to rest. Their sleep is haunted by nightmares.

In the morning, they strain water through their auras to drink. It tastes of ash. Their hunger has grown more acute, along with the lash of remorse. They walk on, toward the nearest town. When they arrive in the heat of the afternoon, it is to tears, and ashes.

They walk on, toward the next village on this trading road that goes to the city of the Great Mother, Kursaga's city. Their feet hurt, after years of being carried in palanquins. Their empty stomachs hurt. Their eyes hurt, dazzled by the hot crescent of the sun. They pause on the parched path, far from their goal. Everywhere they look, death has been before them.

"How?" Ea demands at last. "How could we have done this, if your 'tests,' sister Inanna, were so thorough?"

Inanna, standing with her head bent, does not look up. "My only guess is: resonance. That we all sang together. That we sang in a circle. That we sang as loudly as we could. Other than that—I cannot guess."

Kurgal says, "If there is no food to be had, we will die."

"We can walk for weeks without food—but should we try?" asks Kursaga, weeping. "If all that is left is death, death that we have brought, why should we not die as well?"

"We don't know where the devastation ends!" Inanna shouts. "We must find out, before we give in to despair. The people of your city could have survived. We could survive. I've had an idea," she says, temptingly.

The response she receives is a chorus of groans—not unusual.

"No, no, listen to me!" She tries to communicate her excitement. "I've been studying plants, especially roses. They're very interesting. It seems that plants need light to grow and stay alive."

"Everybody knows that," Kurgal scoffs.

"Well, yes, but does everyone know why?"

Ea uncovers his face to listen to her.

"I tested roses, in pots, inside and outside a cave. The ones outside were fine; the ones slightly inside grew sickly; and the ones most within died—all of them, though I gave them water and they had the same soil as the others. I'm convinced that plants eat light—sunlight—to live."

Kursaga raises her head to stare intently. "Did you find the mechanism?"

"I know it's to do with why plants are green," she says. "I tested mushrooms, too, and mice. Plants and mice both have a clear fluid in their bodies—"

"Serum," Irkalla agrees.

"But mice—and men, and other creatures which have bones as well as flesh—have red blood, and must eat other flesh, or plants, to live and grow."

"Plants need soil as well, to thrive. Perhaps they eat the dirt?" Kursaga asks.

"Indeed they seem to. I tested soils, too. But the plants outside the cave lived even on water and stones far longer than the plants in darkness lived without light."

"So. We can live for many weeks on water alone," says Irkalla.

"Yes, but we'll grow weaker and weaker, less able to walk. Already we made less progress today than we did yesterday."

"If we're just going to die, why are you blathering about roses?" Kurgal demands.

"We don't have to die!" Inanna says. "I know a way to save us."

"You know?" Kursaga repeats herself.

"Remember the transformations we did together? Giving the wheat extra grains? Encouraging the apple trees to give more fruit? Finding a way for teeth to grow again? We've talked about giving animals human heads, or wings; or animal heads to men, though all we've done so far is to intensify the scent of the rose and give it more petals; and given sparrows' beaks to mice."

"The mice with beaks died," Kursaga says. "They couldn't eat the food their stomachs needed."

"Yes, but that only proves it was a bad idea, not that the process didn't work!"

"What are you proposing?" Kurgal asks, with a frown.

"I can give us the ability of plants to eat sunlight," she says. "We can search as long as we need to for a place on earth that yet lives, untouched by the Word of Death."

"That place might be just beyond the next hill," says Irkalla. "Such a transformation—never done before—you're mad to suggest it."

"You gave us the Word of Death to sing, which had never been done before," Inanna counters. "My vizier is dead. My

city is dead. We are like to starve in a world of death. You call me mad for daring to suggest a way we might survive?"

Irkalla's blue eyes blaze, even as twilight fades to night, but she doesn't speak.

"This—process—is unproven?" Ea asks, seeking confirmation.

"Yes," Inanna admits. "But I know what I was going to try to do."

"We'll walk one more day," Kurgal says, his voice firm. "If we find no signs of life, we'll test your process on one of us, drawn by lot."

Joy in the midst of devastation fills Inanna's heart. She can test her plan!

* * * *

The morning, another day's journey into the land of death, is cloudy and chill, no sunlight to be seen. But she knows it will suffice. She steps close to the first of her siblings to draw the ochre-colored lot. Emesh has already been reborn once, and is not afraid of the risk of death, though Kurgal, his father, regrets his plan already.

She places Emesh in the center of a loose circle of the remainder of her siblings. She wants them to see what she does, so they will know the way of it.

Palms damp, she sits behind Emesh, enclosing him in a steadying embrace. She breathes with him, until he settles into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She takes hold of the essence that makes him exactly what he is, and twists it. The parts she wants are everywhere

in the body and they all 'look' just the same; she has to remember the structure she wants to create, that will 'look' just like what's in roses. She puts it together the best that she can; it's complicated. Then she has to do it again. And again. And again. She works for hours. At some point, the body of her brother starts making the little structures by itself. She stops, exhausted, and falls back, gasping.

"Is it done?" Ea asks in a hush. Night has fallen, and their other siblings drowse.

"I've done as much as I can." Worry and excitement chase her into sleep.

Screams wake her. Emesh is screaming. Dawn light shows hideous blisters and sores on his skin; his mouth is red as blood; he lies curled around his stomach, in agony; and in between screams he curses her.

"What's wrong with him? What did you do?" Kursaga yells.

She wastes only a moment on guilt before she tries to decide where she went wrong on the structures she built. Was there an 'in' where there should have been an 'out'? She goes toward her nephew, to inspect him more closely.

But her other siblings prevent her. "How could you?"

"He's dying," Kurgal says. In three days he has aged ten years. "Return him to the way he was."

She bites her lip. How? At the fury in Kurgal's gaze, she nods her head in acquiescence. This time, her siblings allow her to approach Emesh.

But the structures that were so easy to manipulate yesterday resist her today. They won't dissolve, though she

tries with as much strength as she can apply in such tiny spaces. Her nephew's writhing, also, does not help.

She works for hours but to no avail. Today she is hungrier than yesterday, and her mind feels fuzzy, her aura uncoordinated.

Emesh never stops screaming, and this, too, wears her down. Finally she runs out of ideas to fix what she broke. She sits, panting. His curses have degenerated to mad rants which make no sense. His aura, when she looks at it, is completely chaotic, mostly black with veins of putrid green. She's never seen such an aura on anyone before. It makes her sick to look at. She regrets that she did this deed. What went wrong? Her idea was perfect...

"Step away from him," Kurgal says. "I'm going to put him out of his misery."

Kurgal takes his obsidian knife and cuts Emesh's throat. Blood sprays, and Emesh's body relaxes. As he dies, and his aura is freed from his body, the siblings, together, experience the rapture of his death. Shaken, replete, they look at one another. Their auras are enlarged again. They look away, ashamed.

Inanna's stomach growls. She catches herself thinking about her dead brother's flesh, beneath the scabrous sores on his skin. It might be whole and uncorrupted ... No. Better not to even think that.

They find the village they seek in the late, golden afternoon after the clouds have passed.

Death has been there before them.

* * * *

In the morning, she argues with them to let her try again. They all ignore her, and keep walking until they are too tired to move.

The next morning, their sister, Kursaga, cannot stand up.

Reluctantly, Kurgal speaks. "If you cannot go on, are you willing for Inanna to try to transform you?"

Kursaga weeps, but agrees.

Inanna puts her to sleep, as she did with Emesh. She finds the tiny structures she searches for. They are the same. The ones she needs to create—this time she makes with the 'in' going out, and the 'out' going in. It takes as much time, but today she feels weaker, and it's harder to do.

