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AN OUTLANDER NOVELLA

Virgins

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An Outlander Novella

Diana Gabaldon



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By Diana Gabaldon

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OCTOBER 1740

NEAR BORDEAUX, FRANCE

Ian Murray knew from the moment he saw his best friend's face that something terrible had happened. The fact that he was seeing Jamie Fraser's face at all was evidence enough of that, never mind the look of the man.

Jamie was standing by the armorer's wagon, his arms full of the bits and pieces Armand had just given him, white as milk and swaying back and forth like a reed on Loch Awe. Ian reached him in three paces and took him by the arm before he could fall over.

"Ian." Jamie looked so relieved at seeing him that Ian thought he might break into tears. "God, Ian."

Ian seized Jamie in an embrace and felt him stiffen and draw in his breath at the same instant that Ian felt the bandages beneath Jamie's shirt.

"Jesus!" he began, startled, but then coughed and said, "Jesus, man, it's good to see ye." He patted Jamie's back gently and let go. "Ye'll need a bit to eat, aye? Come on, then."

Plainly they couldn't talk now, but he gave Jamie a quick private nod, took half the equipment from him, and then led him to the fire, to be introduced to the others.

Jamie'd picked a good time of day to turn up, Ian thought. Everyone was tired but happy to sit down, looking forward to their supper and the daily ration of whatever was going in the way of drink. Ready for the possibilities a new fish offered for entertainment, but without the energy to include the more physical sorts of entertainment.

"That's Big Georges over there," Ian said, dropping Jamie's gear and gesturing toward the far side of the fire. "Next to him, the wee fellow wi' the warts is Juanito; doesna speak much French and nay English at all."

"Do any of them speak English?" Jamie likewise dropped his gear and sat heavily on his bedroll, tucking his kilt absently down between his knees. His eyes flicked round the circle, and he nodded, half-smiling in a shy sort of way.

"I do." The captain leaned past the man next to him, extending a hand to Jamie. "I'm *le capitaine*—Richard D'Eglise. You'll call me Captain. You look

big enough to be useful—your friend says your name is Fraser?”

“Jamie Fraser, aye.”

Ian was pleased to see that Jamie knew to meet the captain’s eye square and had summoned the strength to return the handshake with due force.

“Know what to do with a sword?”

“I do. And a bow, forbye.” Jamie glanced at the unstrung bow by his feet and the short-handled ax beside it. “Havena had much to do wi’ an ax before, save chopping wood.”

“That’s good,” one of the other men put in, in French. “That’s what you’ll use it for.” Several of the others laughed, indicating that they at least understood English, whether they chose to speak it or not.

“Did I join a troop of soldiers, then, or charcoal-burners?” Jamie asked, raising one brow. He said that in French—very good French, with a faint Parisian accent—and a number of eyes widened. Ian bent his head to hide a smile, in spite of his anxiety. The wean might be about to fall face-first into the fire, but nobody—save maybe Ian—was going to know it, if it killed him.

Ian *did* know it, though, and kept a covert eye on Jamie, pushing bread into his hand so the others wouldn’t see it shake, sitting close enough to catch him if he should in fact pass out. The light was fading into gray now, and the clouds hung low and soft, pink-bellied. Going to rain, likely, by the morning. He saw Jamie close his eyes, just for an instant, saw his throat move as he swallowed, and felt the trembling of Jamie’s thigh, near his own.

What the devil’s happened? he thought in anguish. *Why are ye here?*

—

It wasn’t until everyone had settled for the night that Ian got an answer.

“I’ll lay out your gear,” he whispered to Jamie, rising. “You stay by the fire that wee bit longer—rest a bit, aye?” The firelight cast a ruddy glow on Jamie’s face, but Ian thought his friend was likely still white as a sheet; he hadn’t eaten much.

Coming back, he saw the dark spots on the back of Jamie’s shirt, blotches where fresh blood had seeped through the bandages. The sight filled him with fury, as well as fear. He’d seen such things; the wean had been flogged. Badly, and recently. *Who? How?*

“Come on, then,” he said roughly, and, bending, slipped an arm under Jamie’s

and got him to his feet and away from the fire and the other men. He was alarmed to feel the clamminess of Jamie's hand and hear his shallow breath.

"What?" he demanded, the moment they were out of earshot. "What happened?"

Jamie sat down abruptly.

"I thought one joined a band of mercenaries because they didn't ask ye questions."

Ian gave him the snort this statement deserved and was relieved to hear a breath of laughter in return.

"Eejit," he said. "D'ye need a dram? I've got a bottle in my sack."

"Wouldn't come amiss," Jamie murmured. They were camped at the edge of a wee village, and D'Eglise had arranged for the use of a byre or two, but it wasn't cold out, and most of the men had chosen to sleep by the fire or in the field. Ian had put their gear down a little distance away and, with the possibility of rain in mind, under the shelter of a plane tree that stood at the side of a field.

Ian uncorked the bottle of whisky—it wasn't good, but it *was* whisky—and held it under his friend's nose. When Jamie reached for it, though, Ian pulled it away.

"Not a sip do ye get until ye tell me," he said. "And ye tell me *now*, a *charaid*."

Jamie sat hunched, a pale blur on the ground, silent. When the words came at last, they were spoken so softly that Ian thought for an instant he hadn't really heard them.

"My father's dead."

He tried to believe he *hadn't* heard, but his heart had; it froze in his chest.

"Oh, Jesus," he whispered. "Oh, God, Jamie." He was on his knees then, holding Jamie's head fierce against his shoulder, trying not to touch his hurt back. His thoughts were in confusion, but one thing was clear to him—Brian Fraser's death hadn't been a natural one. If it had, Jamie would be at Lallybroch. Not here, and not in this state.

"Who?" he said hoarsely, relaxing his grip a little. "Who killed him?"

More silence, then Jamie gulped air with a sound like fabric being ripped.

"I did," he said, and began to cry, shaking with silent, tearing sobs.

It took some time to winkle the details out of Jamie—and no wonder, Ian thought. He wouldn't want to talk about such things, either, or to remember them. The English dragoons who'd come to Lallybroch to loot and plunder, who'd taken Jamie away with them when he'd fought them. And what they'd done to him then, at Fort William.

“A hundred lashes?” he said in disbelief and horror. “For protecting your *home*?”

“Only sixty the first time.” Jamie wiped his nose on his sleeve. “For escaping.”

“The *first* ti— Jesus, God, man! What...how...”

“Would ye let go my arm, Ian? I've got enough bruises; I dinna need any more.” Jamie gave a small, shaky laugh, and Ian hastily let go but wasn't about to let himself be distracted.

“Why?” he said, low and angry. Jamie wiped his nose again, sniffing, but his voice was steadier.

“It was my fault,” he said. “It—what I said before. About my...” He had to stop and swallow, but went on, hurrying to get the words out before they could bite him in a tender place. “I spoke chough to the commander. At the garrison, ken. He—well, it's nay matter. It was what I said to him made him flog me again, and Da—he—he'd come. To Fort William, to try to get me released, but he couldn't, and he—he was there, when they...did it.”

Ian could tell from the thicker sound of his voice that Jamie was weeping again but trying not to, and he put a hand on the wean's knee and gripped it, not too hard, just so as Jamie would ken he was there, listening.

Jamie took a deep, deep breath and got the rest out.

“It was...hard. I didna call out, or let them see I was scairt, but I couldna keep my feet. Halfway through it, I fell into the post, just—just hangin' from the ropes, ken, wi' the blood...runnin' down my legs. They thought for a bit that I'd died—and Da must ha' thought so, too. They told me he put his hand to his head just then and made a wee noise, and then...he fell down. An apoplexy, they said.”

“Mary, Mother o' God, have mercy on us,” Ian said. “He—died right there?”

“I dinna ken was he dead when they picked him up or if he lived a bit after that.” Jamie's voice was desolate. “I didna ken a thing about it; no one told me until days later, when Uncle Dougal got me away.” He coughed and wiped the

sleeve across his face again. “Ian...would ye let go my knee?”

“No,” Ian said softly, though he did indeed take his hand away. Only so he could gather Jamie gently into his arms, though. “No. I willna let go, Jamie. Bide. Just...bide.”

—

Jamie woke dry-mouthed, thickheaded, and with his eyes half swollen shut by midgie bites. It was also raining, a fine, wet mist coming down through the leaves above him. For all that, he felt better than he had in the last two weeks, though he didn't at once recall why that was—or where he was.

“Here.” A piece of half-charred bread rubbed with garlic was shoved under his nose. He sat up and grabbed it.

Ian. The sight of his friend gave him an anchor, and the food in his belly another. He chewed slower now, looking about. Men were rising, stumbling off for a piss, making low rumbling noises, rubbing their heads and yawning.

“Where are we?” he asked. Ian gave him a look.

“How the devil did ye find us if ye dinna ken where ye are?”

“Murtagh brought me,” he muttered. The bread turned to glue in his mouth as memory came back; he couldn't swallow and spat out the half-chewed bit. Now he remembered it all, and wished he didn't. “He found the band but then left; said it would look better if I came in on my own.”

His godfather had said, in fact, “*The Murray lad will take care of ye now. Stay wi' him, mind—dinna come back to Scotland. Dinna come back, d'ye hear me?*” He'd heard. Didn't mean he meant to listen.

“Oh, aye. I wondered how ye'd managed to walk this far.” Ian cast a worried look at the far side of the camp, where a pair of sturdy horses was being brought to the traces of a canvas-covered wagon. “*Can ye walk, d'ye think?*”

“Of course. I'm fine.” Jamie spoke crossly, and Ian gave him the look again, even more slit-eyed than the last.

“Aye, right,” he said, in tones of rank disbelief. “Well. We're near Bèguey, maybe twenty miles from Bordeaux; that's where we're going. We're takin' the wagon yon to a Jewish moneylender there.”

“Is it full of money, then?” Jamie glanced at the heavy wagon, interested.

“No,” Ian said. “There's a wee chest, verra heavy, so it's maybe gold, and

there are a few bags that clink and might be silver, but most of it's rugs."

"Rugs?" He looked at Ian in amazement. "What sort of rugs?"

Ian shrugged. "Couldna say. Juanito says they're Turkey rugs and verra valuable, but I dinna ken that he knows. He's Jewish, too," Ian added, as an afterthought. "Jews are—" He made an equivocal gesture, palm flattened. "But they dinna really hunt them in France, or exile them anymore, and the captain says they dinna even arrest them, so long as they keep quiet."

"And go on lending money to men in the government," Jamie said cynically. Ian looked at him, surprised, and Jamie gave him the *I went to the Université in Paris and ken more than you do* smart-arse look, fairly sure that Ian wouldn't thump him, seeing he was hurt.

Ian looked tempted but had learned enough merely to give Jamie back the *I'm older than you and ye ken well ye havena sense enough to come in out of the rain, so dinna be trying it on* look instead. Jamie laughed, feeling better.

"Aye, right," he said, bending forward. "Is my shirt verra bloody?"

Ian nodded, buckling his sword belt. Jamie sighed and picked up the leather jerkin the armorer had given him. It would rub, but he wasn't wanting to attract attention.

—

He managed. The troop kept up a decent pace, but it wasn't anything to trouble a Highlander accustomed to hill-walking and running down the odd deer. True, he grew a bit light-headed now and then, and sometimes his heart raced and waves of heat ran over him—but he didn't stagger any more than a few of the men who'd drunk too much for breakfast.

He barely noticed the countryside but was conscious of Ian striding along beside him, and Jamie took pains now and then to glance at his friend and nod, in order to relieve Ian's worried expression. The two of them were close to the wagon, mostly because he didn't want to draw attention by lagging at the back of the troop but also because he and Ian were taller than the rest by a head or more, with a stride that eclipsed the others, and he felt a small bit of pride in that. It didn't occur to him that possibly the others didn't *want* to be near the wagon.

The first inkling of trouble was a shout from the driver. Jamie had been trudging along, eyes half closed, concentrating on putting one foot ahead of the other, but a bellow of alarm and a sudden loud *bang!* jerked him to attention. A

horseman charged out of the trees near the road, slewed to a halt, and fired his second pistol at the driver.

“What—” Jamie reached for the sword at his belt, half fuddled but starting forward; the horses were neighing and flinging themselves against the traces, the driver cursing and on his feet, hauling on the reins. Several of the mercenaries ran toward the horseman, who drew his own sword and rode through them, slashing recklessly from side to side. Ian seized Jamie’s arm, though, and jerked him round. “Not there! The back!”

He followed Ian at the run, and, sure enough, there was the captain on his horse at the back of the troop, in the middle of a *mêlée*, a dozen strangers laying about with clubs and blades, all shouting.

“*Caisteal DHOON!*” Ian bellowed, and swung his sword over his head and flat down on the head of an attacker. It hit the man a glancing blow, but he staggered and fell to his knees, where Big Georges seized him by the hair and kned him viciously in the face.

“*Caisteal DHOON!*” Jamie shouted as loud as he could, and Ian turned his head for an instant, a big grin flashing.

It was a bit like a cattle raid but lasting longer. Not a matter of hit hard and get away; he’d never been a defender before and found it heavy going. Still, the attackers were outnumbered and began to give way, some glancing over their shoulders, plainly thinking of running back into the wood.

They began to do just that, and Jamie stood panting, dripping sweat, his sword a hundredweight in his hand. He straightened, though, and caught the flash of movement from the corner of his eye.

“*Dhoon!*” he shouted, and broke into a lumbering, gasping run. Another group of men had appeared near the wagon and were pulling the driver’s body quietly down from his seat, while one of their number grabbed at the lunging horses’ bridles, pulling their heads down. Two more had got the canvas loose and were dragging out a long rolled cylinder—one of the rugs, he supposed.

He reached them in time to grab another man trying to mount the wagon, yanking him clumsily back onto the road. The man twisted, falling, and came to his feet like a cat, knife in hand. The blade flashed, bounced off the leather of Jamie’s jerkin, and cut upward, an inch from his face. Jamie squirmed back, off-balance, narrowly keeping his feet, and two more of the bastards charged him.

“On your right, man!” Ian’s voice came suddenly at his shoulder, and without a moment’s hesitation Jamie turned to take care of the man to his left, hearing

Ian's grunt of effort as he laid about with a broadsword.

Then something changed; he couldn't tell what, but the fight was over. The attackers melted away, leaving one or two of their number lying in the road.

The driver wasn't dead; Jamie saw him roll half over, an arm across his face. Then he himself was sitting in the dust, black spots dancing before his eyes. Ian bent over him, panting, hands braced on his knees. Sweat dripped from his chin, making dark spots in the dust that mingled with the buzzing spots that darkened Jamie's vision.

"All...right?" Ian asked.

He opened his mouth to say yes, but the roaring in his ears drowned it out, and the spots merged suddenly into a solid sheet of black.

—

He woke to find a priest kneeling over him, intoning the Lord's Prayer in Latin. Not stopping, the priest took up a little bottle and poured oil into the palm of one hand, then dipped his thumb into the puddle and made a swift sign of the cross on Jamie's forehead.

"I'm no dead, aye?" Jamie said, then repeated this information in French. The priest leaned closer, squinting nearsightedly.

"Dying?" he asked.

"Not that, either."

The priest made a small, disgusted sound but went ahead and made crosses on the palms of Jamie's hands, his eyelids, and his lips. "*Ego te absolvo*," he said, making a final quick sign of the cross over Jamie's supine form. "Just in case you've killed anyone." Then he rose swiftly to his feet and disappeared behind the wagon in a flurry of dark robes.

"All right, are ye?" Ian reached down a hand and hauled him into a sitting position.

"Aye, more or less. Who was that?" He nodded in the direction of the recent priest.

"Père Renault. This is a verra well-equipped outfit," Ian said, boosting him to his feet. "We've got our own priest, to shrive us before battle and give us Extreme Unction after."

"I noticed. A bit over-eager, is he no?"

“He’s blind as a bat,” Ian said, glancing over his shoulder to be sure the priest wasn’t close enough to hear. “Likely thinks better safe than sorry, aye?”

“D’ye have a surgeon, too?” Jamie asked, glancing at the two attackers who had fallen. The bodies had been pulled to the side of the road; one was clearly dead, but the other was beginning to stir and moan.

“Ah,” Ian said thoughtfully. “That would be the priest, as well.”

“So if I’m wounded in battle, I’d best try to die of it, is that what ye’re sayin’?”