She tests the energy pathway this time. Light goes in, it comes out; the body accepts it as food. Good! She makes more of these structures, scavenging parts of the body and reorganizing them. More and more energy is produced, until her sister, though as still as death, shines with a luster visible to Seer's eyes, even brighter than sunlight. This brightness grows harsh, crackling like thunder.

Inanna does not know what to do. This was nothing she expected! It seems as if Kursaga will burn up, and die.

Irkalla, called upon, shakes her head, saying, "I don't know." Ea, likewise.

Kurgal, who can throw lightning, stands some distance away, staring into the distant sky, avoiding the messy business of life and death.

—How do we save her?—Inanna mind-speaks him.

—Energy must have a path,—he sends, his emotions muffled and distant.

A path, she thinks. How? And it comes to her. Her sister's aura is too bright to look upon. Inanna takes hold of it from top to bottom. With all her remaining strength, she tears Kursaga's aura in two, right down to the skin. Shrieking in pain, at first, Kursaga quiets. Her aura stabilizes, a brilliant blue the color of a mountain sky. Her aura moves, each half independent, like great wings.

But Kursaga does not speak. She does not wake for two more days. The siblings take turns carrying her motionless body as they walk ever onward through lands of death. They communicate, without much talking, their resentment of Inanna's bright ideas. On the third day Irkalla cannot stand up when dawn breaks.

They find water. They rest. They don't discuss the possibilities. At sunset, Kursaga groans, and moves for the first time in three days. They all sit by her, watching, waiting, until her eyes open.

Kursaga says with a slow smile: "I feel wonderful. So strong." She stands up by herself. "Oh! The colors are so clear. I see everything." Her eyes glow with wonder. "And I'm not hungry anymore. My sister! You have saved us!" She pulls Inanna up on her feet and leans forward to kiss her.

Happy that her plan has worked, Inanna returns her sister's embrace. It isn't until seconds pass that she realizes something else has gone wrong. Kursaga isn't letting go. Kursaga's mouth is on her neck in a kiss that has nothing to do with sisterliness. As Inanna tries to push Kursaga away,

the most absurd and shocking thing happens: Kursaga bites her, right on the neck!

Inanna squawks. "Get off me!" She tries to push Kursaga away, but her sister has become very strong. "Get off!"

—Mmmm,—Kurgal sends, sharing:—With your blood, I can see your memories. I can see who you were, before you were my sister.—

Inanna shouts for help. Her siblings struggle with Kursaga, but even four against one they cannot budge her.

"Kursaga!" Inanna shouts into her sister's ear. "Let me go!" The next breath she takes is more difficult. She feels dizzy. Can Kursaga drink so much blood?

This time Kursaga lets her go.

Inanna falls flat on her rump. Dizzily, she touches her neck. Blood runs freely under her fingers. "What have I done?" she asks, and faints.

* * * *

When she wakes, Kursaga is tenderly washing her face and neck. It takes all her self-control not to jerk away. "Are you—" she doesn't want to say 'better.' "Sorted out?"

Kursaga smiles, but doesn't meet her eyes. "I can't explain what came over me. I'm hoping you can. But I don't—" her gazes flashes to Inanna briefly, "—expect you'll be able to, either. What can I say? I wasn't, precisely, hungry. But I had to have your blood."

Inanna thinks of the little structures she has built, and the way the similar structures exist all through the body. As they were so necessary for the production of energy ... and she

had used so many of them ... the body would want more ...
"We'll have to see whether you'll feel the need of it again." Or
how often, she thought without sharing her dismay.

Kursaga's mouth twists. "I can hear your thoughts," she
says. "Even when you aren't sending them." An invisible hand
tenderly brushes Inanna's matted hair away from her face.
"And I can move physical objects with my aura so much more
easily."

Inanna looks at her sister's aura. It remains bright blue,
outshining the sunlight. Can these wings be used in flight?
Will that be any compensation for needing to drink blood to
live? She closes her eyes, heartsick. Failure was never so
painful as this success.

As she mourns, Kurgal, standing at some distance away,
sends to them a statement that rocks all of them at once.—I
see birds flying.—

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seventeen

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."—*The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, 1:22-23*

Villeroze-sur-Orb, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Saturday,
October 4, AD 1270

Cecilia's heart filled with rage and dreadful resolve as her memories were raped. Through her bond with Blanche, she shared the horror of those days when they feared that they had destroyed the whole world with their power. She saw how Dominic, Honoria, and Blanche swayed, assaulted by the knowledge they bled from her.

Now, perhaps, they might understand why *not* remembering was a gift. But the time for regrets had passed. They had made their choice, all of them—chosen to make *her* the enemy. Chosen to ally themselves with The Cursed One.

The elders of the House might yet be swayed to rule in her favor, but Cecilia could not risk it. She would find them again, those who had remained loyal to her, and raise them up. Let the rest remain in darkness for all time.

Violated, betrayed by those she loved best, bereft of her most valuable secret, Cecilia opened her mouth and sang a single note. Her aura sang, too, lower than human ears could hear. Blanche's rosy aura resonated to that note, and a flush of imminent triumph heated Cecilia's cheeks. This was the

way to circumvent the geas that Ninshubur had implanted. *Cecilia* would not be the one to slay Ea and Ninshubur, oh, no. None of them would notice what was happening, until too late. All their attention had turned inward. They dwelt once more in a land of dust and ashes and desperate hunger.

I would have spared you this, if you had only let me.

* * * *

At first, Dominic was as enraptured as Honoria and Blanche were, seeing at last the earliest history of the Apkallu. But despite his keen interest, he only rode the surface of these memories like a boat made of reed bundles, rather than drowning in them. They were not *his* memories. He had not been there.

Then through the link he shared with Blanche, he found himself—or, rather, he saw Inanna's vision of K'aka, arriving in Eanna, Inanna's city, foremost of the Cities of the Plain. They became best friends, doing everything together, Inanna seeking knowledge or amusement, and K'aka finding the ways to accomplish Inanna's will. Inanna's love ennobled K'aka, and she was granted the title Ninshubur, 'Queen of the East,' which also meant, in a clever pun, 'Queen of servants.' Ninshubur was raised to the rank of vizier. But Inanna was not satisfied. Her friend would grow old, and die, unless...

"Let me kindle the divine fire in you, dearest friend and most loyal servant," Inanna says, the wreath of gold-and-lapis blossoms pinned to her dark hair picking up the sea colors in her brilliant gaze. She takes K'aka's hand in her own, and leads her out to the vast, red-plastered forecourt of her

temple, where rows of prisoners-of-war kneel, hands bound. She raises the sacrificial knife. Blood sprays ... Once the slaughter begins, each death invigorates her, like a swallow of honey-sweetened wine; each death makes her friend, Ninshubur, burn just a little more brightly...

Was this glut of death *truly* how the Apkallu had come into being? Dominic blinked, sickened, breaking free of the spell cast by Cecilia. His head felt oddly light, and his skin stung as if pierced by thousands of the hair-fine needles employed by the physicians on the far end of the Silk Road. Something was very wrong, but what? His thoughts were as slippery as eels in a bucket.

Was it Cecilia? What was she doing? He looked, and saw her sitting up, her mouth open, an expression on her face of terrible grief and determination. From between her parted lips flowed an indescribable sound like the drone of a cloud of locusts. How had she broken free of the potion? The elders, seeing her motion, anxiously pressed themselves against the walls. One, then another, prudently slipped toward the door.

Blanche still locked her in an embrace, her fingers digging through fabric and into the flesh beneath, but Blanche's gaze was fixed blindly on scenes thousands of years and hundreds of lifetimes in the past. Her rose-colored aura had melded with Cecilia's, the edges bright as scarlet lightning, and the color was bleeding inward towards the core of her power. And where that sanguine light touched Honoria's golden aura, it spread.