“I am. Come on, let’s find some water.”

They found a rock-lined irrigation ditch running between two fields, a little way off the road. Ian pulled Jamie into the shade of a tree and, rummaging in his rucksack, produced a spare shirt, which he shoved into his friend’s hands.

“Put it on,” he said, low-voiced. “Ye can wash yours out; they’ll think the blood on it’s from the fightin’.” Jamie looked surprised, but grateful, and with a nod skimmed out of the leather jerkin and peeled the sweaty, stained shirt gingerly off his back. Ian grimaced; the bandages were filthy and coming loose, save where they stuck to Jamie’s skin, crusted black with old blood and dried pus.

“Shall I pull them off?” he muttered in Jamie’s ear. “I’ll do it fast.”

Jamie arched his back in refusal, shaking his head.

“Nay, it’ll bleed more if ye do.” There wasn’t time to argue; several more of the men were coming. Jamie ducked hurriedly into the clean shirt and knelt to splash water on his face.

“Hey, Scotsman!” Alexandre called to Jamie. “What’s that you two were shouting at each other?” He put his hands to his mouth and hooted, “GOOOOOON!” in a deep, echoing voice that made the others laugh.

“Have ye never heard a war cry before?” Jamie asked, shaking his head at such ignorance. “Ye shout it in battle, to call your kin and your clan to your side.”

“Does it mean anything?” Petit Philippe asked, interested.

“Aye, more or less,” Ian said. “Castle Dhuni’s the dwelling place of the chieftain of the Frasers of Lovat. *Caisteal Dhuin* is what ye call it in the

Gàidhlig—that’s our own tongue.”

“And that’s our clan,” Jamie clarified. “Clan Fraser, but there’s more than one branch, and each one will have its own war cry and its own motto.” He pulled his shirt out of the cold water and wrung it out; the bloodstains were still visible but faint brown marks now, Ian saw with approval. Then he saw Jamie’s mouth opening to say more.

Don’t say it! he thought, but, as usual, Jamie wasn’t reading his mind, and Ian closed his eyes in resignation, knowing what was coming.

“Our clan motto’s in French, though,” Jamie said, with a small air of pride. “*Je suis prêt.*”

It meant “I am ready” and was, as Ian had foreseen, greeted with gales of laughter and a number of crude speculations as to just what the young Scots might be ready for. The men were in good humor from the fight, and it went on for a bit. Ian shrugged and smiled, but he could see Jamie’s ears turning red.

“Where’s the rest of your queue, Georges?” Petit Philippe demanded, seeing Big Georges shaking off after a piss. “Someone trim it for you?”

“Your wife bit it off,” Georges replied, in a tranquil tone indicating that this was common badinage. “Mouth like a sucking pig, that one. And a *cramouille* like a—”

This resulted in a further scatter of abuse, but it was clear from the sidelong glances that it was mostly performance for the benefit of the two Scots. Ian ignored it. Jamie had gone squiggle-eyed; Ian wasn’t sure his friend had ever heard the word “*cramouille*” before, but he likely figured what it meant.

Before Jamie could get them in more trouble, though, the conversation by the stream was stopped dead by a strangled scream beyond the scrim of trees that hid them from the roadside.

“The prisoner,” Alexandre murmured after a moment.

Ian knelt by Jamie, water dripping from his cupped hands. He knew what was happening; it curdled his wame. He let the water fall and wiped his hands on his thighs.

“The captain,” he said softly to Jamie. “He’ll...need to know who they were. Where they came from.”

“Aye.” Jamie’s lips pressed tight at the sound of muted voices, the sudden meaty smack of flesh and a loud grunt. “I know.” He splashed water fiercely onto his face.

The jokes had stopped. There was little conversation now, though Alexandre and Josef-from-Alsace began a random argument, speaking loudly, trying to drown out the noises from the road. Most of the men finished their washing and drinking in silence and sat hunched in the shade, shoulders pulled in.

“Père Renault!” The captain’s voice rose, calling for the priest. Père Renault had been performing his own ablutions a discreet distance from the men but stood at this summons, wiping his face on the hem of his robe. He crossed himself and headed for the road, but on the way he paused by Ian and motioned toward his drinking cup.

“May I borrow this from you, my son? Only for a moment.”

“Aye, of course, Father,” Ian said, baffled. The priest nodded, bent to scoop up a cup of water, and went on his way. Jamie looked after him, then at Ian, brows raised.

“They say he’s a Jew,” Juanito said nearby, very quietly. “They want to baptize him first.” He knelt by the water, fists curled tight against his thighs.

Hot as the air was, Ian felt a spear of ice run right through his chest. He stood up fast and made as though to follow the priest, but Big Georges snaked out a hand and caught him by the shoulder.

“Leave it,” he said. He spoke quietly, too, but his fingers dug hard into Ian’s flesh.

He didn’t pull away but stayed standing, holding Georges’s eyes. He felt Jamie make a brief, convulsive movement, but said, “No!” under his breath, and Jamie stopped.

They could hear French cursing from the road, mingled with Père Renault’s voice. “*In nomine Patris, et Filii...*” Then struggling, spluttering, and shouting, the prisoner, the captain, and Mathieu, and even the priest, all using such language as made Jamie blink. Ian might have laughed if not for the sense of dread that froze every man by the water.

“No!” shouted the prisoner, his voice rising above the others, anger lost in terror. “No, please! I told you all I—” There was a small sound, a hollow noise like a melon being kicked in, and the voice stopped.

“Thrifty, our captain,” Big Georges said, under his breath. “Why waste a bullet?” He took his hand off Ian’s shoulder, shook his head, and knelt down to wash his hands.

There was a ghastly silence under the trees. From the road, they could hear low voices—the captain and Mathieu speaking to each other, and over that, *Père Renault* repeating, “*In nomine Patris, et Filii...*” but in a very different tone. Ian saw the hairs on Jamie’s arms rise, and Jamie rubbed the palms of his hands against his kilt, maybe feeling a slick from the chrism oil still there.

Jamie plainly couldn’t stand to listen and turned to Big Georges at random.

“Queue?” he said with a raised brow. “That what ye call it in these parts, is it?”

Big Georges managed a crooked smile.

“And what do you call it? In your tongue?”

“*Bot*,” Ian said, shrugging. There were other words, but he wasn’t about to try one like *clipeachd* on them.

“Mostly just cock,” Jamie said, shrugging, too.

“Or penis, if ye want to be all English about it,” Ian chimed in.

Several of the men were listening now, willing to join in any sort of conversation to get away from the echo of the last scream, still hanging in the air like fog.

“Ha,” Jamie said. “Penis isna even an English word, ye wee ignoramus. It’s Latin. And even in Latin, it doesna mean a man’s closest companion—it means ‘tail.’ ”

Ian gave him a long, slow look.

“Tail, is it? So ye canna even tell the difference between your cock and your arse, and ye’re preachin’ to me about *Latin*?”

The men roared. Jamie’s face flamed up instantly, and Ian laughed and gave him a good nudge with his shoulder. Jamie snorted but elbowed Ian back and laughed, too, reluctantly.

“Aye, all right, then.” He looked abashed; he didn’t usually throw his education in Ian’s face. Ian didn’t hold it against him; he’d floundered for a bit, too, his first days with the company, and that was the sort of thing you did, trying to get your feet under you by making a point of what you were good at. But if Jamie tried rubbing Mathieu’s or Big Georges’s face in his Latin and Greek, he’d be proving himself with his fists, and fast, too. Right this minute, he didn’t look as though he could fight a rabbit and win.

The renewed murmur of conversation, subdued as it was, dried up at once

with the appearance of Mathieu through the trees. Mathieu was a big man, though broad rather than tall, with a face like a mad boar and a character to match. Nobody called him “Pig-face” to his face.

“You, cheese rind—go bury that turd,” he said to Jamie, adding with a narrowing of red-rimmed eyes, “far back in the wood. And go before I put a boot in your arse. Move!”

Jamie got up—slowly—eyes fixed on Mathieu with a look Ian didn’t care for. He came up quick beside Jamie and gripped him by the arm.

“I’ll help,” he said. “Come on.”

“Why do they want this one buried?” Jamie muttered to Ian. “Giving him a *Christian* burial?” He drove one of the trenching spades Armand had lent them into the soft leaf mold, with a violence that would have told Ian just how churned up his friend was if he hadn’t known already.

“Ye kent it’s no a verra civilized life, *a charaid*,” Ian said. He didn’t feel any better about it himself, after all, and spoke sharp. “Not like the *Université*.”

The blood flamed up Jamie’s neck like tinder taking fire, and Ian held out a palm, in hopes of quelling him. He didn’t want a fight, and Jamie couldn’t stand one.

“We’re burying him because D’Eglise thinks his friends might come back to look for him, and it’s better they don’t see what was done to him, aye? Ye can see by looking that the other fellow was just killed fightin’. Business is one thing; revenge is another.”

Jamie’s jaw worked for a bit, but gradually the hot flush faded and his clench on the shovel loosened.

“Aye,” he muttered, and resumed digging. The sweat was running down his neck in minutes, and he was breathing hard. Ian nudged him out of the way with an elbow and finished the digging. Silent, they took the dead man by the oxters and ankles and dragged him into the shallow pit.

“D’ye think D’Eglise found out anything?” Jamie asked, as they scattered matted chunks of old leaves over the raw earth.

“I hope so,” Ian replied, eyes on his work. “I wouldna like to think they did that for nothing.”

He straightened up and they stood awkwardly for a moment, not quite looking

at each other. It seemed wrong to leave a grave, even that of a stranger and a Jew, without a word of prayer. But it seemed worse to say a Christian prayer over the man—more insult than blessing, in the circumstances.

At last Jamie grimaced and, bending, dug about under the leaves, coming out with two small stones. He gave one to Ian, and one after the other, they squatted and placed the stones together atop the grave. It wasn't much of a cairn, but it was something.

—

It wasn't the captain's way to make explanations or to give more than brief, explicit orders to his men. He had come back into camp at evening, his face dark and his lips pressed tight. But three other men had heard the interrogation of the Jewish stranger, and by the usual metaphysical processes that happen around campfires, everyone in the troop knew by the next morning what he had said.

"Ephraim bar-Sefer," Ian said to Jamie, who had come back late to the fire, after going off quietly to wash his shirt out again. "That was his name." Ian was a bit worried about the wean. His wounds weren't healing as they should, and the way he'd passed out...He'd a fever now; Ian could feel the heat coming off his skin, but he shivered now and then, though the night wasn't bitter.

"Is it better to know that?" Jamie asked bleakly.

"We can pray for him by name," Ian pointed out. "That's better, is it not?"

Jamie wrinkled up his brow, but after a moment he nodded.

"Aye, it is. What else did he say, then?"

Ian rolled his eyes. Ephraim bar-Sefer had confessed that the band of attackers were professional thieves, mostly Jews, who—

"Jews?" Jamie interrupted. "Jewish *bandits*?" For some reason, the thought struck Jamie as funny, but Ian didn't laugh.

"Why not?" he asked briefly, and went on without waiting for an answer. The men gained advance knowledge of valuable shipments and made a practice of lying in wait, to ambush and rob. "It's mostly other Jews they rob, so there's nay much danger of being pursued by the French army or a local judge."

"Oh. And the advance knowledge—that's easier come by, too, I suppose, if the folk they rob are Jews. Jews live close by one another in groups," Jamie explained, seeing the look of surprise on Ian's face. "They all read and write, though, and they write letters all the time; there's a good bit of information

passed to and fro between the groups. Wouldna be that hard to learn who the moneylenders and merchants are and intercept their correspondence, would it?”

“Maybe not,” Ian said, giving Jamie a look of respect. “Bar-Sefer said they got notice from someone—he didna ken who it was himself—who kent a great deal about valuables comin’ and goin’. The person who knew wasna one of their group, though; it was someone outside, who got a percentage o’ the proceeds.”

That, however, was the total of the information bar-Sefer had divulged. He wouldn’t give up the names of any of his associates—D’Eglise didn’t care so much about that—and had died stubbornly insisting that he knew nothing of future robberies planned.

“D’ye think it might ha’ been one of ours?” Jamie asked, low-voiced.

“One of—oh, our Jews, ye mean?” Ian frowned at the thought. There were three Spanish Jews in D’Eglise’s band—Juanito, Big Georges, and Raoul—but all three were good men and fairly popular with their fellows. “I doubt it. All three o’ them fought like fiends. When I noticed,” he added fairly.

“What I want to know is how the thieves got away wi’ that rug,” Jamie said reflectively. “Must have weighed what, ten stone?”

“At least that,” Ian assured him, flexing his shoulders at the memory. “I helped load the wretched things. I suppose they must have had a wagon somewhere nearby, for their booty. Why?”

“Well, but...rugs? Who steals rugs? Even valuable ones. And if they kent ahead of time that we were comin’, presumably they kent what we carried.”

“Ye’re forgettin’ the gold and silver,” Ian reminded him. “It was in the front of the wagon, under the rugs. They had to pull the rugs out to get at it.”

“Mmphm.” Jamie looked vaguely dissatisfied—and it was true that the bandits had gone to the trouble to carry the rug away with them. But there was nothing to be gained by more discussion, and when Ian said he was for bed, Jamie came along without argument.

They settled down in a nest of long yellow grass, wrapped in their plaids, but Ian didn’t sleep at once. He was bruised and tired, but the excitements of the day were still with him, and he lay looking up at the stars for some time, remembering some things and trying hard to forget others—like the look of Ephraim bar-Sefer’s head. Maybe Jamie was right and it was better not to have kent his right name.

He forced his mind into other paths, succeeding to the extent that he was

surprised when Jamie shifted, cursing under his breath as the movement hurt him.

“Have ye ever done it?” Ian asked suddenly.

There was a small rustle as Jamie hitched himself into a more comfortable position.

“Have I ever done what?” he asked. His voice sounded that wee bit hoarse but none so bad. “Killed anyone? No.”

“Nay, lain wi’ a lass.”

“Oh, that.”

“Aye, *that*. Gowk.” Ian rolled toward Jamie and aimed a feint toward his middle.

Despite the darkness, Jamie caught his wrist before the blow landed. “Have you?”

“Oh, ye haven’t, then.” Ian detached the grip without difficulty. “I thought ye’d be up to your ears in whores and poetesses in Paris.”

“Poetesses?” Jamie was beginning to sound amused. “What makes ye think women write poetry? Or that a woman who writes poetry would be wanton?”

“Well, o’ course they are. Everybody kens that. The words get into their heads and drive them mad, and they go looking for the first man who—”

“Ye’ve bedded a poetess?” Jamie’s fist struck him lightly in the middle of the chest. “Does your mam ken that?”

“Dinna be telling my mam anything about poetesses,” Ian said firmly. “No, but Big Georges did, and he told everyone about her. A woman he met in Marseilles. He has a book of her poetry and read some out.”

“Any good?”

“How would I ken? There was a good bit o’ swooning and swellin’ and bursting goin’ on, but it seemed to do wi’ flowers, mostly. There was a good wee bit about a bumblebee, though, doin’ the business wi’ a sunflower. Pokin’ it, I mean. With its snout.”

There was a momentary silence as Jamie absorbed the mental picture.

“Maybe it sounds better in French,” he said.

—

“I’ll help ye,” Ian said suddenly, in a tone that was serious to the bone.

“Help me...?”

“Help ye kill this Captain Randall.”

Jamie lay silent for a moment, feeling his chest go tight.

“Jesus, Ian,” he said, very softly. He lay for several minutes, eyes fixed on the shadowy tree roots near his face.

“No,” he said at last. “Ye can’t. I need ye to do something else for me, Ian. I need ye to go home.”

“Home? What—”

“I need ye to go home and take care of Lallybroch—and my sister. I—I canna go. Not yet.” He bit his lower lip hard.

“Ye’ve got tenants and friends enough there,” Ian protested. “Ye need me here, man. I’m no leavin’ ye alone, aye? When ye go back, we’ll go together.” And he turned over in his plaid with an air of finality.

Jamie lay with his eyes tight closed, ignoring the singing and conversation near the fire, the beauty of the night sky over him, and the nagging pain in his back. He should perhaps be praying for the soul of the dead Jew, but he had no time for that just now. He was trying to find his father.

Brian Fraser’s soul must still exist, and he was positive that his father was in heaven. But surely there must be some way to reach him, to sense him. When first Jamie had left home, to foster with Dougal at Beannachd, he’d been lonely and homesick, but Da had told him he would be and not to trouble overmuch about it.