In an instant, he grasped Cecilia's plan. Having seen those memories, he knew the Word of Death would wreak devastation far beyond the walls of Villerose-sur-Orb.

—Honorias, beloved! Blanche! Wake up! We've been betrayed!—The pulse of their auras was languid in response to his urgency.

But Cecilia started violently. Her eyes narrowed at Dominic as she realized he was no longer enthralled. In a heartbeat, she unfurled her aura, sweeping Dominic and Honorias back in a blaze of icy fire like solidified moonlight. The impact against the wall drove the breath out of Dominic's lungs. Struggling against the vast weight immobilizing him, Dominic heard an ugly crack. He turned his head to see Honorias sliding down to the floor, the back of her head defacing the fresco of the deer with a long smear of blood.

She knocked over Master Guibert in her collapse. Fabrice threw himself to his knees next to the old man, checking him for injuries. But Dominic's attention was all on Honorias. How badly had Cecilia injured her? Was her skull fractured?

Cecilia drew breath, and an instant later, the prickling returned.

He had to stop her before she killed every living thing in this county. Dominic fought desperately against the force restraining him, but Cecilia simply spread her wings wider, negating his feeble attempts as if he were a butterfly on a pin.—Blanche!—

Blanche roused out of her trance, opened her mouth, and began to sing a countermelody. Where Cecilia's song was

pitched low, Blanche's voice pressed against Dominic's ears in a weird dissonance.

The force pinning Dominic against the wall eased a little, but the prickling sensation increased as both women continued their struggle, Blanche never letting go of Cecilia, her aura paling to nearly silver as Cecilia's aura began to flush.

The house groaned around them. The stone walls shuddered and the beams creaked. Flakes of scorched and painted plaster flaked from the ceiling. Hyacinthe gasped as a piece fell on her head. "What's happening? What are they doing?" she cried.

"You must leave here," Dominic replied, pushing away from the wall with all his strength.—Honor! Ea! Beloved, wake up!—He struggled toward her still form, each step like struggling through a chest-high snowdrift, noting with dull horror the blood staining her wimple.

He spared Hyacinthe one more measure of attention. "Get everyone out, and go as far away as you can. Quickly!" He made it to Honor's side, and lifted her unresisting form into his lap.

"What is the Cursed One doing?" asked Master Amadeus, glaring at Dominic as if he suspected Dominic was responsible for all this.

"It's Cecilia. She's trying to sing the Word of Death," said Honor, weakly. She opened her eyes, and blinked, as if the light hurt them. "And I don't know if we can stop her."

"But—" Amadeus began. Whatever he was about to say was interrupted when Cecilia's wings convulsed, pushing hard

against the confines of the room, and a stronger tremor shook the building. Amadeus stared in shock as the furniture bounced against the walls.

"Everyone out! Now! And don't forget to check the upstairs rooms," Dominic snapped, calling upon every ounce of command he had learned over the centuries.

This time, no one protested. With the brisk efficiency borne of lifetimes of practice, the elders left the parlor and fanned out through the house and outbuildings. Within a few minutes, Dominic heard the tramp of feet descending the stairs, and then murmurs from the courtyard, followed by the heavy slide of the gate's crossbar being lifted.

"But where's Maman?" Dominic heard Pieter's clear, boyish voice outside, followed by a high-pitched squeal from what could only be Giselbert's healthy lungs. "Want Maman! Maman!" Baudouin's shriek joined the chorus: "Maman! MAMAN!"

Caught up in her countermelody to Cecilia's song, Blanche did not seem to hear her sons. Their protests faded quickly into the distance as the kin herded everyone out the gates, urging them to hurry, to walk faster, to run.

The house was trembling now with the force of the two auras, locked in combat. The wall next to the parlor window crumbled with a crackling noise.

Honorio grabbed his wrist, and he helped her sit up. She was pale, but determined. "We have to stop them before they destroy the house." Leaning heavily on his arm, she struggled to her feet. Dominic did not let go of her as they approached

the entwined pair, who were afire now with angry energies in silver and scarlet.

The clash of their songs, both heard and unheard, started a sick pounding in his head not unlike the pain inflicted by Cecilia's geas. The prickling feeling was nearly unbearable now, like an angry swarm of wasps, and the throbbing pain in his head made his vision blur.

—Blanche, we're here,—Honoriasaid.—Let us help you.—She extended her great golden wings and surrounded her niece with them, trying to calm the roiling scarlet.

—NO!—Blanche's mental shout rocked Dominic back on his heels.—Leave me alone! I'll *make* her tell me! If I can just decipher the Word of Death ... I need the Word of *Life*! I will change this world and all the people in it! Banish stupidity. Banish lack of foresight. Banish unkindness. *Banish*...—

A tendril of the scarlet-and-silver energy lashed out, and Dominic slammed against the wall once more. This time, a rib broke, and pain speared from his back, through his chest. He looked frantically for Honorias.

She had fallen to her knees, but she was still clinging to Blanche's waist, still trying to restrain that angry aura with her own.

Staggering, Dominic pushed himself away from the wall. "We have to kill Cecilia," he shouted, ignoring the pain that transfixed him as he reached for his sword. "There's no other way."

* * * *

"No!" Honoria released her hold on Blanche and whirled to face Dominic. She put her hand over his, forcing his blade back down into its sheath. Killing them was the wrong answer. She knew it, if she couldn't explain why.

Dominic glared. "If we don't silence Cecilia now, she'll kill *us*. You. Me. The kin ... and Blanche's boys. They won't have gotten far enough away."

Ah, if only my head would stop aching! I can't think ... She had to explain why it felt like the wrong thing to do. Honoria rubbed her head gingerly, and tried to put her gut feeling into words.—If we remove Cecilia, then without a counterbalance, Blanche may go out of control. She's already descended too deeply to heed us.—

"Then what?" Dominic shouted over the groaning house.—What should we do?—

Honoria closed her eyes, forcing down the sickening headache. She had to think of something, and soon, before the building collapsed around them! She sorted through her newly-reawaked memories. There had to be something she could use. Ea had been the patron of *useful* magic, after all, the god who gathered and kept the *mes*, the gifts of civilized living. It was he who had first thought to harness the power of water to irrigate the fields, and who had designed the canal systems in the land of Shinar, so that the wild plants that Ninharsag had tamed and improved could grow.

It was he ... *No. I did those things.*

Honoria embraced Blanche once more, and made another attempt to reach her niece through their bond.... "*All bow to the Shining One, Inanna, Queen of Heaven!*" the high priest

calls, and every human being in the temple falls to their knees of their own volition, pressing their foreheads to the ochre-tinted flagstones. One by one, the temple guards lead, push, or pull terrified prisoners-of-war up the steps to Inanna's altar. There, she kisses each sweating, terrified man in turn, the stink of fear like fine perfume, before she draws the sacred knife across his throat. With each death, she revels in the hot, sticky spray of blood across her face, and the death-energy, sweeter by far than sexual climax. The slaughter continues through the afternoon and into the twilight. Torchlight extinguishes every star except the bright flare of her own star, shining just above the horizon, visible through the temple's horned gateway ... Her guiding star, her temptation.

—Blanche! Inanna!—Honorio called.—Wake up!—Go away!— The blast of energy this time not only slammed shut their connection, but reduced all the furniture in the parlor to splintered kindling and drifts of goose-down. A great din sounded in the courtyard outside as the roof tiles slid loose and smashed against the ground in an avalanche of terracotta.