“Ye think of me, Jamie, and Jenny and Lallybroch. Ye’ll not see us, but we’ll be here nonetheless and thinking of you. Look up at night, and see the stars, and ken we see them, too.”

He opened his eyes a slit, but the stars swam, their brightness blurred. He squeezed his eyes shut again and felt the warm glide of a single tear down his temple. He couldn’t think about Jenny. Or Lallybroch. The homesickness at Dougal’s had stopped. The strangeness when he went to Paris had eased. This wouldn’t stop, but he’d have to go on living anyway.

Where are ye, Da? He thought in anguish. Da, I’m sorry!

—

He prayed as he walked next day, making his way doggedly from one Hail Mary

to the next, using his fingers to count the rosary. For a time, it kept him from thinking and gave him a little peace. But eventually the slippery thoughts came stealing back, memories in small flashes, quick as sun on water. Some he fought off—Captain Randall’s voice, playful as he took the cat in hand—the fearful prickle of the hairs on his body in the cold wind when he took his shirt off—the surgeon’s “*I see he’s made a mess of you, boy...*”

But some memories he seized, no matter how painful they were. The feel of his da’s hands, hard on his arms, holding him steady. The guards had been taking him somewhere—he didn’t recall and it didn’t matter—when suddenly his da was there before him, in the yard of the prison, and he’d stepped forward fast when he saw Jamie, a look of joy and eagerness on his face, this blasted into shock the next moment, when he saw what they’d done to him.

“*Are ye bad hurt, Jamie?*”

“*No, Da, I’ll be all right.*”

For a minute, he had been. So heartened by seeing his father, sure it would all come right—and then he’d remembered Jenny, taking yon *crochaire* into the house, sacrificing herself for—

He cut that one off short, too, saying “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!” savagely out loud, to the startlement of Petit Philippe, who was scuttling along beside him on his short bandy legs.

“Blessed art thou amongst women...” Philippe chimed in obligingly. “Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, amen!”

“Hail Mary,” said Père Renault’s deep voice behind him, taking it up, and within seconds seven or eight of them were saying it, marching solemnly to the rhythm, and then a few more... Jamie himself fell silent, unnoticed. But he found the wall of prayer a barricade between himself and the wicked sly thoughts and, closing his eyes briefly, felt his father walk beside him and Brian Fraser’s last kiss soft as the wind on his cheek.

—

They reached Bordeaux just before sunset, and D’Eglise took the wagon off with a small guard, leaving the other men free to explore the delights of the city—though such exploration was somewhat constrained by the fact that they hadn’t yet been paid. They’d get their money after the goods were delivered next day.

Ian, who’d been in Bordeaux before, led the way to a large, noisy tavern with

drinkable wine and large portions.

“The barmaids are pretty, too,” he observed, as he stood watching one of these creatures wend her way deftly through a crowd of groping hands.

“Is it a brothel upstairs?” Jamie asked, out of curiosity, having heard a few stories.

“I dinna ken,” Ian said, with what sounded like regret, though Jamie was almost sure he’d never been to a brothel, out of a mixture of penury and fear of catching the pox. “D’ye want to go and find out later?”

Jamie hesitated.

“I—well. No, I dinna think so.” He turned his face toward Ian and spoke very quietly. “I promised Da I wouldna go wi’ whores, when I went to Paris. And now...I couldna do it without...thinkin’ of him, ken?”

Ian nodded, his face showing as much relief as disappointment.

“Time enough another day,” he said philosophically, and signaled for another jug. The barmaid didn’t see him, though, and Jamie snaked out a long arm and tugged at her apron. She whirled, scowling, but seeing Jamie’s face, wearing its best blue-eyed smile, chose to smile back and take the order.

Several other men from D’Eglise’s band were in the tavern, and this byplay didn’t pass unnoticed.

Juanito, at a nearby table, glanced at Jamie, raised a derisive eyebrow, then said something to Raoul in the Jewish sort of Spanish they called Ladino; both men laughed.

“You know what causes warts, friend?” Jamie said pleasantly—in biblical Hebrew. “Demons inside a man, trying to emerge through the skin.” He spoke slowly enough that Ian could follow this, and Ian in turn broke out laughing—as much at the looks on the two Jews’ faces as at Jamie’s remark.

Juanito’s lumpy face darkened, but Raoul looked sharply at Ian, first at his face, then, deliberately, at his crotch. Ian shook his head, still grinning, and Raoul shrugged but returned the smile, then took Juanito by the arm, tugging him off in the direction of the back room, where dicing was to be found.

“What did you say to him?” the barmaid asked, glancing after the departing pair, then looking back wide-eyed at Jamie. “And what tongue did you say it in?”

Jamie was glad to have the wide brown eyes to gaze into; it was causing his neck considerable strain to keep his head from tilting farther down in order to

gaze into her décolletage. The charming hollow between her breasts drew the eye...

“Oh, nothing but a little *bonhomie*,” he said, grinning down at her. “I said it in Hebrew.” He wanted to impress her, and he did, but not the way he’d meant to. Her half smile vanished, and she edged back a little.

“Oh,” she said. “Your pardon, sir, I’m needed...” and with a vaguely apologetic flip of the hand, she vanished into the throng of customers, pitcher in hand.

“Eejit,” Ian said. “What did ye tell her that for? Now she thinks ye’re a Jew.”

Jamie’s mouth fell open in shock. “What, me? How, then?” he demanded, looking down at himself. He’d meant his Highland dress, but Ian looked critically at him and shook his head.

“Ye’ve got the lang neb and the red hair,” he pointed out. “Half the Spanish Jews I’ve seen look like that, and some of them are a good size, too. For all yon lass kens, ye stole the plaid off somebody ye killed.”

Jamie felt more nonplussed than affronted. Rather hurt, too.

“Well, what if I was a Jew?” he demanded. “Why should it matter? I wasna askin’ for her hand in marriage, was I? I was only talkin’ to her, for God’s sake!”

Ian gave him that annoyingly tolerant look. He shouldn’t mind, he knew; he’d lorded it over Ian often enough about things he kent and Ian didn’t. He did mind, though; the borrowed shirt was too small and chafed him under the arms, and his wrists stuck out, bony and raw-looking. He didn’t look like a Jew, but he looked like a gowk and he knew it. It made him cross-grained.

“Most o’ the Frenchwomen—the Christian ones, I mean—dinna like to go wi’ Jews. Not because they’re Christ-killers, but because of their...um...” He glanced down, with a discreet gesture at Jamie’s crotch. “They think it looks funny.”

“It doesna look *that* different.”

“It does.”

“Well, aye, when it’s...but when it’s—I mean, if it’s in a state that a lassie would be lookin’ at it, it isna...” He saw Ian opening his mouth to ask just how he happened to know what an erect circumcised cock looked like. “Forget it,” he said brusquely, and pushed past his friend. “Let’s be goin’ down the street.”

At dawn, the band gathered at the inn where D'Eglise and the wagon waited, ready to escort it through the streets to its destination—a warehouse on the banks of the Garonne. Jamie saw that the captain had changed into his finest clothes, plumed hat and all, and so had the four men—among the biggest in the band—who had guarded the wagon during the night. They were all armed to the teeth, and Jamie wondered whether this was only to make a good show or whether D'Eglise intended to have them stand behind him while he explained why the shipment was one rug short, to discourage complaint from the merchant receiving the shipment.

Jamie was enjoying the walk through the city, though keeping a sharp eye out, as he'd been instructed, against the possibility of ambush from alleys or thieves dropping from a roof or balcony onto the wagon. He thought the latter possibility remote but dutifully looked up now and then. Upon lowering his eyes from one of these inspections, he found that the captain had dropped back and was now pacing beside him on his big gray gelding.

“Juanito says you speak Hebrew,” D'Eglise said, looking down at him as though he'd suddenly sprouted horns. “Is this true?”

“Aye,” he said cautiously. “Though it's more I can read the Bible in Hebrew—a bit—there not bein' so many Jews in the Highlands to converse with.” There had been a few in Paris, but he knew better than to talk about the *Université* and the study of philosophers like Maimonides. They'd scrag him before supper.

The captain grunted but didn't look displeased. He rode for a time in silence but kept his horse to a walk, pacing at Jamie's side. This made Jamie nervous, and after a few moments, impulse made him jerk his head to the rear and say, “Ian can, too. Read Hebrew, I mean.”

D'Eglise looked down at him, startled, and glanced back. Ian was clearly visible, as he stood a head taller than the three men with whom he was conversing as he walked.

“Will wonders never cease?” the captain said, as though to himself. But he nudged his horse into a trot and left Jamie in the dust.

—

It wasn't until the next afternoon that this conversation returned to bite Jamie in the arse. They'd delivered the rugs and the gold and silver to the warehouse on the river, D'Eglise had received his payment, and consequently the men were

scattered down the length of an *allée* that boasted cheap eating and drinking establishments, many of these with a room above or behind where a man could spend his money in other ways.

Neither Jamie nor Ian said anything further regarding the subject of brothels, but Jamie found his mind returning to the pretty barmaid. He had his own shirt on now and had half a mind to find his way back and tell her he wasn't a Jew.

He had no idea what she might do with that information, though, and the tavern was clear on the other side of the city.

"Think we'll have another job soon?" he asked idly, as much to break Ian's silence as to escape from his own thoughts. There had been talk around the fire about the prospects; evidently there were no good wars at the moment, though it was rumored that the King of Prussia was beginning to gather men in Silesia.

"I hope so," Ian muttered. "Canna bear hangin' about." He drummed long fingers on the tabletop. "I need to be movin'."

"That why ye left Scotland, is it?" He was only making conversation and was surprised to see Ian dart him a wary glance.

"Didna want to farm, wasna much else to do. I make good money here. *And* I mostly send it home."

"Still, I dinna imagine your da was pleased." Ian was the only son; Auld John was probably still livid, though he hadn't said much in Jamie's hearing during the brief time he'd been home, before the redcoats—

"My sister's marrit. Her husband can manage, if..." Ian lapsed into a moody silence.

Before Jamie could decide whether to prod Ian or not, the captain appeared beside their table, surprising them both.

D'Eglise stood for a moment, considering them. Finally he sighed and said, "All right. The two of you, come with me."

Ian shoved the rest of his bread and cheese into his mouth and rose, chewing. Jamie was about to do likewise when the captain frowned at him.

"Is your shirt clean?"

He felt the blood rise in his cheeks. It was the closest anyone had come to mentioning his back, and it was too close. Most of the wounds had crusted over long since, but the worst ones were still infected; they broke open with the chafing of the bandages or if he bent too suddenly. He'd had to rinse his shirt almost every night—it was constantly damp, and that didn't help—and he knew

fine that the whole band knew but nobody'd spoken of it.

"It is," he replied shortly, and drew himself up to his full height, staring down at D'Eglise, who merely said, "Good, then. Come on."

—

The new potential client was a physician named Dr. Hasdi, reputed to be a person of great influence among the Jews of Bordeaux. The last client had made the introduction, so apparently D'Eglise had managed to smooth over the matter of the missing rug.

Dr. Hasdi's house was discreetly tucked away in a decent but modest side street, behind a stuccoed wall and locked gates. Ian rang the bell, and a man dressed like a gardener promptly appeared to let them in, gesturing them up the walk to the front door. Evidently, they were expected.

"They don't flaunt their wealth, the Jews," D'Eglise murmured out of the side of his mouth to Jamie. "But they have it."

Well, these did, Jamie thought. A manservant greeted them in a plain tiled foyer but then opened the door into a room that made the senses swim. It was lined with books in dark-wood cases, carpeted thickly underfoot, and what little of the walls was not covered with books was adorned with small tapestries and framed tiles that he thought might be Moorish. But above all, the scent! He breathed it in to the bottom of his lungs, feeling slightly intoxicated, and, looking for the source of it, finally spotted the owner of this earthly paradise sitting behind a desk and staring—at him. Or maybe him and Ian both; the man's eyes flicked back and forth between them, round as sucked toffees.

He straightened up instinctively and bowed. "We greet thee, lord," Jamie said, in carefully rehearsed Hebrew. "Peace be on your house."

The man's mouth fell open. Noticeably so; he had a large, bushy dark beard, going white near the mouth. An indefinable expression—surely it wasn't amusement?—ran over what could be seen of his face.

A small sound that certainly *was* amusement drew Jamie's attention to one side. A small brass bowl sat on a round, tile-topped table, with smoke wandering lazily up from it through a bar of late-afternoon sun. Between the sun and the smoke, he could just make out the form of a woman standing in the shadows. She stepped forward, materializing out of the gloom, and his heart jumped.

She inclined her head gravely to the soldiers, addressing them impartially.

“I am Rebekah bat-Leah Hauberger. My grandfather bids me make you welcome to our home, gentlemen,” she said, in perfect French, though the old gentleman hadn’t spoken. Jamie drew in a great breath of relief; he wouldn’t have to try to explain their business in Hebrew, after all. The breath was so deep, though, that it made him cough, the perfumed smoke tickling his chest.

As he tried to strangle the cough, he could feel his face going red and Ian glancing sidelong at him. The girl—yes, she was young, maybe his own age—swiftly took up a cover and clapped it on the bowl, then rang a bell and told the servant something in what sounded like Spanish. *Ladino?* he thought.

“Do please sit, sirs,” she said, waving gracefully toward a chair in front of the desk, then turning to fetch another standing by the wall.

“Allow me, mademoiselle!” Ian leapt forward to assist her. Jamie, still choking as quietly as possible, followed suit.

She had dark hair, very wavy, bound back from her brow with a rose-colored ribbon but falling loose down her back, nearly to her waist. He had actually raised a hand to stroke it before catching hold of himself. Then she turned around. Pale skin, big dark eyes, and an oddly knowing look in those eyes when she met his own—which she did, very directly, when he set the third chair down before her.

Annalise. He swallowed, hard, and cleared his throat. A wave of dizzy heat washed over him, and he wished suddenly that they’d open a window.

D’Eglise, too, was visibly relieved at having a more reliable interpreter than Jamie and launched into a gallant speech of introduction, much decorated with French flowers, bowing repeatedly to the girl and her grandfather in turn.

Jamie wasn’t paying attention to the talk; he was still watching Rebekah. It was her passing resemblance to Annalise de Marillac, the girl he’d loved in Paris, that had drawn his attention—but now he came to look, she was quite different.

Quite different. Annalise had been tiny and fluffy as a kitten. This girl was small—he’d seen that she came no higher than his elbow; her soft hair had brushed his wrist when she sat down—but there was nothing either fluffy or helpless about her. She’d noticed him watching her and was now watching *him*, with a faint curve to her red mouth that made the blood rise in his cheeks. He coughed and looked down.

“What’s amiss?” Ian muttered out of the side of his mouth. “Ye look like ye’ve got a cocklebur stuck betwixt your hurdies.”

Jamie gave an irritable twitch, then stiffened as he felt one of the rawer wounds on his back break open. He could feel the fast-cooling spot, the slow seep of pus or blood, and sat very straight, trying not to breathe deep, in hopes that the bandages would absorb the liquid before it got onto his shirt.

This niggling concern had at least distracted his mind from Rebekah bat-Leah Hauberger, and to distract himself from the aggravation of his back, he returned to the three-way conversation between D'Eglise and the Jews.

The captain was sweating freely, whether from the hot tea or the strain of persuasion, but he talked easily, gesturing now and then toward his matched pair of tall, Hebrew-speaking Scots, now and then toward the window and the outer world, where vast legions of similar warriors awaited, ready and eager to do Dr. Hasdi's bidding.

The doctor watched D'Eglise intently, occasionally addressing a soft rumble of incomprehensible words to his granddaughter. It did sound like the Ladino that Juanito spoke, more than anything else; certainly it sounded nothing like the Hebrew that Jamie had been taught in Paris.

Finally the old Jew glanced among the three mercenaries, pursed his lips thoughtfully, and nodded. He rose and went to a large blanket chest that stood under the window, where he knelt and carefully gathered up a long, heavy cylinder wrapped in oiled cloth. Jamie could see that it was remarkably heavy for its size, from the slow way the old man rose with it, and his first thought was that it must be a gold statue of some sort. His second thought was that Rebekah smelled like rose petals and vanilla pods. He breathed in, very gently, feeling the shirt stick to his back.

The thing, whatever it was, jingled and chimed softly as it moved. Some sort of Jewish clock? Dr. Hasdi carried the cylinder to the desk and set it down, then curled a finger to invite the soldiers to step near.

Unwrapped with a slow and solemn sense of ceremony, the object emerged from its layers of linen, canvas, and oiled cloth. It *was* gold, in part, and not unlike statuary but made of wood and shaped like a prism, with a sort of crown at one end. While Jamie was still wondering what the devil it might be, the doctor's arthritic fingers touched a small clasp and the box opened, revealing yet more layers of cloth, from which yet another delicate, spicy scent emerged. All three soldiers breathed deep, in unison, and Rebekah made that small sound of amusement again.

"The case is cedar wood," she said. "From Lebanon."

“Oh,” D’Eglise said respectfully. “Of course!”

The bundle inside was dressed—there was no other word for it; it was wearing a sort of caped mantle and a belt, with a miniature buckle—in velvet and embroidered silk. From one end, two massive golden finials protruded like twin heads. They were pierced work and looked like towers, adorned in the windows and along their lower edges with a number of tiny bells.

“This is a *very* old Torah scroll,” Rebekah said, keeping a respectful distance. “From Spain.”

“A priceless object, to be sure,” D’Eglise said, bending to peer closer.

Dr. Hasdi grunted and said something to Rebekah, who translated:

“Only to those whose Book it is. To anyone else, it has a very obvious and attractive price. If this were not so, I would not stand in need of your services.” The doctor looked pointedly at Jamie and Ian. “A respectable man—a Jew—will carry the Torah. It may not be touched. But you will safeguard it—and my granddaughter.”

“Quite so, your honor.” D’Eglise flushed slightly but was too pleased to look abashed. “I am deeply honored by your trust, sir, and I assure you...” But Rebekah had rung her bell again, and the manservant came in with wine.

The job offered was simple; Rebekah was to be married to the son of the chief rabbi of the Paris synagogue. The ancient Torah was part of her dowry, as was a sum of money that made D’Eglise’s eyes glisten. The doctor wished to engage D’Eglise to deliver all three items—the girl, the scroll, and the money—safely to Paris; the doctor himself would travel there for the wedding but later in the month, as his business in Bordeaux detained him. The only things to be decided were the price for D’Eglise’s services, the time in which they were to be accomplished, and the guarantees D’Eglise was prepared to offer.

The doctor’s lips pursed over this last; his friend Ackerman, who had referred D’Eglise to him, had not been entirely pleased at having one of his valuable rugs stolen en route, and the doctor wished to be assured that none of *his* valuable property—Jamie saw Rebekah’s soft mouth twitch as she translated this—would go missing between Bordeaux and Paris. The captain gave Ian and Jamie a stern look, then altered this to earnest sincerity as he assured the doctor that there would be no difficulty; his best men would take on the job, and he would offer whatever assurances the doctor required. Small drops of sweat stood out on his upper lip.

Between the warmth of the fire and the hot tea, Jamie was sweating, too, and

could have used a glass of wine. But the old gentleman stood up abruptly and, with a courteous bow to D'Eglise, came out from behind his desk and took Jamie by the arm, pulling him up and tugging him gently toward a doorway.

He ducked, just in time to avoid braining himself on a low archway, and found himself in a small, plain room, with bunches of drying herbs hung from its beams. What—

But before he could formulate any sort of question, the old man had got hold of his shirt and was pulling it free of his plaid. He tried to step back, but there was no room, and willy-nilly, he found himself set down on a stool, the old man's horny fingers pulling loose the bandages. The doctor made a deep sound of disapproval, then shouted something in which the words "*agua caliente*" were clearly discernible, back through the archway.

He daren't stand up and flee—and risk D'Eglise's new arrangement. And so he sat, burning with embarrassment, while the physician probed, prodded, and—a bowl of hot water having appeared—scrubbed at his back with something painfully rough. None of this bothered Jamie nearly as much as the appearance of Rebekah in the doorway, her dark eyebrows raised.

"My grandfather says your back is a mess," she told him, translating a remark from the old man.

"Thank ye. I didna ken that," he muttered in English, but then repeated the remark more politely in French. His cheeks burned with mortification, but a small, cold echo sounded in his heart. "*I see he's made a mess of you, boy.*"

The surgeon at Fort William had said it when the soldiers dragged Jamie to him after the flogging, legs too wobbly to stand by himself. The surgeon had been right, and so was Dr. Hasdi, but it didn't mean Jamie wanted to hear it again.

Rebekah, evidently interested to see what her grandfather meant, came round behind Jamie. He stiffened, and the doctor poked him sharply in the back of the neck, making him bend forward again. The two Jews were discussing the spectacle in tones of detachment; he felt the girl's small, soft fingers trace a line between his ribs and nearly shot off the stool, his skin erupting in goose flesh.

"Jamie?" Ian's voice came from the hallway, sounding worried. "Are ye all right?"

"Aye!" he managed, half strangled. "Don't—ye needn't come in."

"Your name is Jamie?" Rebekah was now in front of him, leaning down to

look into his face. Her own was alive with interest and concern. “James?”

“Aye. James.” He clenched his teeth as the doctor dug a little harder, clicking his tongue.

“Diego,” she said, smiling at him. “That’s what it would be in Spanish—or Ladino. And your friend?”

“He’s called Ian. That’s”—he groped for a moment and found the English equivalent—“John. That would be...”

“Juan. Diego and Juan.” She touched him gently on the bare shoulder. “You’re friends? Brothers? I can see you come from the same place—where is that?”

“Friends. From...Scotland. The—the—Highlands. A place called Lallybroch.” He’d spoken unwarily, and a pang shot through him at the name, sharper than whatever the doctor was scraping his back with. He looked away; the girl’s face was too close—he didn’t want her to see.

She didn’t move away. Instead, she crouched gracefully beside him and took his hand. Hers was very warm, and the hairs on his wrist rose in response, in spite of what the doctor was doing to his back.

“It will be done soon,” she promised. “He’s cleaning the infected parts; he says they will scab over cleanly now and stop draining.” A gruff question from the doctor. “He asks, do you have fever at night? Bad dreams?”

Startled, he looked back at her, but her face showed only compassion. Her hand tightened on his in reassurance.

“I...yes. Sometimes.”

A grunt from the doctor, more words, and Rebekah let go his hand with a little pat and went out, skirts a-rustle. He closed his eyes and tried to keep the scent of her in his mind—he couldn’t keep it in his nose, as the doctor was now anointing him with something vile-smelling. He could smell himself, too, and his jaw prickled with embarrassment; he reeked of stale sweat, campfire smoke, and fresh blood.

He could hear D’Eglise and Ian talking in the parlor, low-voiced, discussing whether to come and rescue him. He would have called out to them, save that he couldn’t bear the captain to see...He pressed his lips together tight. Aye, well, it was nearly done; he could tell from the doctor’s slower movements, almost gentle now.

“Rebekah!” the doctor called, impatient, and the girl appeared an instant later,

a small cloth bundle in one hand. The doctor let off a short burst of words, then pressed a thin cloth of some sort over Jamie's back; it stuck to the nasty ointment.

"Grandfather says the cloth will protect your shirt until the ointment is absorbed," she told him. "By the time it falls off—don't peel it off, let it come off by itself—the wounds will be scabbed, but the scabs should be soft and not crack."

The doctor took his hand off Jamie's shoulder, and Jamie shot to his feet, looking round for his shirt. Rebekah handed it to him. Her eyes were fastened on his naked chest, and he was—for the first time in his life—embarrassed by the fact that he possessed nipples. An extraordinary but not unpleasant tingle made the curly hairs on his body stand up.

"Thank you—ah, I mean...*gracias, señor.*" His face was flaming, but he bowed to the doctor with as much grace as he could muster. "*Muchas gracias.*"

"*De nada,*" the old man said gruffly, with a dismissive wave of one hand. He pointed at the small bundle in his granddaughter's hand. "Drink. No fever. No dream." And then, surprisingly, he smiled.

"*Shalom,*" he said, and made a shooin' gesture.

D'Eglise, looking pleased with the new job, left Ian and Jamie at a large tavern called *Le Poulet Gai*, where some of the other mercenaries were enjoying themselves—in various ways. The Cheerful Chicken most assuredly did boast a brothel on the upper floor, and slatternly women in various degrees of undress wandered freely through the lower rooms, picking up new customers with whom they vanished upstairs.

The two tall young Scots provoked a certain amount of interest from the women, but when Ian solemnly turned his empty purse inside out in front of them—he having put his money inside his shirt for safety—they left the lads alone.

"Couldna look at one of those," Ian said, turning his back on the whores and devoting himself to his ale. "Not after seein' the wee Jewess up close. Did ye ever seen anything like?"

Jamie shook his head, deep in his own drink. It was sour and fresh and went down a treat, parched as he was from the ordeal in Dr. Hasdi's surgery. He could

still smell the ghost of Rebekah's scent, vanilla and roses, a fugitive fragrance among the reeks of the tavern. He fumbled in his sporran, bringing out the little cloth bundle Rebekah had given him.

"She said—well, the doctor said—I was to drink this. How, d'ye think?" The bundle held a mixture of broken leaves, small sticks, and a coarse powder, and smelled strongly of something he'd never smelled before. Not bad; just odd.

Ian frowned at it. "Well...ye'd brew a tea of it, I suppose," he said. "How else?"

"I havena got anything to brew it in," Jamie said. "I was thinkin'...maybe put it in the ale?"

"Why not?"

—

Ian wasn't paying much attention; he was watching Mathieu Pig-face, who was standing against a wall, summoning whores as they passed by, looking them up and down, and occasionally fingering the merchandise before sending each one on with a smack on the rear.

He wasn't really tempted—the women scairt him, to be honest—but he was curious. If he ever *should*...how did ye start? Just grab, like Mathieu was doing, or did ye need to ask about the price first, to be sure you could afford it? And was it proper to bargain, like ye did for a loaf of bread or a flich of bacon, or would the woman kick ye in the privates and find someone less mean?

He shot a glance at Jamie, who, after a bit of choking, had got his herbed ale down all right and was looking a little glazed. He didn't think Jamie knew, either, but he didn't want to ask, just in case he did.

"I'm goin' to the privy," Jamie said abruptly, and stood up. He looked pale.

"Have ye got the shits?"

"Not yet." With this ominous remark, he was off, bumping into tables in his haste, and Ian followed, pausing long enough to thriftily drain the last of Jamie's ale as well as his own.

Mathieu had found one he liked; he leered at Ian and said something obnoxious as he ushered his choice toward the stairs. Ian smiled cordially and said something much worse in *Gàidhlig*.

By the time Ian got to the yard at the back of the tavern, Jamie had disappeared. Figuring Jamie would be back as soon as he rid himself of his

trouble, Ian leaned tranquilly against the back wall of the building, enjoying the cool night air and watching the folk in the yard.

There were a couple of torches burning, stuck in the ground, and it looked a bit like a painting he'd seen of the Last Judgment, with angels on the one side blowing trumpets, and sinners on the other going down to hell in a tangle of naked limbs and bad behavior. It was mostly sinners out here, though now and then he thought he saw an angel floating past the corner of his eye. He licked his lips thoughtfully, wondering what was in the stuff Dr. Hasdi had given Jamie.

Jamie himself emerged from the privy at the far side of the yard, looking a little more settled in himself. Spotting Ian, he made his way through the small knots of drinkers sitting on the ground singing and the others wandering to and fro, smiling vaguely as they looked for something, not knowing what they were looking for.

Ian was seized by a sudden sense of revulsion, almost terror: a fear that he would never see Scotland again, would die here, among strangers.

"We should go home," he said abruptly, as soon as Jamie was in earshot. "As soon as we've finished this job."

"Home?" Jamie looked strangely at Ian, as though he were speaking some incomprehensible language.

"Ye've business there, and so have I. We—"

A skelloch and the thud and clatter of a falling table with its burden of dishes interrupted them. The back door of the tavern burst open and a woman ran out, yelling in a sort of French that Ian didn't understand but knew fine was bad words from the tone of it. Similar words in a loud male voice, and Mathieu charged out after her.

He caught her by the shoulder, spun her round, and cracked her across the face with the back of one meaty hand. Ian flinched at the sound, and Jamie's hand tightened on his wrist.

"What—" Jamie began, but then stopped dead.

"*Putain de...merde...tu fais...chien,*" Mathieu panted, slapping her with each word. She shrieked some more, trying to get away, but he had her by the arm and now jerked her round and pushed her hard in the back, knocking her to her knees.

Jamie's hand loosened, and Ian grabbed his arm, tight.

"Don't," he said tersely, and yanked Jamie back into the shadow.

“I wasn’t,” Jamie said, but under his breath and not noticing much what he was saying, because his eyes were fixed on what was happening, as much as Ian’s were.

The light from the door spilled over the woman, glowing off her hanging breasts, bared in the ripped neck of her shift. Glowing off her wide round buttocks, too; Mathieu had shoved her skirts up to her waist and was behind her, jerking at his flies one-handed, the other hand twisted in her hair so her head pulled back, throat straining and her face white-eyed as a panicked horse.

“*Pute!*” he said, and gave her arse a loud smack, open-handed. “Nobody says no to me!” He’d got his cock out now, in his hand, and shoved it into the woman with a violence that made her hurdies wobble and knotted Ian from knees to neck.

“*Merde,*” Jamie said, still under his breath. Other men and a couple of women had come out into the yard and were gathered round with the others, enjoying the spectacle as Mathieu set to work in a businesslike manner. He let go of the woman’s hair in order to grasp her by the hips, and her head hung down, hair hiding her face. She grunted with each thrust, panting bad words that made the onlookers laugh.

Ian was shocked—and shocked as much at his own arousal as at what Mathieu was doing. He’d not seen open coupling before, only the heaving and giggling of things happening under a blanket, now and then a wee flash of pale flesh. This... He ought to look away, he knew that fine. But he didn’t.

Jamie took in a breath, but no telling whether he meant to say something. Mathieu threw back his big head and howled like a wolf, and the watchers all cheered. Then his face convulsed, gapped teeth showing in a grin like a skull’s, and he made a noise like a pig gives out when you knock it clean on the head and collapsed on top of the whore.

The whore squirmed out from under his bulk, abusing him roundly. Ian understood what she was saying now and would have been shocked anew if he’d had any capacity for being shocked left. She hopped up, evidently not hurt, and kicked Mathieu in the ribs once, then twice, but having no shoes on, she didn’t hurt him. She reached for the purse still tied at his waist, stuck her hand in, and grabbed a handful of coins, then kicked him once more for luck and stomped off into the house, holding up the neck of her shift. Mathieu lay sprawled on the ground, his breeks around his thighs, laughing and wheezing.

Ian heard Jamie swallow and realized he was still gripping Jamie’s arm. Jamie

didn't seem to have noticed. Ian let go. His face was burning all the way down to the middle of his chest, and he didn't think it was just torchlight on Jamie's face, either.

"Let's...go someplace else," he said.

"I wish we'd...done something," Jamie blurted. They hadn't spoken at all after leaving *Le Poulet Gai*. They'd walked clear to the other end of the street and down a side alley, eventually coming to rest in a small tavern, fairly quiet. Juanito and Raoul were there, dicing with some locals, but gave Ian and Jamie no more than a glance.

"I dinna see what we *could* have done," Ian said reasonably. "I mean, we could maybe have taken on Mathieu together and got off with only bein' maimed. But ye ken it would ha' started a kebbie-lebbie, wi' all the others there." He hesitated and gave Jamie a quick glance before returning his gaze to his cup. "And...she was a whore. I mean, she wasna a—"

"I ken what ye mean." Jamie cut him off. "Aye, ye're right. And she did go with the man, to start. God knows what he did to make her take against him, but there's likely plenty to choose from. I wish—ah, feck it. D'ye want something to eat?"

Ian shook his head. The barmaid brought them a jug of wine, glanced at them, and dismissed them as negligible. It was rough wine that took the skin off the insides of your mouth, but it had a decent taste to it, under the resin fumes, and wasn't too much watered. Jamie drank deep and faster than he generally did; he was uneasy in his skin, prickling and irritable, and wanted the feeling to go away.

There were a few women in the place, not many. Jamie had to think that whoring maybe wasn't a profitable business, wretched as most of the poor creatures looked, raddled and half toothless. Maybe it wore them down, having to...He turned away from the thought and, finding the jug empty, waved to the barmaid for another.