Honorio's connection with Dominic was abruptly severed. She looked frantically for him, taking in the ruin of the chamber. Only small patches of plaster remained on the walls, revealing the house's skeleton of rough-hewn sandstone blocks. A vortex of dust, ashes, and feathers whirled furiously around the two women still locked together in silent combat in the center of the parlor, dimming their bright auras to twilight shades.

Then she found Dominic, sprawled on the floor behind her amid the debris, his sword pinned uselessly under his hip. He coughed, sending a spray of blood from between his lips to stain the dusty floor, and his pale cheeks were smeared with more blood trickling from his ears.

—Beloved!—She fell to her knees next to him, and frantically swept a hand of air across his body, heart freezing in her chest as she realized how many of his bones had been broken. His aura had protected him from being torn apart like the furniture, but all the same, he lay smashed like the roof tiles outside. He was still alive ... barely.

Rage moved through Honoria like the mighty surge of floodwaters, sweeping all before it except the thought: *No. I won't lose you, too!*

She placed her hands lightly above his head and his heart, trying not to press on any of his injuries, and channeled all her power through him, trying to stop the worst of the internal bleeding and to align shattered bones so that they would heal straight and true. She wanted to heal *all* of his wounds, but knew that she only needed to ensure that he stayed alive long enough for his body to heal itself. Her task completed, she pressed a soft kiss to his brow, and rose to her feet, her anger undimmed, to deal with Cecilia and Blanche.

They had done enough ... more than enough. Had they learned nothing from their many lifetimes apart? Even now, they were trapped in the past, locked in their ancient struggle. She would not permit them to destroy one another.

She would not permit them to destroy another thing, another person that she loved.

She had already decided she would not kill them. She did not want more blood on her hands ... and what would killing them accomplish, other than to free them to continue their struggle through another lifetime?

Useful magic, she thought, her aura blazing with anger and determination.

How can I neutralize them? How can I make them resolve their quarrel without harm to the rest of the world?

The tremors rippling through the building intensified. Whatever she did, she would have to do it quickly. A gust of wind brought her the scent of pottery dust and bruised roses from outside. With it came inspiration, like a draught of cool water, and Honoria knew what she must do.

She reached out with her hand of air, and brought one of the ornamental pots from the courtyard to her. The vessel had been cracked by a falling tile, but the rosebush planted in it looked unharmed.

Honoria plucked a leaf and placed it against her lips, ignoring the sharp serrations on its edge. She used her hands of air to set the potted bush next to Cecilia and Blanche. Straining together, their energies continuing to swirl around them in a destructive gyre of angry color and debris, they took no notice of her action.

The outside wall of the parlor cracked wide, then crashed down. Honoria flicked an assessing glance upward at the wooden-beamed ceiling, which sagged dangerously. Would it hold? It must.

She opened her memories, sending her mind back to her days as Ea, seeking her old secrets, her magic. Where Blanche had lost herself in her obsessive quest, seeking to grasp knowledge like a tool or a weapon, Honoria let memory and wisdom bathe her innermost being.

Wisdom had been Ea's chief *me*, magic and music his art, the creation of canals and tools of daily life his work; and at the center, love had filled his heart. Love of learning, love of family, love of Ninshubur. Honoria recalled that life ... *at the high apex of a stepped temple, inspecting with satisfaction a vast grid of canals shining like copper wire inlaid in the wide brown-and-green plain ... shaven-headed priests sing the evening blessing while playing the instruments he has designed ... he whispers in the ear of a brown-skinned, gray-eyed woman, "Ninshubur, Queen of the East, my dearest Speaker of Truth, come lie with me tonight." His heart leaps as she smiles at him. "Ea, beloved, I will come to you..."*

And one by one, Honoria broke Ereshkigal's locks upon her spirit, casting the geas-fire harmlessly away into the air beyond the shattered parlor wall. As she passed through each of the gates that had been closed to her for so long, she clothed herself in her long-lost garments of power and knowledge. Then she stepped forward and embraced the two women for the third and last time, surrounding them and the rosebush at their feet with her aura. She saw how she and Dominic had taken the wrong approach before, using their auras to construct walls that could be battered down. Drawing upon her newly-regained knowledge of the ways of water, she began her work.

Instead of trying to constrain the might of their mingled auras, which beat against each other in a perfect storm of rage and betrayal, she used her power to channel the deadly streams of scarlet and silver, redirecting them according to her will. Slowly, steadily, as the increasing volume of Cecilia's Word of Death tried to undermine her aura as it was undermining the foundations of this house, Honoria worked to reshape the raw destructive energy into something useful.

Employing the tools of Transformation in the same way as water shaped the land, Honoria dipped into the streams of power flowing around her, purified them with her own strength, and used their mingled powers to wash the essences of the two women within the compass of her aura. She scrubbed away their angry humanity, scouring their limbs and minds clear of the intention to harm, and anointed them with essence of the living rose. She reached into the fabric of their bodies, and reweave them, thread by shining thread, until the pattern *changed*.

The scent of roses intensified in the shattered chamber as the dissonant melodies that had been battling for supremacy faded away. Likewise, Honoria felt the powerful streams of anger and destruction dry to a mere trickle. She purified one final handful of the tainted power that had been gnawing at her fabric of creation, and poured it like a baptismal blessing from her hand.

Then, the silence was only broken by the creaks and groans of the overstressed building around them.

Honoria opened her eyes. The human bodies of Ereshkigal and Inanna had vanished. The potted rose had grown to

nearly twice Honoria's height, and it wore a shifting cloak of rose and silver light.

Honoria let her shoulders relax. Her own anger had been transformed, as well, and she gazed upon what she had wrought with serenity. "Remain joined in that form," she commanded, her voice creaky with dust and exhaustion, "until you've made your peace, and trouble us no more."

Then she turned her back on the conjoined goddesses to find her beloved.

* * * *

Dominic regained consciousness. He tried to rise, desperate to know what was occurring behind the currents of swirling light. But his body betrayed him, stabbing him with crippling pain and weakness. He got no further than his hands and knees, where he swayed dangerously and gasped like a fish drowning in air, beginning to notice that the damnable pounding headache and piercing-needle sensation had vanished.

The light faded away, revealing the ruined parlor, exposed to the air. A moment later, Honoria was at his side, helping him tenderly to his feet, as if she feared he would fragment like the ruined walls all around him.

He ignored the pain from his bruised flesh and knitting bones, and flung his arms around her, holding her with all his strength. "Are they—?"

"Of all the Apkallu, now only we are left," she said, and burst into tears.

"Beloved," he whispered, scarcely able to believe that they were still here. Still whole. Still together.

* * * *

In the end, as in the beginning, there was nothingness, soft and dark, surrounding consciousness. Adrift in the warm seas of Nothingness, Cecilia dreamed her old, bad dream, the dream of truth:

In the time before memory, Ereshkigal, the Goddess of the Underworld, stands on a high cliff overlooking a settled plain. From her vantage point, greenish-gold fields of ripening grain shimmer in a moist breeze. Her traitorous sister's city, a cluster of square plastered buildings, shines carnelian in the sunset light, with a high, stepped tower in the middle, the temple of the Goddess of Love and War. In the east, the waters of the great freshwater lake gleam a hazy pink and silver.

"Great lady, we are late arriving," says Eresh-erib, her chief priestess. She is a young, pretty woman with long, curling dark hair and amber eyes.

The Queen of the Underworld reaches out with her mind, and discovers that her siblings have already formed a conclave without her. In a great, blue-tiled underground chamber at the base of the temple, Inanna stands, bound in chains and restrained by spells, while Utu chants the indictment against her:

"Let the traitor-goddess know our vengeance and our wrath;

Let her city know our vengeance, pronounced by those
who decree fate;

She has broken the Law: she has stolen from the gods;
She has given what was sacred to a mortal;

*She has stolen the Mes of Divinity and gifted men with
divine fire;*

"For her great crimes let her descend into the Underworld.