Juanito gave a joyful whoop and said something in Ladino. Looking in that direction, Jamie saw one of the whores who'd been lurking in the shadows come gliding purposefully in, bending down to give Juanito a congratulatory kiss as he scooped in his winnings. Jamie snorted a little, trying to blow the smell of her

out of his neb—she'd passed by close enough that he'd got a good whiff of her, a stink of rancid sweat and dead fish. Alexandre had told him that was from unclean privates, and he believed it.

He went back to the wine. Ian was matching him, cup for cup, and likely for the same reason. His friend wasn't usually irritable or crankit, but if he was well put out, he'd often stay that way until the next dawn—a good sleep erased his bad temper, but 'til then you didn't want to rile him.

He shot a sidelong glance at Ian. He couldn't tell Ian about Jenny. He just... couldn't. But neither could he think about her, left alone at Lallybroch...maybe with ch—

“Oh, God,” he said, under his breath. “No. Please. No.”

“*Dinna come back,*” Murtagh had said, and plainly meant it. Well, he *would* go back—but not yet a while. It wouldn't help his sister, him going back just now and bringing Randall and the redcoats straight to her like flies to a fresh-killed deer...He shoved that analogy hastily out of sight, horrified. The truth was, it made him sick with shame to think about Jenny, and he tried not to—and was the more ashamed because he mostly succeeded.

Ian's gaze was fixed on another of the harlots. She was old, in her thirties at least, but had most of her teeth and was cleaner than most. She was flirting with Juanito and Raoul, too, and Jamie wondered whether she'd mind if she found out they were Jews. Maybe a whore couldn't afford to be choosy.

His treacherous mind at once presented him with a picture of his sister, obliged to follow that walk of life to feed herself, made to take any man who... Blessed Mother, what would the folk, the tenants, the servants, do to her if they found out what had happened? The talk...He shut his eyes tight, hoping to block the vision.

“That one's none sae bad,” Ian said meditatively, and Jamie opened his eyes. The better-looking whore had bent over Juanito, deliberately rubbing her breast against his warty ear. “If she doesna mislike a Jew, maybe she'd...”

The blood flamed up in Jamie's face.

“If ye've got any thought to my sister, ye're no going to—to—pollute yourself wi' a French whore!”

Ian's face went blank but then flooded with color in turn.

“Oh, aye? And if I said your sister wasna worth it?”

Jamie's fist caught him in the eye and he flew backward, overturning the

bench and crashing into the next table. Jamie scarcely noticed, the agony in his hand shooting fire and brimstone from his crushed knuckles up his forearm. He rocked to and fro, injured hand clutched between his thighs, cursing freely in three languages.

Ian sat on the floor, bent over, holding his eye and breathing through his mouth in short gasps. After a minute, he straightened up. His eye was puffing already, leaking tears down his lean cheek. He got up, shaking his head slowly, and put the bench back in place. Then he sat down, picked up his cup and took a deep gulp, put it down and blew out his breath. He took the snot-rag Jamie was holding out to him and dabbed at his eye.

“Sorry,” Jamie managed. The agony in his hand was beginning to subside, but the anguish in his heart wasn’t.

“Aye,” Ian said quietly, not meeting his eye. “I wish we’d done something, too. Ye want to share a bowl o’ stew?”

—

Two days later, they set off for Paris. After some thought, D’Eglise had decided that Rebekah and her maid, Marie, would travel by coach, escorted by Jamie and Ian. D’Eglise and the rest of the troop would take the money, with some men sent ahead in small groups to wait, both to check the road and so that they could ride in shifts, not stopping anywhere along the way. The women obviously would have to stop, but if they had nothing valuable with them, they’d be in no danger.

It was only when they went to collect the women at Dr. Hasdi’s residence that they learned the Torah scroll and its custodian, a sober-looking man of middle age introduced to them as Monsieur Peretz, would be traveling with Rebekah. “I trust my greatest treasures to you, gentlemen,” the doctor told them, through his granddaughter, and gave them a formal little bow.

“May you find us worthy of trust, lord,” Jamie managed in halting Hebrew, and Ian bowed with great solemnity, hand on his heart. Dr. Hasdi looked from one to the other, gave a small nod, and then stepped forward to kiss Rebekah on the forehead.

“Go with God, child,” he whispered, in something close enough to Spanish that Jamie understood it.

—

All went well for the first day and the first night. The autumn weather held fine, with no more than a pleasant tang of chill in the air, and the horses were sound. Dr. Hasdi had provided Jamie with a purse to cover the expenses of the journey, and they all ate decently and slept at a very respectable inn—Ian being sent in first to inspect the premises and insure against any nasty surprises.

The next day dawned cloudy, but the wind came up and blew the clouds away before noon, leaving the sky clean and brilliant as a sapphire overhead. Jamie was riding in the van, Ian post, and the coach was making good time, in spite of a rutted, winding road.

As they reached the top of a small rise, though, Jamie brought his horse to a sudden stop, raising a hand to halt the coach, and Ian reined up alongside him. A small stream had run through the roadbed in the dip below, making a bog some ten feet across.

“What—” Jamie began, but was interrupted. The driver had pulled his team up for an instant, but at a peremptory shout from inside the coach, now snapped the reins over the horses’ backs and the coach lunged forward, narrowly missing Jamie’s horse, which shied violently, flinging its rider off into the bushes.

“Jamie! Are ye all right?” Torn between concern for his friend and for his duty, Ian held his horse, glancing to and fro.

“Stop them! Get them! *Ifrinn!*” Jamie scuttled crabwise out of the weeds, face scratched and bright red with fury. Ian didn’t wait but kicked his horse and lit out in pursuit of the heavy coach, this now lurching from side to side as it ran down into the boggy bottom. Shrill feminine cries of protest from inside were drowned by the driver’s exclamation of “*Ladrones!*”

That was one word he kent in Spanish—“thieves.” One of the *ladrones* was already skittering up the side of the coach like an eight-legged cob, and the driver promptly dived off the box, hit the ground, and ran for it.

“Coward!” Ian bellowed, and gave out with a Hieland screech that set the coach horses dancing, flinging their heads to and fro, and giving the would-be kidnapper fits with the reins. He forced his own horse—which hadn’t liked the screeching any better than the coach horses did—through the narrow gap between the brush and the coach and, as he came even with the driver, had his pistol out. He drew down on the fellow—a young chap with long yellow hair—and shouted at him to pull up.

The man glanced at him, crouched low, and slapped the reins on the horses’

backs, shouting at them in a voice like iron. Ian fired and missed—but the delay had let Jamie catch them up; he saw Jamie’s red head poke up as he climbed the back of the coach, and there were more screams from inside as Jamie pounded across the roof and launched himself at the yellow-haired driver.

Leaving that bit of trouble to Jamie to deal with, Ian kicked his horse forward, meaning to get ahead and seize the reins, but another of the thieves had beat him to it and was hauling down on one horse’s head. Aye, well, it worked once. Ian inflated his lungs as far as they’d go and let rip.

The coach horses bolted in a spray of mud. Jamie and the yellow-haired driver fell off the box, and the whoreson in the road disappeared, possibly trampled into the mire. Ian hoped so. Blood in his eye, he reined up his own agitated mount, drew his broadsword, and charged across the road, shrieking like a *ban-sidhe* and slashing wildly. Two thieves stared up at him openmouthed, then broke and ran for it.

He chased them a wee bit into the brush, but the going was too thick for his horse, and he turned back to find Jamie rolling about in the road, earnestly hammering the yellow-haired laddie. Ian hesitated—help him, or see to the coach? A loud crash and horrible screams decided him at once, and he charged down the road.

The coach, driver-less, had run off the road, hit the bog, and fallen sideways into a ditch. From the clishmaclaver coming from inside, he thought the women were likely all right and, swinging off his horse, wrapped the reins hastily round a tree and went to take care of the coach horses before they killed themselves.

It took no little while to disentangle the mess single-handed—luckily the horses had not managed to damage themselves significantly—and his efforts were not aided by the emergence from the coach of two agitated and very disheveled women carrying on in an incomprehensible mix of French and Ladino.

Just as well, he thought, giving them a vague wave of a hand he could ill spare at the moment. *It wouldna help to hear what they’re saying*. Then he picked up the word “dead” and changed his mind. Monsieur Peretz was normally so silent that Ian had in fact forgotten his presence, in the confusion of the moment. He was even more silent now, Ian learned, having broken his neck when the coach overturned.

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, running to look. But the man was undeniably dead, and the horses were still creating a ruckus, slipping and stamping in the mud of the

ditch. He was too busy for a bit to worry about how Jamie was faring, but as he got the second horse detached from the coach and safely tethered to a tree, he did begin to wonder where the wean was.

He didn't think it safe to leave the women; the banditti might come back, and a right numpty he'd look if they did. There was no sign of their driver, who had evidently abandoned them out of fright. He told the ladies to sit down under a sycamore tree and gave them his canteen to drink from, and, after a bit, they stopped talking quite so fast.

"Where is Diego?" Rebekah said, quite intelligibly.

"Och, he'll be along presently," Ian said, hoping it was true. He was beginning to be worrit himself.

"Perhaps he's been killed, too," said the maidservant, who shot an ill-tempered glare at her mistress. "How would you feel then?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't—I mean, he's not. I'm sure," Rebekah repeated, not sounding all that sure.

She was right, though; no sooner had Ian decided to march the women back along the road to have a keek when Jamie came shambling around the bend and sank down in the dry grass, closing his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Rebekah asked, bending down anxiously to look at him from under the brim of her straw traveling hat. He didn't look very peart, Ian thought.

"Aye, fine." He touched the back of his head, wincing slightly. "Just a wee dunt on the heid. The fellow who fell down in the road," he explained to Ian, closing his eyes again. "He got up again and hit me from behind. Didna knock me clean out, but it distracted me for a wee bit, and when I got my wits back, they'd both gone—the fellow that hit me, and the one I was hittin'."

"Mmphm," said Ian, and, squatting in front of his friend, thumbed up one of Jamie's eyelids and peered intently into the bloodshot blue eye behind it. He had no idea what to look for, but he'd seen Père Renault do that, after which he usually applied leeches somewhere. As it was, both that eye and the other one looked fine to him; just as well, as he hadn't any leeches. He handed Jamie the canteen and went to look the horses over.

"Two of them are sound enough," he reported, coming back. "The light bay's lame. Did the bandits take your horse? And what about the driver?"

Jamie looked surprised.

“I forgot I had a horse,” he confessed. “I dinna ken about the driver—didna see him lyin’ in the road, at least.” He glanced vaguely round. “Where’s Monsieur Pickle?”

“Dead. Stay there, aye?”

Ian sighed, got up, and loped back down the road, where there was no sign of the driver, though he walked to and fro calling for a while. Fortunately, he did come across Jamie’s horse peaceably cropping grass by the verge. He rode it back and found the women on their feet, discussing something in low voices, now and then looking down the road or standing on their toes in a vain attempt to see through the trees.

Jamie was still sitting on the ground, eyes closed—but at least upright.

“Can ye ride, man?” Ian asked softly, squatting down by his friend. To his relief, Jamie opened his eyes at once.

“Oh, aye. Ye’re thinkin’ we should ride into Saint-Aulaye and send someone back to do something about the coach and Peretz?”

“What else is there to do?”

“Nothing I can think of. I dinna suppose we can take him with us.” Jamie got to his feet, swaying a little but without needing to hold on to the tree. “Can the women ride, d’ye think?”

Marie could, it turned out—at least a little. Rebekah had never been on a horse. After more discussion than Ian would have believed possible on the subject, he got the late M. Peretz decently laid out on the coach’s seat with a handkerchief over his face against flies, and the rest of them finally mounted: Jamie on his horse with the Torah scroll in its canvas wrappings bound behind his saddle—between the profanation of its being touched by a Gentile and the prospect of its being left in the coach for anyone happening by to find, the women had reluctantly allowed the former—the maid on one of the coach horses, with a pair of saddlebags fashioned from the covers of the coach’s seats, these filled with as much of the women’s luggage as they could cram in, and Ian with Rebekah on the saddle before him.

Rebekah looked like a wee dolly, but she was surprisingly solid, as he found when she put her foot in his hands and he tossed her up into the saddle. She didn’t manage to swing her leg over and instead lay across the saddle like a dead deer, waving her arms and legs in agitation. Wrestling her into an upright position and getting himself set behind her left him red-faced and sweating, far more than dealing with the horses had.

Jamie gave him a raised eyebrow, as much jealousy as amusement in it, and he gave Jamie a squinted eye in return and put his arm round Rebekah's waist to settle her against him, hoping that he didn't stink too badly.

It was dark by the time they made it into Saint-Aulaye and found an inn that could provide them with two rooms. Ian talked to the landlord and arranged that someone should go in the morning to retrieve M. Peretz's body and bury it; the women weren't happy about the lack of proper preparation of the body, but as they insisted he must be buried before the next sundown, there wasn't much else to be done. Then he inspected the women's room, looked under the beds, rattled the shutters in a confident manner, and bade them good night. They looked that wee bit frazzled.

Going back to the other room, he heard a sweet chiming sound and found Jamie on his knees, pushing the bundle that contained the Torah scroll under the single bed.

"That'll do," he said, sitting back on his heels with a sigh. He looked nearly as done up as the women, Ian thought, but didn't say so.

"I'll go and have some supper sent up," he said. "I smelled a joint roasting. Some of that, and maybe—"

"Whatever they've got," Jamie said fervently. "Bring it all."

They ate heartily, and separately, in their rooms. Jamie was beginning to feel that the second helping of *tarte tatin* with clotted cream had been a mistake, when Rebekah came into the men's room, followed by her maid carrying a small tray with a jug on it, wisping aromatic steam. Jamie sat up straight, restraining a small cry as pain flashed through his head. Rebekah frowned at him, gull-winged brows lowering in concern.

"Your head hurts very much, Diego?"

"No, it's fine. No but a wee bang on the heid." He was sweating and his wame was wobbly, but he pressed his hands flat on the table and was sure he looked steady. She appeared not to agree and came close, bending down to gaze searchingly into his eyes.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “You look...clammy.”

“Oh. Aye?” he said, rather feebly.

“If she means ye resemble a fresh-shucked clam, then, aye, ye do,” Ian informed him. “Shocked, ken? All pale and wet and—”

“I ken what clammy means, aye?” He glowered at Ian, who gave him half a grin—damn, he must look awful; Ian was actually worried. He swallowed, groping for something witty to say in reassurance, but his gorge rose suddenly and he was obliged to shut both mouth and eyes tightly, concentrating fiercely to make it go back down.

“Tea,” Rebekah was saying firmly. She took the jug from her maid and poured a cup, then folded Jamie’s hands about it and, holding his hands with her own, guided the cup to his mouth. “Drink. It will help.”

He drank, and it did. At least he felt less queasy at once. He recognized the taste of the tea, though he thought this cup had a few other things in it, too.

“Again.” Another cup was presented; he managed to drink this one alone, and by the time it was down, he felt a good bit better. His head still throbbed with his heartbeat, but the pain seemed be standing a little apart from him, somehow.

“You shouldn’t be left alone for a while,” Rebekah informed him, and sat down, sweeping her skirts elegantly around her ankles. He opened his mouth to say that he wasn’t alone, Ian was there—but caught Ian’s eye in time and stopped.

“The bandits,” she was saying to Ian, her pretty brow creased, “who do you think that they were?”

“Ah...well, depends. If they kent who ye were and wanted to abduct ye, that’s one thing. But could be they were no but random thieves and saw the coach and thought they’d chance it for what they might get. Ye didna recognize any of them, did ye?”

Her eyes sprang wide. They weren’t quite the color of Annalise’s, Jamie thought hazily. A softer brown...like the breast feathers on a grouse.

“Know who I was?” she whispered. “Wanted to abduct me?” She swallowed. “You...think that’s possible?” She gave a little shudder.

“Well, I dinna ken, of course. Here, *a nighean*, ye ought to have a wee nip of that tea, I’m thinkin’.” Ian stretched out a long arm for the jug, but she moved it back, shaking her head.

“No, it’s medicine—and Diego needs it. Don’t you?” she said, leaning

forward to peer earnestly into Jamie's eyes. She'd taken off the hat but had her hair tucked up—mostly—in a lacy white cap with pink ribbon. He nodded obediently.

“Marie—bring some brandy, please. The shock...” She swallowed again and wrapped her arms briefly around herself. Jamie noticed the way it pushed her breasts up, so they swelled just a little above her stays. There was a bit of tea left in his cup; he drank it automatically.

Marie came with the brandy and poured a glass for Rebekah—then one for Ian, at Rebekah's gesture, and when Jamie made a small polite noise in his throat, half-filled his cup, pouring in more tea on top of it. The taste was peculiar, but he didn't really mind. The pain had gone off to the far side of the room; he could see it sitting over there, a wee glowering sort of purple thing with a bad-tempered expression on its face. He laughed at it, and Ian frowned at him.

“What are ye giggling at?”

Jamie couldn't think how to describe the pain beastie, so he just shook his head, which proved a mistake—the pain looked suddenly gleeful and shot back into his head with a noise like tearing cloth. The room spun and he clutched the table with both hands.

“Diego!” Chairs scraped and there was a good bit of clishmaclaver that he paid no attention to. Next thing he knew, he was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling beams. One of them seemed to be twining slowly, like a vine growing.

“...and he told the captain that there was someone among the Jews who kent about...” Ian's voice was soothing, earnest and slow so Rebekah would understand him—though Jamie thought she maybe understood more than she said. The twining beam was slowly sprouting small green leaves, and he had the faint thought that this was unusual, but a great sense of tranquillity had come over him and he didn't mind it a bit.

Rebekah was saying something now, her voice soft and worried, and with some effort he turned his head to look. She was leaning over the table toward Ian, and he had both big hands wrapped round hers, reassuring her that he and Jamie would let no harm come to her.

A different face came suddenly into his view: the maid, Marie, frowning down at him. She rudely pulled back his eyelid and peered into his eye, so close he could smell the garlic on her breath. He blinked hard, and she let go with a small “hmph!” then turned to say something to Rebekah, who replied in quick Ladino. The maid shook her head dubiously but left the room.

Her face didn't leave with her, though. He could still see it, frowning down at him from above. It had become attached to the leafy beam, and he now realized that there was a snake up there, a serpent with a woman's head, and an apple in its mouth—that couldn't be right, surely it should be a pig?—and it came slithering down the wall and right over his chest, pressing the apple close to his face. It smelled wonderful, and he wanted to bite it, but before he could, he felt the weight of the snake change, going soft and heavy, and he arched his back a little, feeling the distinct imprint of big round breasts squashing against him. The snake's tail—she was mostly a woman now, but her back end seemed still to be snake-ish—was delicately stroking the inside of his thigh.

He made a very high-pitched noise, and Ian came hurriedly to the bed.

“Are ye all right, man?”

“I—oh. Oh! Oh, Jesus, do that again.”

“Do *what*—” Ian was beginning, when Rebekah appeared, putting a hand on Ian's arm.

“Don't worry,” she said, looking intently at Jamie. “He's all right. The medicine—it gives men strange dreams.”

“He doesna look like he's asleep,” Ian said dubiously.

In fact, Jamie was squirming—or thought he was squirming—on the bed, trying to persuade the lower half of the snake woman to change, too. He was panting; he could hear himself.

“It's a waking dream,” Rebekah said reassuringly. “Come, leave him. He'll fall quite asleep in a bit, you'll see.”

Jamie didn't think he'd fallen asleep, but it was evidently some time later that he emerged from a remarkable tryst with the snake demon—he didn't know how he knew she was a demon, but clearly she was—who had not changed her lower half but had a very womanly mouth about her. The tryst also included a number of her friends, these being small female demons who licked his ears—and other things—with great enthusiasm.

He turned his head on the pillow to allow one of these better access and saw, with no sense of surprise, Ian kissing Rebekah. The brandy bottle had fallen over, empty, and Jamie seemed to see the wraith of its perfume rise swirling through the air like smoke, wrapping the two of them in a mist shot with rainbows.

He closed his eyes again, the better to attend to the snake lady, who now had a

number of new and interesting acquaintances. When he opened his eyes some time later, Ian and Rebekah were gone.

At one point he heard Ian give a sort of strangled cry and wondered dimly what had happened, but it didn't seem important, and the thought drifted away. He slept.

—

He woke feeling limp as a frostbitten cabbage leaf, but the pain in his head was gone. He just lay there for a bit, enjoying the feeling. It was dark in the room, and it was some time before he realized from the smell of brandy that Ian was lying beside him.

Memory came back to him. It took a little while to disentangle the real memories from the memory of dreams, but he was quite sure he'd seen Ian embracing Rebekah—and her, him. What the devil had happened *then*?

Ian wasn't asleep; he could tell. His friend lay rigid as one of the tomb figures in the crypt at Saint Denis, and his breathing was rapid and shaky, as though he'd just run a mile uphill. Jamie cleared his throat, and Ian jerked as though stabbed with a brooch pin.

"Aye, so?" he whispered, and Ian's breathing stopped abruptly. He swallowed audibly.

"If ye breathe a word of this to your sister," he said in an impassioned whisper, "I'll stab ye in your sleep, cut off your heid, and kick it to Arles and back."

Jamie didn't want to think about his sister, and he did want to hear about Rebekah, so he merely repeated, "Aye. So?"

Ian made a small grunting noise, indicative of thinking how best to begin, and turned over in his plaid, facing Jamie.

"Aye, well. Ye raved a bit about the naked she-devils ye were havin' it away with, and I didna think the lass should have to be hearing that manner o' thing, so I said we should go into the other room, and—"

"Was this before or after ye started kissing her?" Jamie asked.

Ian inhaled strongly through his nose. "After," he said tersely. "And she was kissin' me back, aye?"

"Aye, I noticed that. So then...?" He could feel Ian squirming slowly, like a worm on a hook, but Jamie waited. It often took Ian a moment to find words, but

it was usually worth waiting for. Certainly in this instance.

He was a little shocked—and frankly envious—and he did wonder what might happen when the lass’s affianced discovered she wasn’t a virgin, but he supposed the man might not find out; she seemed a clever lass. It might be wise to leave D’Eglise’s troop, though, and head south, just in case...

“D’ye think it hurts a lot to be circumcised?” Ian asked suddenly.

“I do. How could it not?” His hand sought out his own member, protectively rubbing a thumb over the bit in question. True, it wasn’t a very big bit, but...

“Well, they do it to wee bairns,” Ian pointed out. “Canna be that bad, can it?”

“Mmphm,” Jamie said, unconvinced, though fairness made him add, “Aye, well, and they did it to Christ, too.”

“Aye?” Ian sounded startled. “Aye, I suppose so—I hadna thought o’ that.”

“Well, ye dinna think of Him bein’ a Jew, do ye? But He was, to start.”

There was a momentary, meditative silence before Ian spoke again.

“D’ye think Jesus ever did it? Wi’ a lass, I mean, before he went to preachin’?”

“I think Père Renault’s goin’ to have ye for blasphemy, next thing.”

Ian twitched, as though worried that the priest might be lurking in the shadows.

“Père Renault’s nowhere near here, thank God.”

“Aye, but ye’ll need to confess yourself to him, won’t ye?”

Ian shot upright, clutching his plaid around him.

“What?”

“Ye’ll go to hell, else, if ye get killed,” Jamie pointed out, feeling rather smug. There was moonlight through the window and he could see Ian’s face drawn in anxious thought, his deep-set eyes darting right and left from Scylla to Charybdis. Suddenly Ian turned his head toward Jamie, having spotted the possibility of an open channel between the threats of hell and Père Renault.

“I’d only go to hell if it was a mortal sin,” he said. “If it’s no but venial, I’d only have to spend a thousand years or so in purgatory. That wouldna be so bad.”

“Of course it’s a mortal sin,” Jamie said, cross. “Anybody kens fornication’s a mortal sin, ye numpty.”

“Aye, but...” Ian made a “wait a bit” gesture with one hand, deep in thought.

“To be a *mortal* sin, though, ye’ve got the three things. Requirements, like.” He put up an index finger. “It’s got to be seriously wrong.” Middle finger. “Ye’ve got to *know* it’s seriously wrong.” Ring finger. “And ye’ve got to give full consent to it. That’s the way of it, aye?” He put his hand down and looked at Jamie, brows raised.

“Aye, and which part of that did ye not do? The full consent? Did she rape ye?” He was chaffing, but Ian turned his face away in a manner that gave him a sudden doubt. “Ian?”

“Noo...” his friend said, but it sounded doubtful, too. “It wasna like that—exactly. I meant more the seriously wrong part. I dinna think it was...” His voice trailed off.

Jamie flung himself over, raised on one elbow.

“Ian,” he said, steel in his voice. “What did ye *do* to the lass? If ye took her maidenheid, it’s seriously wrong. Especially with her betrothed. Oh—” A thought occurred to him, and he leaned a little closer, lowering his voice. “Was she no a virgin? Maybe that’s different.” If the lass was an out-and-out wanton, perhaps...she probably *did* write poetry, come to think...

Ian had now folded his arms on his knees and was resting his forehead on them, his voice muffled in the folds of his plaid. “...dinna ken...” emerged in a strangled croak.

Jamie reached out and dug his fingers hard into Ian’s calf. His friend unfolded with a startled cry that made someone in a distant chamber shift and grunt in their sleep.

“What d’ye mean ye dinna ken? How could ye not notice?” he gibed.

“Ah...well...she...erm...she did me wi’ her hand,” Ian blurted. “Before I could...well.”

“Oh.” Jamie rolled onto his back, somewhat deflated in spirit, if not in flesh. His cock seemed still to want to hear the details.

“Is that seriously wrong?” Ian asked, turning his face toward Jamie again. “Or—well, I canna say I really gave full *consent* to it, because that wasna what I had in mind doing at all, but...”

“I think ye’re headed for the Bad Place,” Jamie assured him. “Ye meant to do it, whether ye managed or not. And how did it happen, come to that? Did she just...take hold?”

Ian let out a long, long sigh and sank his head in his hands. He looked as

though it hurt.

“Well, we kissed for a bit, and there was more brandy—lots more. She...er... she’d take a mouthful and kiss me and, er...put it into my mouth, and—”

“*Ifrinn!*”

“Will ye not say, ‘Hell!’ like that, please? I dinna want to think about it.”

“Sorry. Go on. Did she let ye feel her breasts?”

“Just a bit. She wouldna take her stays off, but I could feel her nipples through her shift—did ye say something?”

“No,” Jamie said with an effort. “What then?”

“Well, she put her hand under my kilt and then pulled it out again like she’d touched a snake.”

“And had she?”

“She had, aye. She was shocked. Will ye no snort like that?” he said, annoyed. “Ye’ll wake the whole house. It was because it wasna circumcised.”

“Oh. Is that why she wouldna...er...the regular way?”

“She didna say so, but maybe. After a bit, though, she wanted to look at it, and that’s when...well.”

“Mmphm.” Naked demons versus the chance of damnation or not, Jamie thought Ian had had well the best of it this evening. A thought occurred to him. “Why did ye ask if being circumcised hurts? Ye werena thinking of doing it, were ye? For her, I mean?”

“I wouldna say the thought hadna occurred to me,” Ian admitted. “I mean...I thought I should maybe marry her, under the circumstances. But I suppose I couldna become a Jew, even if I got up the nerve to be circumcised—my mam would tear my heid off if I did.”

“No, ye’re right,” Jamie agreed. “She would. *And* ye’d go to hell.” The thought of the rare and delicate Rebekah churning butter in the yard of a Highland croft or waulking urine-soaked wool with her bare feet was slightly more ludicrous than the vision of Ian in a skullcap and whiskers—but not by much. “Besides, ye havena got any money, have ye?”

“A bit,” Ian said thoughtfully. “Not enough to go and live in Timbuktu, though, and I’d have to go at least that far.”

Jamie sighed and stretched, easing himself. A meditative silence fell—Ian no doubt contemplating perdition, Jamie reliving the better bits of his opium dreams

but with Rebekah's face on the snake lady. Finally he broke the silence, turning to his friend.

“So...was it worth the chance of goin' to hell?”

Ian sighed long and deep once more, but it was the sigh of a man at peace with himself.

“Oh, aye.”

—

Jamie woke at dawn, feeling altogether well and in a much better frame of mind. Some kindly soul had brought a jug of sour ale and some bread and cheese. He refreshed himself with these as he dressed, pondering the day's work.

He'd have to collect a few men to go back and deal with the coach.

He thought the coach wasn't badly damaged; they might get it back up on the road again by noon....How far might it be to Bonnes? That was the next town with an inn. If it was too far, or the coach too badly hurt, or he couldn't find a Jew to dispose decently of M. Peretz, they'd need to stay the night here again. He fingered his purse but thought he had enough for another night and the hire of men; the doctor had been generous.

He was beginning to wonder what was keeping Ian and the women. Though he kent women took more time to do anything than a man would, let alone getting dressed—well, they had stays and the like to fret with, after all...He sipped ale, contemplating a vision of Rebekah's stays and the very vivid images his mind had been conjuring ever since Ian's description of his encounter with the lass. He could all but see her nipples through the thin fabric of her shift, smooth and round as pebbles...

Ian burst through the door, wild-eyed, his hair standing on end.

“They're gone!”

Jamie choked on his ale.

“What? How?”

Ian understood what he meant and was already heading for the bed.

“No one took them. There's nay sign of a struggle, and their things are gone. The window's open, and the shutters aren't broken.”

Jamie was on his knees alongside Ian, thrusting first his hands and then his head and shoulders under the bed. There was a canvas-wrapped bundle there,

and he was flooded with a momentary relief—which disappeared the instant Ian dragged it into the light. It made a noise, but not the gentle chime of golden bells. It rattled, and when Jamie seized the corner of the canvas and unrolled it, the contents were shown to be naught but sticks and stones, these hastily wrapped in a woman's petticoat to give the bundle the appropriate bulk.

"*Cramouille!*" he said, this being the worst word he could think of on short notice. And very appropriate, too, if what he thought had happened really had. He turned on Ian.

"She drugged me and seduced you, and her bloody maid stole in here and took the thing whilst ye had your fat heid buried in her...er..."

"Charms," Ian said succinctly, and flashed him a brief, evil grin. "Ye're only jealous. Where d'ye think they've gone?"

It was the truth, and Jamie abandoned any further recriminations, rising and strapping on his belt, hastily arranging dirk, sword, and ax in the process.

"Not to Paris, would be my guess. Come on, we'll ask the ostler."

The ostler confessed himself at a loss; he'd been the worse for drink in the hay shed, he said, and if someone had taken two horses from the shelter, he hadn't waked to see it.

"Aye, right," said Jamie, impatient, and, grabbing the man's shirtfront, lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the inn's stone wall. The man's head bounced once off the stones and he sagged in Jamie's grip, still conscious but dazed. Jamie drew his dirk left-handed and pressed the edge of it against the man's weathered throat.

"Try again," he suggested pleasantly. "I dinna care about the money they gave you—keep it. I want to know which way they went and when they left."

The man tried to swallow but abandoned the attempt when his Adam's apple hit the edge of the dirk.

"About three hours past moonrise," he croaked. "They went toward Bonnes. There's a crossroads no more than three miles from here," he added, now trying urgently to be helpful.

Jamie dropped him with a grunt. "Aye, fine," he said in disgust. "Ian—oh, ye've got them." For Ian had gone straight for their own horses while Jamie dealt with the ostler and was already leading one out, bridled, the saddle over his arm. "I'll settle the bill, then."

The women hadn't made off with his purse; that was something. Either

Rebekah bat-Leah Hauberger had some vestige of conscience—which he doubted very much—or she just hadn't thought of it.

It was still early; the women had perhaps six hours' lead.

"Do we believe the ostler?" Ian asked, settling himself in the saddle.

Jamie dug in his purse, pulled out a copper penny, and flipped it, catching it on the back of his hand.

"Tails we do, heads we don't?" He took his hand away and peered at the coin. "Heads."

"Aye, but the road back is straight all the way through Yvrac," Ian pointed out. "And it's nay more than three miles to the crossroads, he said. Whatever ye want to say about the lass, she's no a fool."

Jamie considered that one for a moment, then nodded. Rebekah couldn't have been sure how much lead she'd have—and unless she'd been lying about her ability to ride (which he wouldn't put past her, but such things weren't easy to fake and she was gey clumsy in the saddle), she'd want to reach a place where the trail could be lost before her pursuers could catch up with her. Besides, the ground was still damp with dew; there might be a chance...