"Let her be Forgotten!"

Ninshubur, the recipient of divine fire that comprised of hundreds—no thousands—of human lives, stands sorrowfully among those judging Inanna. Her hair is dressed with carnelian beads, which gleam like drops of blood among her black braids. By all rights, the newly-made Apkallu should share in Inanna's fate, but apparently Ea has convinced the others to spare her. The Queen of the East is the newest and least of the Apkallu, but her fledging aura gleams with a bronze light that rivals the weapons she wields so dexterously.

Ereshkigal's rage is an icy wind off snow-covered mountains. They have gathered without her! She has been excluded from their council, and yet Ninshubur attends!

As she gazes down upon the white-washed walls of Inanna's temple, blazing blood red, a terrible thought occurs to Ereshkigal. When else are all the Apkallu going to be gathered in the same place? She has seen the gradual corruption of her siblings after eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: an awful awareness of both the Word of Death and the making of Apkallu has taken root in their souls. Avarice for power and cruelty has supplanted the care they

once felt for their people. The Shining Ones are feared now more than they are loved, and they wage ceaseless war among the villages and cities, drinking more lives and gaining ever more strength.

Would they not be happier—gods and men—if they simply ... forgot these terrible things?

I'm sorry, *she apologizes*. But it is truly for the best. I swear I will find you all again, and return to you all your memories, save these few, dangerous ones, and we will rule the cities of man once more as Shining Ones, returned to benevolence.

Resolved that it must be done for the greater good, Ereshkigal closes her eyes, and begins to sing her terrible, silent song. First she sings the destruction of the storehouses, feeling the power of the earth flow through her to shatter the great pottery grain jars and beer jars, the precious alabaster vases of perfume, and the stacked ceremonial platters of agate and obsidian.

Next, she sings down the mudbrick walls of the buildings, shivering and crumbling them. The houses of her sister's city collapse, sending clouds of dust into the twilit air. But Inanna's temple yet stands, and beneath it, her siblings continue to sit in judgment. And Inanna is beginning to sway them with her appeals, so they may not condemn her after all. That is unacceptable. They must never again make another Apkallu.

The earth begins to sing in harmony, a deeper, more mysterious melody than her own. Ereshkigal, intoxicated, allows herself to be seduced by this power. As the temple

bows and falls in the bloody dusk, she sings a duet with a bass voice thrumming below the ruins of her sister's city. But the earth's music cannot hold to only one song. It breaks free, and the cliffs separating the plain from the Great Green Sea scream discordantly, responding to the straining need of living rock to move—

The cliffs rumble and crack. A giant ripple races across the plain. Ereshkigal's priestesses scream, falling to the ground, Ereshkigal herself is driven to her knees.

Too much! She stops singing, abruptly, but the earth of the plain continues to shudder like the skin of an ass tormented by stinging flies. The song of the earth continues without her, terrible with an uncontrolled drumbeat of destruction.

The western cliffs reverberate, amplifying the stolen song until Ereshkigal cannot hear her own screams. The dreadful noise reaches a crescendo with a mighty pulse, and stops. For an age, profound silence reigns.

Suddenly, the western cliffs explode outward. Hungry salt waters from the sea thunder to the plain below, pooling at the base of the cliffs in a murky, foaming swirl. The gap widens rapidly, and more water pours through. In minutes, a boiling brown wave sweeps across the barley fields. Gathering speed, it races through the shattered walls and fallen buildings of Inanna's city.

Ereshkigal feels her brothers and sisters drown in muddy, salty darkness, trapped in the underground Chamber of Judgment. They die together, their separate presences snuffed out almost as one.

The waters seek more, greedily devouring all the lands and the cities of the plain in the days and nights that follow.

Ereshkigal, sole surviving goddess, stands on the cliff from sunrise to sunset each day, keeping vigil as her world drowns.

"What has happened, great lady?" the priestesses wail on the first day. Hungry salt waters lap at the base of the cliff where they are encamped.

It was an accident, *Ereshkigal thinks to herself. This is the truth she must believe. That she will believe, from this point on. To her priestesses, she says, "Inanna has done a terrible thing in her wrath, in her pride. Let us curse her. She must be Forgotten!"*

Weeping, her eye-makeup of kohl and ground mineral running down her cheek in streaks, Eresh-erib sprinkles a sacred circle of salt and barley meal around Ereshkigal, chanting the curse:

"Let Inanna wander the earth, forgotten.

"Let no god Name her. Let no one call her kin.

"Let her be Lost for a thousand years."

"Let her be Forgotten," sing the priestesses.

"Let her city be wiped away; let her city be Forgotten.

"Let them be Forgotten," intones Eresh-erib, completing the circle. She steps back into the ranks of the priestesses.

Ereshkigal raises her arms. "Let her be Forgotten, but I will find all the rest, and restore them to their rightful places. I, Queen of the Underworld, give you my sacred oath on this."

Horror gripped Cecilia, as if the disaster had just occurred anew, rather than seven millennia ago.

She had done it for their own good! They had been reborn into new bodies, and she kept her promise to find them again and Raise them ... just without the most dangerous memories of the world.

—Sister,—came a voice both detested and dear, borne on rose-colored thought.—All knowledge is worth having.—And acting upon? Now, thanks to you, they remember the Word of Death!—Cecilia cried, bitterly.—Will they destroy the world with it?—As you did?—Inanna said.—Have faith that love can be a force as strong as hatred.—

Ereshkigal's thoughts faded. Bodiless, voiceless, helpless, Ereshkigal *hated* that she has no choice. *I want to remember! I want to determine her own fate!*

—Shhh, I'm here,—Inanna crooned. To someone she couldn't quite recall, she sent,—Love my boys! Remember ... Remem ... Re..

And then there was only sunlight.

* * * *

With the revival of Ea's knowledge came the *Me* of Sharing with Mortals. Even clouded by despair and the pain of yet another loss, Honoria immediately grasped its usefulness. She opened her blood-bond with Sir Jean, and informed him that it was safe for the kin to return.

They came back several hours later to find their home on the verge of collapse. They were relieved to learn that they would not be tasked with the removal of more corpses.

Lady Alais seemed the most affected in the aftermath. As she rode her gentle palfrey through the gates to the half-

ruined house, she dismounted and ran to where Honoria and Dominic stood. Alais threw herself at Honoria's feet, sobbing wildly and babbling incoherent apologies, of which Honoria comprehended only the general sense that the immobilizing drug must have been brewed incorrectly.

Blanche's four sons came to a halt as they saw the heaps of rubble and shattered tiles scattered in the courtyard. Giselbert began to sniffle as he saw the destruction, and Pieter bent and lifted the toddler in his arms.

"Grandmaman, is Maman ... dead?" Pieter asked Honoria, who had been dreading the question.

"No," she said, truthfully, and then launched into the comforting lie she had agreed upon with Dominic. "Your Maman fought a great battle against a wicked sorceress, and she was badly injured. She is ... resting."

Pieter's eyes narrowed, unconvinced.. "Can we see her?"

She shook her head, braced for entreaties. "She's sleeping."

He blinked, and an expression of intense pain crossed his face. "I ... understand," he said, his eyes filling with tears.

"We won't wake her," Reynaud promised, his dirt-smudged face shining with sincerity. "Please, Grandmaman?"

Before Honoria could reply, Pieter shook his head, putting his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Later," he said, sounding defeated.

Baudouin tagged behind. "But I want to see Mama," he protested. "Why is everything broken?"

"Later," Pieter repeated, in the same lifeless tone.

Elise came to Honoria's rescue then, herding the boys away with promises of honeycakes and fresh milk.