"Aye, come on, then."

Luck was with them. No one had passed the inn during the late-night watches, and while the roadbed was trampled with hoof marks, the recent prints of the women's horses showed clear, edges still crumbling in the damp earth. Once sure they'd got upon the track, the men galloped for the crossroads, hoping to reach it before other travelers obscured the marks.

No such luck. Farm wagons were already on the move, loaded with produce headed for Parcoul or La Roche-Chalais, and the crossroads was a maze of ruts and hoofprints. But Jamie had the bright thought of sending Ian down the road that lay toward Parcoul, while he took the one toward La Roche-Chalais, catching up the incoming wagons and questioning the drivers. Within an hour, Ian came pelting back with the news that the women had been seen, riding slowly and cursing volubly at each other, toward Parcoul.

“And *that*,” he said, panting for breath, “is not all.”

“Aye? Well, tell me while we ride.”

Ian did. He’d been hurrying back to find Jamie when he’d met Josef-from-Alsace, just short of the crossroads, come in search of them.

“D’Eglise was held up near La Teste-de-Buch,” Ian reported in a shout. “The same band of men that attacked us at Bèguey—Alexandre and Raoul both recognized some of them. Jewish bandits.”

Jamie was shocked and slowed for a moment to let Ian catch him up. “Did they get the dowry money?”

“No, but they had a hard fight. Three men wounded badly enough to need a surgeon, and Paul Martan lost two fingers of his left hand. D’Eglise pulled them into La Teste-de-Buch and sent Josef to see if all was well wi’ us.”

Jamie’s heart bounced into his throat. “Jesus. Did ye tell him what happened?”

“I did not,” Ian said tersely. “I told him we’d had an accident wi’ the coach, and ye’d gone ahead with the women; I was comin’ back to fetch something left behind.”

“Aye, good.” Jamie’s heart dropped back into his chest. The last thing he wanted was to have to tell the captain that they’d lost the girl and the Torah scroll. And he’d be damned if he would.

—

They traveled fast, stopping only to ask questions now and then, and by the time they pounded into the village of Aubeterre-sur-Dronne, they were sure that their quarry lay no more than an hour ahead of them—if the women had passed on through the village.

“Oh, those two?” said a woman, pausing in the act of scrubbing her steps. She stood up slowly, stretching her back. “I saw them, yes. They rode right by me and went down the lane there.” She pointed.

“I thank you, madame,” Jamie said, in his best Parisian French. “What lies down that lane, please?”

She looked surprised that they didn’t know and frowned a little at such ignorance.

“Why, the chateau of the Vicomte Beaumont, to be sure!”

“To be sure,” Jamie repeated, smiling at her, and Ian saw a dimple appear in

her cheek in reply. “*Merci beaucoup, madame!*”

—

“What the devil...?” Ian murmured. Jamie reined up beside him, pausing to look at the place. It was a small manor house, somewhat run down but pretty in its bones. And the last place anyone would think to look for a runaway Jewess, he’d say that for it.

“What shall we do now, d’ye think?” he asked, and Jamie shrugged and kicked his horse.

“Go knock on the door and ask, I suppose.”

Ian followed his friend up to the door, feeling intensely conscious of his grubby clothes, sprouting beard, and general state of uncouthness. Such concerns vanished, though, when Jamie’s forceful knock was answered.

“Good day, gentlemen!” said the yellow-haired bugger Ian had last seen locked in combat in the roadbed with Jamie the day before. The man smiled broadly at them, cheerful despite an obvious black eye and a freshly split lip. He was dressed in the height of fashion, in a plum velvet suit; his hair was curled and powdered, and his yellow beard was neatly trimmed. “I hoped we would see you again. Welcome to my home!” he said, stepping back and raising his hand in a gesture of invitation.

“I thank you, monsieur...?” Jamie said slowly, giving Ian a sidelong glance. Ian lifted one shoulder in the ghost of a shrug. Did they have a choice?

The yellow-haired bugger bowed. “Pierre Robert Heriveaux d’Anton, Vicomte Beaumont, by the grace of the Almighty, for one more day. And you, gentlemen?”

“James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser,” Jamie said, with a good attempt at matching the other’s grand manner. Only Ian would have noticed the faint hesitation or the slight tremor in his voice when he added, “Laird of Broch Tuarach.”

“Ian Alastair Robert MacLeod Murray,” Ian said, with a curt nod, and straightened his shoulders. “His...er...the laird’s...tacksman.”

“Come in, please, gentlemen.” The yellow-haired bugger’s eyes shifted just a little, and Ian heard the crunch of gravel behind them, an instant before he felt the prick of a dagger in the small of his back. No, they didn’t have a choice.

Inside, they were relieved of their weapons, then escorted down a wide

hallway and into a commodious parlor. The wallpaper was faded, and the furniture was good but shabby. By contrast, the big Turkey carpet on the floor glowed like it was woven from jewels. A big roundish thing in the middle was green and gold and red, and concentric circles with wiggly edges surrounded it in waves of blue and red and cream, bordered in a soft, deep red, and the whole of it so ornamented with unusual shapes it would take you a day to look at them all. He'd been so taken with it the first time he saw it, he'd spent a quarter of an hour looking at them, before Big Georges caught him at it and shouted at him to roll the thing up, they hadn't all day.

"Where did ye get this?" Ian asked abruptly, interrupting something the vicomte was saying to the two rough-clad men who'd taken their weapons.

"What? Oh, the carpet! Yes, isn't it wonderful?" The vicomte beamed at him, quite unself-conscious, and gestured the two roughs away toward the wall. "It's part of my wife's dowry."

"Your wife," Jamie repeated carefully. He darted a sideways glance at Ian, who took the cue.

"That would be Mademoiselle Hauberger, would it?" he asked. The vicomte blushed—actually blushed—and Ian realized that the man was no older than he and Jamie were.

"Well. It—we—we have been betrothed for some time, and in Jewish custom, that is almost like being married."

"Betrothed," Jamie echoed again. "Since...when, exactly?"

The vicomte sucked in his lower lip, contemplating them. But whatever caution he might have had was overwhelmed in what were plainly very high spirits.

"Four years," he said. And, unable to contain himself, he beckoned them to a table near the window and proudly showed them a fancy document covered with colored scrolly sorts of things and written in some very odd language that was all slashes and tilted lines.

"This is our *ketubah*," he said, pronouncing the word very carefully. "Our marriage contract."

Jamie bent over to peer closely at it. "Aye, verra nice," he said politely. "I see it's no been signed yet. The marriage hasna taken place, then?"

Ian saw Jamie's eyes flick over the desk and could sense him passing the possibilities through his mind: Grab the letter opener off the desk and take the

vicomte hostage? Then find the sly wee bitch, roll her up in one of the smaller rugs, and carry her to Paris? That would doubtless be his own job, Ian thought.

A slight movement as one of the roughs shifted his weight, catching Ian's eye, and he thought, *Don't do it, eejit!* at Jamie, as hard as he could. For once, the message seemed to get through; Jamie's shoulders relaxed a little and he straightened up.

"Ye do ken the lass is meant to be marrying someone else?" he asked baldly. "I wouldna put it past her not to tell ye."

The vicomte's color became higher. "Certainly I know!" he snapped. "She was promised to me first, by her father!"

"How long have ye been a Jew?" Jamie asked carefully, edging round the table. "I dinna think ye were born to it. I mean—ye *are* a Jew now, aye? For I kent one or two, in Paris, and it's my understanding that they dinna marry people who aren't Jewish." His eyes flicked round the solid, handsome room. "It's my understanding that they mostly aren't aristocrats, either."

The vicomte was quite red in the face by now. With a sharp word, he sent the roughs out—though they were disposed to argue. While the brief discussion was going on, Ian edged closer to Jamie and whispered rapidly to him about the rug in *Gàidhlig*.

"Holy God," Jamie muttered in the same language. "I didna see him or either of those two at Bèguey, did you?"

Ian had no time to reply and merely shook his head, as the roughs reluctantly acquiesced to Vicomte Beaumont's imperious orders and shuffled out with narrowed eyes aimed at Ian and Jamie. One of them had Jamie's dirk in his hand and drew this slowly across his neck in a meaningful gesture as he left.

Aye, they might manage in a fight, Ian thought, returning the slit-eyed glare, *but not that wee velvet gomerel*. Captain D'Eglise wouldn't have taken on the vicomte, and neither would a band of professional highwaymen, Jewish or not.

"All right," the vicomte said abruptly, leaning his fists on the desk. "I'll tell you."

And he did. Rebekah's mother, the daughter of Dr. Hasdi, had fallen in love with a Christian man and run away with him. The doctor had declared his daughter dead, as was the usual way in such a situation, and done formal mourning for her. But she was his only child, and he had not been able to forget her. He had arranged to have information brought to him and knew about

Rebekah's birth.

"Then her mother died. That's when I met her—about that time, I mean. Her father was a judge, and my father knew him. She was fourteen and I sixteen; I fell in love with her. And she with me," he added, giving the Scots a hard eye, as though daring them to disbelieve it. "We were betrothed, with her father's blessing. But then her father caught a flux and died in two days. And—"

"And her grandfather took her back," Jamie finished. "And she became a Jew?"

"By Jewish belief, she was born Jewish; it descends through the mother's line. And...her mother had told her, privately, about her lost heritage. She embraced it, once she went to live with her grandfather."

Ian stirred and cocked a cynical eyebrow. "Aye? Why did ye not convert then, if ye're willing to do it now?"

"I said I would!" The vicomte had one fist curled round his letter opener as though he would strangle it. "The miserable old wretch said he did not believe me. He thought I would not give up my—my—this life." He waved a hand dismissively around the room, encompassing, presumably, his title and property, both of which would be confiscated by the government the moment his conversion became known.

"He said it would be a sham conversion and that the moment I had her I would become a Christian again and force Rebekah to be Christian, too. Like her father," he added darkly.

Despite the situation, Ian was beginning to have some sympathy for the wee popinjay. It was a very romantic tale, and he was partial to those. Jamie, however, was still reserving judgment. He gestured at the rug beneath their feet.

"Her dowry, ye said?"

"Yes," said the vicomte, but sounded much less certain. "She says it belonged to her mother. She had some men bring it here last week, along with a chest and a few other things. Anyway," he said, resuming his self-confidence and glowering at them, "when the old beast arranged her marriage to that fellow in Paris, I made up my mind to—to—"

"To abduct her. By arrangement, aye? Mmphm," Jamie said, his noise indicating his opinion of the vicomte's skills as a highwayman. He raised one red brow at Pierre's black eye but forbore to make any more remarks, thank God. It hadn't escaped Ian that they were prisoners, though it maybe had Jamie.

“May we speak with Mademoiselle Hauberger?” Ian asked politely. “Just to be sure she’s come of her own free will, aye?”

“Rather plainly she did, since you followed her here.” The vicomte hadn’t liked Jamie’s noise. “No, you may not. She’s busy.” He raised his hands and clapped them sharply, and the rough fellows came back in, along with a half dozen or so male servants as reinforcement, led by a tall, severe-looking butler armed with a stout walking-stick.

“Go with Ecrivisse, gentlemen. He’ll see to your comfort.”

“Comfort” proved to be the chateau’s wine cellar, which was fragrant but cold. Also dark. The vicomte’s hospitality did not extend so far as a candle.

“If he meant to kill us, he’d have done it already,” Ian reasoned.

“Mmphm.” Jamie sat on the stairs, the fold of his plaid pulled up around his shoulders against the chill. There was music coming from somewhere outside: the faint sound of a fiddle and the tap of a little hand drum. It started, then stopped, then started again.

Ian wandered restlessly to and fro; it wasn’t a very large cellar. If he didn’t mean to kill them, what did the vicomte intend to do with them?

“He’s waiting for something to happen,” Jamie said suddenly, answering the thought. “Something to do wi’ the lass, I expect.”

“Aye, reckon.” Ian sat down on the stairs, nudging Jamie over. “A *Dhia*, that’s cold!”

“Mm,” said Jamie absently. “Maybe they mean to run. If so, I hope he leaves someone behind to let us out and doesna leave us here to starve.”

“We wouldna starve,” Ian pointed out logically. “We could live on wine for a good long time. Someone would come before it ran out.” He paused a moment, trying to imagine what it would be like to stay drunk for several weeks.

“That’s a thought.” Jamie got up, a little stiff from the cold, and went off to rummage the racks. There was no light to speak of, save what seeped through the crack at the bottom of the door to the cellar, but Ian could hear Jamie pulling out bottles and sniffing the corks.

He came back in a bit with a bottle and, sitting down again, drew the cork with his teeth and spat it to one side. He took a sip, then another, and tilted back the bottle for a generous swig, then handed it to Ian.

“No bad,” he said.

It wasn’t, and there wasn’t much conversation for the next little while. Eventually, though, Jamie set the empty bottle down, belched gently, and said, “It’s her.”

“What’s her? Rebekah, ye mean. I daresay.” Then after a moment, “What’s her?”

“It’s her,” Jamie repeated. “Ken what the Jew said—Ephraim bar-Sefer? About how his gang knew where to strike, because they got information from some outside source? It’s her. She told them.”

Jamie spoke with such certainty that Ian was staggered for a moment, but then he marshaled his wits.

“That wee lass? Granted, she put one over on us—and I suppose she at least kent about Pierre’s abduction, but...”

Jamie snorted. “Aye, Pierre. Does the mannie strike ye either as a criminal or a great schemer?”

“No, but—”

“Does she?”

“Well...”

“Exactly.”

Jamie got up and wandered off into the racks again, this time returning with what smelled to Ian like one of the very good local red wines. It was like drinking his mam’s strawberry preserves on toast with a cup of strong tea, he thought approvingly.

“Besides,” Jamie went on, as though there’d been no interruption in his train of thought, “mind what ye told me the maid said, when I got my heid half-stove in? *‘Perhaps he’s been killed, too. How would you feel then?’* Nay, she’d planned the whole thing—to have Pierre and his lads stop the coach and make away with the women and the scroll and doubtless Monsieur Pickle, too. *But,*” he added, sticking up a finger in front of Ian’s face to stop him interrupting, “then Josef-from-Alsace tells ye that thieves—and the *same* thieves as before, or some of them—attacked the band wi’ the dowry money. Ye ken well that canna have been Pierre. It had to be her who told them.”

Ian was forced to admit the logic of this. Pierre had enthusiasm but couldn’t possibly be considered a professional highwayman.

“But a lass...” he said helplessly. “How could she—”

Jamie grunted. “D’Eglise said Dr. Hasdi’s a man much respected among the Jews of Bordeaux. And plainly he’s kent as far as Paris, or how else did he make the match for his granddaughter? But he doesna speak French. Want to bet me that she didna manage his correspondence?”

“No,” Ian said, and took another swallow. “Mmphm.”

Some minutes later he said, “That rug. And the other things Monsieur le Vicomte mentioned—her *dowry*.”

Jamie made an approving noise. “Aye. Her percentage of the take, more like. Ye can see our lad Pierre hasna got much money, and he’d lose all his property when he converted. She was feathering their nest, like—makin’ sure they’d have enough to live on. Enough to live *well* on.”

“Well, then,” Ian said, after a moment’s silence. “There ye are.”

—

The afternoon dragged on. After the second bottle, they agreed to drink no more for the time being, in case a clear head should be necessary if or when the door at last opened, and aside from going off now and then to have a pee behind the farthest wine racks, they stayed huddled on the stairs.

Jamie was singing softly along to the fiddle’s distant tune when the door finally *did* open. He stopped abruptly and lunged awkwardly to his feet, nearly falling, his knees stiff with cold.

“Monsieurs?” said the butler, peering down at them. “If you will be so kind as to follow me, please?”

To their surprise, the butler led them straight out of the house and down a small path, in the direction of the distant music. The air outside was fresh and wonderful after the must of the cellar, and Jamie filled his lungs with it, wondering what the devil...?

Then they rounded a bend in the path and saw a garden court before them, lit by torches driven into the ground. Somewhat overgrown, but with a fountain tinkling away in the center—and just by the fountain a sort of canopy, its cloth glimmering pale in the dusk. There was a little knot of people standing near it, talking, and as the butler paused, holding them back with one hand, Vicomte Beaumont broke away from the group and came toward them, smiling.