Pieter spared Honoria one last glance that tore through her chest. But he put his hand in Elise's, and trudged off with her.

"It's not your fault," Dominic said, approaching with jars of blood cradled in his arms.

"I know, but I still feel responsible." Honoria broke the clay seal and raised the heavy vessel to her lips. She drank preserved blood, knowing, for the first time in seven thousand years, why she did so.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eighteen

"So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."—*Book of Genesis, 11:8-9*

Villeroise-sur-Orb, Sunday, October 5, AD 1270

The council of elders resumed in the wine-cave, at dawn, after they'd camped out in the chapel overnight. It had been the part of the manor least-affected by the tremors that had weakened the main building.

The rosebush in its cracked pot was carried ceremoniously into the council chamber and set down in the place that Cecilia and Blanche would have occupied, had they still been in human form.

Honorio offered to show the elders exactly what had happened, though the bond of blood. Hesitantly, they accepted, proffering their fingers in same way they did during Appointing ceremonies, and they reeled as she shared with them the record of Cecilia's crimes, and attempted deeds. Cautiously, Honorio omitted the exact vibratory frequencies of the Word of Death.

When Honorio finished her report, the council bade her and Dominic to withdraw as they began their debate on the fate of the rosebush, and the two souls it contained.

Swaying with fatigue, Honoria repaired to the pallet in the stable that they had jury-rigged with curtains salvaged from the broken house. It was blessedly quiet, and dim, save for the movements of the horses and mules, those dumb and charitable witnesses.

She knew she should look in on Blanche's sons, but she did not have the strength to face them. Perhaps, in the afternoon, after the Council made its decision. They were by no means minded to allow the survival of the divine rosebush without discussion.

She drew the bedcurtains for privacy, and lay back, hiding her eyes with the back of her hand, and began sorting through the jumble of newly-returned memories, looking for some precedent, some answer to the problem. So engrossed was she, that she scarcely noticed Dominic until he had removed his clothes and joined her on the pallet. "Stop now, and rest, beloved."

"But, if I can only just—" The rest of her protest was muffled when he firmly covered her mouth with his, and kissed her until she lost her grasp on the reins of her racing thoughts.

They made love slowly, both of them finding it difficult to kindle passion from deep fatigue and sorrow, but needing to find comfort in each other. Dominic's pale skin was still vividly marked with bruises and welts, and she wrapped arms and legs gingerly around him, striving to draw him nearer without pressing on his injuries, wanting nothing more than to crawl inside his skin, so that nothing could sunder them.

He clung to her in return, surrounding her with his wings as if he feared that she, too, might float away.

"I won't," she promised him, sleepily, curled in his arms afterwards, feeling his breath move through her unbound hair. "I won't leave you."

She fell deeply asleep, only to dream of roses with mouths at their centers, all of them screaming.

* * * *

The elders remained sequestered in deliberations throughout the afternoon, so Honoria, restless, offered to help the kin with rebuilding the shattered parlor wall. Dominic, still healing from his many injuries, remained deeply asleep in the stable.

Using her hands of air, she was steadying a brace of roped-together beams under the sagging parlor ceiling, when one of the kin came to summon her to the wine-cave.

The elders had finally reached a decision.

Honoria finished her task, and went to wash her face and hands, and to wake Dominic.

* * * *

The limestone cave in the hill behind the house was cool and heady with the scent of wine-soaked oak. Deep shadows were only pushed back a short distance by the light of a dozen oil lamps illuminating the hastily-repaired benches from the great hall on which the ten elders sat.

Honorio, her hand in Dominic's, stood patiently as Sir Jean recapitulated the accusations against both Cecilia and Blanche, and the events that the council had witnessed.

When Sir Jean had finished speaking, Master Guibert pronounced the council's decision. "It is the considered verdict of this council, that these two souls should not be restored to bodies, nor should ever again be Raised and Named. They have, both together and separately, caused too much harm to the House, and to the world. They are dangerous, and should never be freed to wreak further harm."

How can I bear to face Pieter and his brothers with this news? Honorio's hand tightened around Dominic's as her spirits sank even further. Roses were long-lived plants, but like all living things except the djinni, they too, aged and eventually withered. Death of the plant would free the two bound souls for rebirth who knew where.

As if the blood bond she had formed with him reached both ways—impossible, she knew—Master Guibert spoke again. "Lady Ea, Lord Ninshubur, we furthermore request that you use all your knowledge to ensure that those souls cannot escape their prison."

Something niggled at the edges of Honorio's consciousness. She pursued it, looking inwards, and found the answer in Ea's experiences. Ninsharsag had always been the most skilled among them in the manipulation of plants and the compounding of drugs, and she had shared much of her knowledge with her spouse, Ea.

"Master Guibert, esteemed elders of the House," Honoria said. "If you will permit, I know a Transformation that can be worked upon this plant, to render it for all intents and purposes immortal. However, while I agree that a period of penance is appropriate, I do not agree that the souls of Inanna and Ereshkigal should be lost to us forever."

Dominic started with surprise at her side, just as the elders began a babble of protest.

She raised her hand, and they fell silent. "What use are all of our lifetimes, if we learn nothing from our experiences? I have come to believe firmly in the principle of forgiveness. I also believe that the day will come when we may forgive and release our sisters from this form."

"And who will determine that day?" Amadeus rose to his feet, his cheeks flushed. "Will you respect the will of the elders, Lady Ea, or override our judgment?"

Honoria considered her answer carefully. "I will follow my conscience, when the time comes."

Master Guibert glanced at the other council members, as if they might provide him with guidance in the face of djinni intransigence. Finding only uneasiness, he asked the question uppermost in all their minds. "Do you wish to break your covenant with us?"

"I have kept my vows to the kin," Honoria replied. "But I wonder if the same can be said of *you*. You have not denied Cecilia's account that it was the kin who first requested that our powers be reduced and our memories altered."

—Beloved! What are you doing?—Dominic's face did not betray the anxious tone of his thoughts.

—What we should have done a long time ago,—Honoriam replied.—Trust me.—

Amadeus, his flush deepened to the color of wine, replied, "Lady, I agree that it was *necessary*. After all, look at all the harm the Apkallu have brought to the House in the space of a single generation! I quail to think what more harm would have been done if we had not been so prudent!"

A murmur of agreement rose, and Honoriam caught snatches: "...Dumuzi..." "...Arjumand killed everyone in Venice..." "Dominic, the Child-Killer..."

Honoriam clapped her hands sharply, "Enough!"

Shocked silence descended as ten anxious gazes turned to her.

"Are you so displeased with us, your Protectors?" she asked, quietly, looking at the seated row of elders. They looked away uncomfortably.

As she sent a thought Dominic's way, he relaxed, comprehending her strategy.—Beloved, the Templars trained you well in the art of negotiation.—His thought was a caress. Playing his part with just the right note of calm reasonableness, he said, "Honoriam, perhaps we should withdraw to Bressoux, and turn our attention to raising Blanche's sons. Baudouin is Apkallu, after all. *He* needs us, even if the kin do not."

Sir Jean gasped. "You wish to establish a rival House?" He glared at Amadeus, who frowned back, unrepentant.

"We have bled and died for you," Honoriam said. "But it seems we are no longer welcome under your roof. Lord Pieter

de Bressoux and his brothers would offer us a home without conditions or restrictions."

"You have Sharibet and two Crown of Service djinni," Dominic added, smoothly. "They can protect you. And their powers are such that you need never fear the tyranny of the old gods."

"But only three Protectors...?" Hyacinthe asked, with dismay. "Lords, we do not wish to offend you!"

"Amadeus spoke out of turn. He sees the harvest but not the vintage." Fabrice said. "I think—" His next words were overridden by a babble of mingle protest and agreements.

Guibert struck the floor of the cave with his staff, and the elders subsided reluctantly. "Lords, you have given us much to discuss," he quavered. "I would ask you this—are you still willing to serve as our Protectors?"

Honorias glanced at Dominic.—Do you trust me, love?—

He nodded, and she spoke. "We are willing to continue our relationship with your House, but with an alteration of terms. We will continue to intervene on your behalf in times of great peril, but we wish to delegate the ordinary tasks of Protectors, particularly Raisings and Namings, to Crown of Service djinni. In return, we are willing to Transform and train as many volunteers from among the kin, whomever you deem fit, as are willing to serve as Protectors."

Guibert nodded. "What else, lords?"

Dominic took up the thread. "We will dwell outside the House to raise Pieter de Bressoux and his brothers to manhood in their home. Honorias will assume Mathilde's

identity. No one will question the desire of a grandmother to care for her orphaned grandsons."

"And you will give into our sole care both the divine rosebush, and Pieter's brother, Baudouin, who is Emesh, Ninurta, and defer to our judgment in all matters that pertain to their fates," Honoria added.

"Lords, you ask for too much," Guibert said. "This house has been reduced to ruins by conflict amongst your kind."

"We wish to continue our long-standing relationship with the House of the Rose, of course," Honoria countered, sweetly. "But we will bear you no ill-feeling if you hold our past misdeeds against us."

"We will withdraw now," Dominic said, with a polite bow. "And leave you to consider our offer."

* * * *

The elders summoned Dominic and Honoria back to the cave as distant bells rang Vespers. By that time, the broken parlor wall had been nearly rebuilt, though the braces would remain in place until the mortar had set.

The ten elders slumped wearily, and some of the oil lamps had burned out. Guibert rose as they entered, clinging to his staff. "Lords, the council has reached a decision," he said, simply. "We agree to your terms."

Dominic squeezed her hand hard before releasing it. He bowed. "We thank the council for their hard work and wise resolution. May it increase the House!"

Honorio looked at each of the elders in turn, examining them for faithfulness to their resolution. They returned her gaze with small nods, even Amadeus.

"Will you renew your pledges to us?" asked Sir Jean, who was once more shouldering the Ax of Judgment.

"We will," Dominic and Honorio said, as one.

Sir Jean stepped spoke again, reciting the ritual formula: "Do you swear to protect us to the limits of your cunning and strength against any enemies?"

"I will protect you against great peril as you request, and I see fit, so long as I remember who I am," Honorio said, giving the new response of Apkallu to the House. Dominic repeated the words she had just spoken.

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

"I swear by my blood, and the blood you willingly give me, that I will avenge any injury you cannot avenge by yourselves," Honorio replied. Again Dominic echoed her.

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

"I swear it by the blood we share," Honorio and Dominic both said.

"It is well," said Master Guibert. "As you have promised by your blood, so we bind you with the earth that receives us all, young and old, male and female. As you protect our lives, so shall we protect your secrets. As you serve our House, so

shall we serve your needs." His next words departed from the established formula: "As you open our memories, returning them inviolate, so shall we remember you."

Lady Alais, her eyes reddened and her face tear-swollen, proffered a pot filled with a paste of ground ochre and olive oil. She dipped a brush and touched it to Honoria's lips.

"I will remember you," Honoria promised, tasting rust and earth on her mouth.

Alais moved to Dominic, and repeated her actions.

"We thank you lords, for your past promises, which you have kept steadfastly," Guibert said, "and for your vows today, which we hope to see fulfilled in peace." He let his shoulders sag. "Having reconfirmed our covenant with our remaining Protectors, I declare this council dismissed, and its decisions binding."

There was little talk as the oaken doors were thrown open, and a general exodus ensued to the fresher air. Of the gathered elders, only Master Guibert and Sir Jean stayed behind to speak with Honoria and Dominic. Like Master Guibert, Sir Jean looked as if he had aged a decade in the past day. "Are you really leaving us?" he asked them.

"We must," Honoria answered. "If what Blanche reported is true, the estate of Bressoux will need to be repopulated and restored."

"And what of her son? Is he truly Apkallu?" Master Guibert asked, anxiously.

"Indeed," Honoria assured him. "Ninurta has returned to us."

Guibert's eyes widened. "We will write Lady Sharibet immediately with the news!"

"As for the others," Sir Jean added, quietly. "May we meet again, and soon!"

"May we meet again," Honoria said, thinking of Robert's smile, of Tirgit's impudence, and of Mathilde's practicality and kindness. "May we meet again," she repeated, feeling Dominic's loving presence in the back of her mind, and in all of her heart.

* * * *

Bishopric of Liege, Feast of St. Dominic, Wednesday,
August 4, AD 1271

"I'm happy that my lord bishop granted you our wardship, Grandmaman," Pieter said to Honoria, as their little party rode out the gates of the prince-bishop's residence situated near the cathedral. "I overheard that Aunt Genevieve's father, the *Sieur de Micheroux*, petitioned for it."

Honoria, by now reconciled to bearing Mathilde's name and identity, smiled at him. "Sir Gervais would not have permitted that to happen." *Nor I.*

Dominic's assumption of the identity of Blanche's 'liegeman' had been a necessary fiction. Known to the Templars—and their records—as a sorcerer, he could never show his old face or name in Christendom again. Now he was red-haired Sir Gervais, sworn to Evrard's service before his death in Carthage, and devoted to assisting Lady Mathilde in her grieving widowhood and in the sad loss of her daughter.

His presence may have seemed oddly familiar to them, but the boys—especially Baudouin—never voiced any of their concerns. Mathilde sometimes caught Baudouin studying them intently, as if trying to resolve a puzzle. As Emesh's reincarnation, he had Seer's Eyes, though it appeared that he had not yet figured out what the change in the aura surrounding Mathilde's body really meant.

Three of the boys seemed not to have noticed any changes in her, probably because they had only known their grandmother for a short while before her death. And having lost father, mother, grandfather, great-aunt and long-lost cousin in a single week, and discovered the devastation of their home, they were subdued and skittish even yet.

The outcome of Mathilde's petition for the wardship of Pieter, Reynaud, Baudouin, and Giselbert had never really been in doubt. Bressoux's reputation as a cursed estate had ensured that only the Sieur de Micheroux had expressed any interest in taking over its management. And Dominic—Gervais's—subtle use of the Voice of Coercion during their audience with the notoriously venal Prince-Bishop Henry de Gueldres, supplemented by a generous purse of gold, meant the prince-bishop had no opportunity to refuse.

It was nevertheless a relief to have the legalities out of the way, circumventing the possibility that Prince-Bishop Henry might sell Pieter's wardship to the highest bidder. From this date, until Pieter came of age at the end of his twenty-first year, Mathilde and Gervais would rule Bressoux in Pieter's stead.

And when Baudouin came of age, and if he consented to become a djinn, Mathilde and Gervais had vowed that he would receive both his full memories and his full powers.

Honorio/Mathilde had her struggles as well, grieving for Tirgit, Robert, Roland and the true Mathilde in private, while adapting to the restricted life of a noble lady after a lifetime spent as a man and a knight. But there were also rewards in her new life, Gervais's constant and tender companionship at her side being the first and greatest of these. His presence in her bed had to remain a clandestine pleasure until they could obtain an annulment of Mathilde's previous marriage—a situation that they privately laughed at, and planned to ensure sometime in the future when they had more time.

It had been a busy year. They arrived at the estate on a cold, rainy day in early December, after an uneventful two-month journey north from Villeroze-sur-Orb.

Upon their arrival, they found Master Matthias's son Barthélemy already in residence, filling the office of bailiff, since he was experienced. In the reign of the Roman emperor Claudius, when he had first joined the House, he had been the foreman of a large farm in Etruria. He immediately informed Mathilde and Gervais of the estate's greatest difficulty and necessity: the re-vitalization of the land around the manor house, including the orchard. Great quantities of living soil had to be transplanted to bring the area back up to habitability. The second-greatest difficulty: none of the local folk from the local villages and manors were willing to come and work at a place they considered cursed.

Master Matthias offered to send some of the kin to settle at Bressoux, but knowing how insular the folk of her homeland were, Mathilde had not wanted to populate the estate with outsiders. But she was left with no choice, and members of the kin began trickling in by ones and twos as Christmas approached.

Most of Bressoux's new residents were young, newly Raised and Named sons and daughters of the House who would have otherwise been apprenticed in various cities throughout Europe. Their arrival initially stirred up a great deal of unwelcome attention and gossip about foreigners in the neighborhood, but as the months passed and no disaster struck the new residents of Bressoux, the novelty of their exotic coloring faded, and slowly the locals began to soften their resistance to working Bressoux's fields and living in the vacant cottages.

And as the year wheeled back around toward spring, Mathilde kept a keen eye on how Blanche's sons were adapting to their changed circumstances. The two youngest, Giselbert and Baudouin, seemed to cope best with the loss of their parents, while Reynaud remained sullen and only gradually thawed towards his new guardians.

Reynaud's ill-temper eased when he was permitted to join Pieter for Gervais's lessons in swordsmanship, since he desperately wanted to become a knight.

Around Eastertide, Mathilde began to make delicate enquiries of her relatives and neighbors to see where Reynaud might be sent for fostering, first as a page, then as a squire. Her Uncle Jan van Scheldehuis, with whom Michael

and Roland had both been fostered, responded eagerly despite his advanced age, and plans were made for Reynaud's departure when the lad had passed his seventh year.

Where Reynaud sparked with temper and disobedience throughout the long nights and brief days of winter, Pieter had simply retreated within himself, his spirit smothered under a thick blanket of sadness. He grew thin and dull-eyed, forsaking even his beloved books in favor of staring blankly into the fire or out of a window at the bleak, frozen landscape.

Gervais had proved the boy's savior. When Christmastide had come and gone, and Pieter showed no signs of rousing from his deep apathy, Gervais began forcing the boy to accompany him on rides around the estate, and to participate in the hearing of petitions and judging of disputes amongst the estate's tenant farmers. In mid-January, Mathilde saw Pieter open his beloved *Legend of the Holy Grail* for the first time in months, and shortly thereafter, he approached Gervais for help with his Greek grammar, and she knew he would, finally, be all right.

As midsummer passed, and the long afternoons turned warm, Pieter's periods of deep melancholy eased. Gervais filled Pieter's days with a basic instruction in horsemanship and arms, as well as lessons in the Venetian style of accounting and the composition of letters and reports to his feudal overlord, Prince-Bishop Henry. The boy also regularly accompanied Barthelemey on his rounds, and assisted him in the day-to-day duties of overseeing the welfare of Bressoux.

Baudouin was too young to be trained for his future role as a Protector of the House, but when the time came, perhaps Basil and Leila would agree to foster him, and teach him about the ways of the House. Likewise with Giselbert—he might have a happier future being fostered in one of the Houses of Rose than struggling to make his way as a landless younger son. Perhaps he, too, might someday become a Protector of the House.

In the meanwhile, Mathilde and Gervais awaited the arrival of the first Crown of Service candidates, who would be Transformed and trained at Bressoux before leaving to serve the House wherever they were needed.

Wrapped in her own thoughts, filled with hope and plans for the future, Mathilde scarcely noticed as their little party left Liege behind. She roused from her reverie only when they entered the manor of Bressoux.

As always, her gaze went first to the rosebush that had been carefully planted upon their arrival in the manor's garden, in a sheltered spot at the base of the estate's tower.

It had gone dormant over the long winter, but when spring arrived, it had thrown out vigorous shoots and seemed to be thriving. Whenever Mathilde looked at the bush with her Seer's eyes, she saw the mingled rose and silver auras of Ereshkigal and Inanna, at peace at last. To the wonder of the estate's residents, the bush produced both red and white roses, which flowered continuously all summer.

Mathilde had a brief vision of a future where the tower of Bressoux might be overgrown with roses, half of them white

as snow and the other half red as blood, and was jolted from her musings by Barthelemy's approach.

"Sir Gervais! Lady Mathilde! There is news!"

For an instant, she wondered if the House had need of its Protectors, but Barthelemy's huge smile indicated a less dire sort of news. "Tell us," she said, returning his smile.

"Franziska was delivered of a healthy boy last night!"

"Indeed, that's good to hear!" Mathilde responded, dismounting easily despite her long skirts. She had continued to ride astride, refusing to switch to a side-saddle, and had made some subtle adjustments in her gowns to accommodate this riding style. "And how does Franziska fare?"

Franziska von dem Rosenhaus and her husband Raimund had been some of the first of the kin to arrive at Bressoux the previous autumn. Their baby was the first born on the estate since Cecilia spoke the Word of Death here last summer. It was a good omen.

"She is well, and desires your blessing, my lord, my lady," answered Barthelemy.

"I want to come, too," Pieter said, echoed immediately by Reynaud.

"Of course," said Mathilde, giving the boys a stern look. "If you wash your hands and faces, first."

"Yes, Grandmaman," they said dutifully, and they all waited impatiently in the great hall for the ewerer to make his appearance with hot water and towels.

When they had all washed and made their way over to the tower room where Franziska had her lying-in, they were greeted by Baudouin, who came flying down the spiraling

stone stairs. "Grandmaman! Sir Gervais! The baby—he's an angel, too!"

Mathilde's heart gave a sudden beat out of time. Did she dare hope? Gervais had reminded her, time and again, these past few months as she had mourned her own losses, that no parting was ever permanent. The Lost would be found again, some day.

She picked up her skirts and ran the rest of the way, to Baudouin's delight. He trotted at her heels, laughing. "Run, Grandmaman! I'll race you!"

Mathilde paused at the doorway to the room only long enough to smooth her skirts and ensure that her headdress hadn't gotten disarranged during her dash. Hopeful, but fearing disappointment, she entered the room, opening her Seer's Eyes.

A misty glory of green haloed the tiny, reddened newborn sleeping in the crook of Franziska's arm. She looked tired, but there was color in her cheeks and her hair had been neatly combed and braided. "Is my son...?"

Unable to speak around the sudden swelling in her throat, Mathilde simply nodded. Her eyes were burning, and she fought the urge to weep.

"Robert," she whispered at last, when she had regained some measure of self-control. To Franziska, she said, "Your son is Apkallu. Utu has returned to us, and you have won a Crown of Service, if you desire it."

Franziska's eyes grew wide at her words. "Lady Mathilde!"

"You—you don't have to decide right immediately," Mathilde said, struggling to keep her voice from breaking,

unable to look away from that sleeping face, the unformed features accented by a thatch of dark hair and illuminated by the pale light that radiated outward from his tiny body to fill nearly the entire chamber.

She felt Gervais's comforting presence enter the room, and when he put a hand at her waist, she surprised them both by turning and embracing him fiercely. His arms went around her, and his lips brushed her ear as he spoke. "See? I knew that you two would not be parted for long..."

It was true, Mathilde thought. Tirgit, Roland, Mathilde ... soon, they would be reunited with all those they had lost—and free for the first time in millennia to see what role the old gods might play in this new world.

~The End~

We hope you have enjoyed this story of the House of the Rose. For historical notes, photos, bibliographies, and a glossary of terms, please check out our Web site:
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