“My apologies for the inconvenience, gentlemen,” he said, a huge smile splitting his face. He looked drunk, but Jamie thought he wasn’t—no smell of

spirits. “Rebekah had to prepare herself. And we wanted to wait for nightfall.”

“To do what?” Ian asked suspiciously, and the vicomte giggled. Jamie didn’t mean to wrong the man, but it was a giggle. He gave Ian an eye and Ian gave it back. Aye, it was a giggle.

“To be married,” Pierre said, and while his voice was still full of *joie de vivre*, he said the words with a sense of deep reverence that struck Jamie somewhere in the chest. Pierre turned and waved a hand toward the darkening sky, where the stars were beginning to prick and sparkle. “For luck, you know—that our descendants may be as numerous as the stars.”

“Mmphm,” Jamie said politely.

“But come with me, if you will.” Pierre was already striding back to the knot of...well, Jamie supposed they must be wedding guests. The vicomte beckoned to the Scots to follow.

Marie the maid was there, along with a few other women; she gave Jamie and Ian a wary look. But it was the men with whom the vicomte was concerned. He spoke a few words to his guests, and three men with enormous beards came back with him, all dressed formally, if somewhat oddly, with little velvet skullcaps decorated with beads.

“May I present Monsieur Gershom Sanders and Monsieur Levi Champfleur. Our witnesses. And Reb Cohen, who will officiate.”

The men shook hands, murmuring politeness. Jamie and Ian exchanged looks. Why were *they* here?

The vicomte caught the look and interpreted it correctly.

“I wish you to return to Dr. Hasdi,” he said, the effervescence in his voice momentarily supplanted by a note of steel, “and tell him that everything—everything!—was done in accordance with proper custom and according to the Law. This marriage will not be undone. By anyone.”

“Mmphm,” said Ian, less politely.

And so it was that a few minutes later they found themselves standing among the male wedding guests—the women stood on the other side of the canopy—watching as Rebekah came down the path, jingling faintly. She wore a dress of deep red silk; Jamie could see the torchlight shift and shimmer through its folds as she moved. There were gold bracelets on both wrists, and she had a veil over her head and face, with a little headdress sort of thing made of gold chains that dipped across her forehead, strung with small medallions and bells—it was this

that made the jingling sound. It reminded him of the Torah scroll, and he stiffened a bit at the thought.

Pierre stood with the rabbi under the canopy; as Rebekah approached, he stepped apart, and she came to him. She didn't touch him, though, but proceeded to walk round him. And round him, and round him. Seven times she circled him, and the hairs rose a little on the back of Jamie's neck; it had the faint sense of magic about it—or witchcraft. Something she did to bind the man.

She came face-to-face with Jamie as she made each turn and plainly could see him in the light of the torches, but her eyes were fixed straight ahead; she made no acknowledgment of anyone—not even Pierre.

But then the circling was done and she came to stand by the vicomte's side. The rabbi said a few words of welcome to the guests and then, turning to the bride and groom, poured out a cup of wine, and said what appeared to be a Hebrew blessing over it. Jamie made out the beginning—“*Blessed are you, Adonai our God*”—but then lost the thread.

Pierre reached into his pocket when Reb Cohen stopped speaking, removed a small object—clearly a ring—and, taking Rebekah's hand in his, put it on the forefinger of her right hand, smiling down into her face with a tenderness that, despite everything, rather caught at Jamie's heart. Then Pierre lifted her veil, and Jamie caught a glimpse of the answering tenderness on Rebekah's face in the instant before her husband kissed her.

The congregation sighed as one.

The rabbi picked up a sheet of parchment from a little table nearby. The thing he'd called a *ketubah*, Jamie saw—the wedding contract.

The rabbi read the thing out, first in a language Jamie didn't recognize, and then again in French. It wasn't so different from the few marriage contracts he'd seen, laying out the disposition of property and what was due to the bride and all—though he noted with disapproval that it provided for the possibility of divorce. His attention wandered a bit then; Rebekah's face glowed in the torchlight like pearl and ivory, and the roundness of her bosom showed clearly as she breathed. In spite of everything he thought he now knew about her, he experienced a brief wave of envy toward Pierre.

The contract read and carefully laid aside, the rabbi recited a string of blessings; Jamie knew it was blessings because he caught the words “Blessed are you, Adonai...” over and over, though the subject of the blessings seemed to be everything from the congregation to Jerusalem, so far as he could tell. The bride

and groom had another sip of wine.

A pause then, and Jamie expected some official word from the rabbi, uniting husband and wife, but it didn't come. Instead, one of the witnesses took the wineglass, wrapped it in a linen napkin, and placed it on the ground in front of Pierre. To the Scots' astonishment, he promptly stamped on the thing—and the crowd burst into applause.

For a few moments, everything seemed quite like a country wedding, with everyone crowding round, wanting to congratulate the happy couple. But within moments, the happy couple was moving off toward the house, while the guests all streamed toward tables that had been set up at the far side of the garden, laden with food and drink.

“Come on,” Jamie muttered, and caught Ian by the arm. They hastened after the newly wedded pair, Ian demanding to know what the devil Jamie thought he was doing. “I want to talk to her—alone. You stop him, keep him talking for as long as ye can.”

“I—how?”

“How would I know? Ye'll think of something.”

They had reached the house, and ducking in close upon Pierre's heels, Jamie saw that by good luck the man had stopped to say something to a servant. Rebekah was just vanishing down a long hallway; he saw her put her hand to a door.

“The best of luck to ye, man!” Jamie said, clapping Pierre so heartily on the shoulder that the groom staggered.

Before Pierre could recover, Ian, very obviously commending his soul to God, stepped up and seized him by the hand, which he wrung vigorously, meanwhile giving Jamie a private “*Hurry the bloody hell up!*” sort of look.

Grinning, Jamie ran down the short hallway to the door where he'd seen Rebekah disappear. The grin faded as his hand touched the doorknob, though, and the face he presented to her as he entered was as grim as he could make it.

Her eyes widened in shock and indignation at sight of him.

“What are you doing here? No one is supposed to come in here but my husband and me!”

“He's on his way,” Jamie assured her. “The question is—will he get here?”

Her little fist curled up in a way that would have been comical if he didn't know as much about her as he did.

“Is that a threat?” she said, in a tone as incredulous as it was menacing. “Here? You dare threaten me *here*?”

“Aye, I do. I want that scroll.”

“Well, you’re not getting it,” she snapped. He saw her glance flicker over the table, probably in search of either a bell to summon help or something to bash him on the head with, but the table held nothing but a platter of stuffed rolls and exotic sweets. There *was* a bottle of wine, and he saw her eye light on that with calculation, but he stretched out a long arm and got hold of it before she could.

“I dinna want it for myself,” he said. “I mean to take it back to your grandfather.”

“Him?” Her face hardened. “No. It’s worth more to him than *I* am,” she added bitterly, “but at least that means I can use it for protection. As long as I have it, he won’t try to hurt Pierre or drag me back, for fear I might damage it. I’m keeping it.”

“I think he’d be a great deal better off without ye, and doubtless he kens that fine,” Jamie informed her, and had to harden himself against the sudden look of hurt in her eyes. He supposed even spiders might have feelings, but that was neither here nor there.

“Where’s Pierre?” she demanded. “If you’ve harmed a hair on his head, I’ll —”

“I wouldna touch the poor gomerel, and neither would Ian—Juan, I mean. When I said the question was whether he got to ye or not, I meant whether he thinks better of his bargain.”

“What?” He thought she paled a little, but it was hard to tell.

“You give me the scroll to take back to your grandfather—a wee letter of apology to go with it wouldna come amiss, but I willna insist on that—or Ian and I take Pierre out back and have a frank word regarding his new wife.”

“Tell him what you like!” she snapped. “He wouldn’t believe any of your made-up tales!”

“Oh, aye? And if I tell him exactly what happened to Ephraim bar-Sefer? And why?”

“Who?” she said, but now she really had gone pale to the lips and put out a hand to the table to steady herself.

“Do ye ken yourself what happened to him? No? Well, I’ll tell ye, lass.” And he did so, with a terse brutality that made her sit down suddenly, tiny pearls of

sweat appearing round the gold medallions that hung across her forehead.

“Pierre already kens at least a bit about your wee gang, I think—but maybe not what a ruthless, grasping wee besom ye really are.”

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t kill Ephraim!”

“If not for you, he’d no be dead, and I reckon Pierre would see that. I can tell him where the body is,” he added, more delicately. “I buried the man myself.”

Her lips were pressed so hard together that nothing showed but a straight white line.

“Ye havena got long,” he said, quietly now, but keeping his eyes on hers. “Ian canna hold him off much longer, and if he comes in—then I tell him everything, in front of you, and ye do what ye can then to persuade him I’m a liar.”

She stood up abruptly, her chains and bracelets all a-jangle, and stamped to the door of the inner room. She flung it open, and Marie jerked back, shocked.

Rebekah said something to her in Ladino, sharp, and with a small gasp the maid scurried off.

“All *right*,” Rebekah said through gritted teeth, turning back to him. “Take it and be damned, you *dog*.”

“Indeed I will, ye bloody wee bitch,” he replied with great politeness.

Her hand closed round a stuffed roll, but instead of throwing it at him, she merely squeezed it into paste and crumbs, slapping the remains back on the tray with a small exclamation of fury.

The sweet chiming of the Torah scroll presaged Marie’s hasty arrival, the precious thing clasped in her arms. She glanced at her mistress and, at Rebekah’s curt nod, delivered it with great reluctance into the arms of the Christian dog.

Jamie bowed, first to maid and then mistress, and backed toward the door.

“*Shalom*,” he said, and closed the door an instant before the silver platter hit it with a ringing thud.

—

“Did it hurt a lot?” Ian was asking Pierre with interest, when Jamie came up to them.

“My God, you have no idea,” Pierre replied fervently. “But it was worth it.” He divided a beaming smile between Ian and Jamie and bowed to them, not even noticing the canvas-wrapped bundle in Jamie’s arms. “You must excuse me,

gentlemen; my bride awaits me!”

“Did what hurt a lot?” Jamie inquired, leading the way hastily out through a side door. No point in attracting attention, after all.

“Ye ken he was born a Christian but converted in order to marry the wee besom,” Ian said. “So he had to be circumcised.” He crossed himself at the thought, and Jamie laughed.

“What is it they call the stick-insect things where the female one bites off the head of the male one after he’s got the business started?” Jamie asked, nudging the door open with his bum.

Ian’s brow creased for an instant. “Praying mantis, I think. Why?”

“I think our wee friend Pierre may have a more interesting wedding night than he expects. Come on.”

—

BORDEAUX

It wasn’t the worst thing he’d ever had to do, but he wasn’t looking forward to it. Jamie paused outside the gate of Dr. Hasdi’s house, the Torah scroll in its wrappings in his arms. Ian was looking a bit worm-eaten, and Jamie reckoned he kent why. Having to tell the doctor what had happened to his granddaughter was one thing; telling him to his face with the knowledge of what said granddaughter’s nipples felt like fresh in the mind...or the hand...

“Ye dinna have to come in, man,” he said to Ian. “I can do it alone.”

Ian’s mouth twitched, but he shook his head and stepped up next to Jamie.

“On your right, man,” he said simply.

Jamie smiled. When he was five years old, Ian’s da, Auld John, had persuaded his own da to let Jamie handle a sword cack-handed, as he was wont to do. “And you, lad,” he’d said to Ian, very serious, “it’s your duty to stand on your laird’s right hand and guard his weak side.”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “Right, then.” And rang the bell.

—

Afterward, they wandered slowly through the streets of Bordeaux, making their way toward nothing in particular, not speaking much.

Dr. Hasdi had received them courteously, though with a look of mingled

horror and apprehension on his face when he saw the scroll. This look had faded to one of relief at hearing—the manservant had had enough French to interpret for them—that his granddaughter was safe, then to shock, and finally to a set expression that Jamie couldn't read. Was it anger, sadness, resignation?

When Jamie had finished the story, they sat uneasily, not sure what to do next. Dr. Hasdi sat at his desk, head bowed, his hands resting gently on the scroll. Finally, he raised his head and nodded to them both, one and then the other. His face was calm now, giving nothing away.

“Thank you,” he said in heavily accented French. “*Shalom.*”

—

“Are ye hungry?” Ian motioned toward a small *boulangerie*, whose trays bore filled rolls and big, fragrant round loaves. He was starving himself, though half an hour ago, his wame had been in knots.

“Aye, maybe.” Jamie kept walking, though, and Ian shrugged and followed.

“What d’ye think the captain will do when we tell him?” Ian wasn’t all that bothered. There was always work for a good-sized man who kent what to do with a sword. And he owned his own weapons. They’d have to buy Jamie a sword, though. Everything he was wearing, from pistols to ax, belonged to D’Eglise.

He was busy enough calculating the cost of a decent sword against what remained of their pay that he didn’t notice Jamie not answering him. He did notice that his friend was walking faster, though, and, hurrying to catch up, he saw what they were heading for. The tavern where the pretty brown-haired barmaid had taken Jamie for a Jew.

Oh, like that, is it? he thought, and hid a grin. Aye, well, there was one sure way the lad could prove to the lass that he wasn’t a Jew.

The place was moiling when they walked in, and not in a good way; Ian sensed it instantly. There were soldiers there, army soldiers, and other fighting men, mercenaries like themselves, and no love wasted between them. You could cut the air with a knife, and judging from a splotch of half-dried blood on the floor, somebody had already tried.

There were women but fewer than before, and the barmaids kept their eyes on their trays, not flirting tonight.

Jamie wasn’t taking heed of the atmosphere; Ian could see him looking round

for her, but the brown-haired lass wasn't on the floor. They might have asked after her—if they'd known her name.

“Upstairs, maybe?” Ian said, leaning in to half-shout into Jamie's ear over the noise. Jamie nodded and began forging through the crowd, Ian bobbing in his wake, hoping they found the lass quickly so he could eat while Jamie got on with it.

—

The stairs were crowded—with men coming down. Something was amiss up there, and Jamie shoved someone into the wall with a thump, pushing past. Some nameless anxiety shot jolts down his spine, and he was half prepared before he pushed through a little knot of onlookers at the head of the stairs and saw them.

Mathieu and the brown-haired girl. There was a big open room here, with a hallway lined with tiny cubicles leading back from it; Mathieu had the girl by the arm and was boosting her toward the hallway with a hand on her bum, despite her protests.

“Let go of her!” Jamie said, not shouting but raising his voice well enough to be heard easily. Mathieu paid not the least attention, though everyone else, startled, turned to look at Jamie.

He heard Ian mutter, “Joseph, Mary, and Bride preserve us,” behind him, but he paid no heed. He covered the distance to Mathieu in three strides and kicked him in the arse.

He ducked, by reflex, but Mathieu merely turned and gave him a hot eye, ignoring the whoops and guffaws from the spectators.

“Later, little boy,” he said. “I'm busy now.”

He scooped the young woman into one big arm and kissed her sloppily, rubbing his stubbled face hard over hers so she squealed and pushed at him to get away.

Jamie drew the pistol from his belt.

“I said, let her go.” The noise dropped suddenly, but he barely noticed for the roaring of blood in his ears.

Mathieu turned his head, incredulous. Then he snorted with contempt, grinned unpleasantly, and shoved the girl into the wall so her head struck with a thump, pinning her there with his bulk.

The pistol was primed.

“*Salop!*” Jamie roared. “Don’t touch her! Let her go!” He clenched his teeth and aimed with both hands, rage and fright making his hands tremble.

Mathieu didn’t even look at him. The big man half-turned away, a casual hand on the girl’s breast. She squealed as he twisted it, and Jamie fired. Mathieu whirled, the pistol he’d had concealed in his own belt now in hand, and the air shattered in an explosion of sound and white smoke.

There were shouts of alarm, excitement—and another pistol went off, somewhere behind Jamie. *Ian?* he thought dimly, but, no, Ian was running toward Mathieu, leaping for the massive arm rising, the second pistol’s barrel making circles as Mathieu struggled to fix it on Jamie. It discharged, and the ball hit one of the lanterns that stood on the tables, which exploded with a *whuff* and a bloom of flame.

Jamie had reversed his pistol and was hammering at Mathieu’s head with the butt before he was conscious of having crossed the room. Mathieu’s mad-boar eyes were almost invisible, slitted with the glee of fighting, and the sudden curtain of blood that fell over his face did nothing but enhance his grin, blood running down between his teeth. He shook Ian off with a shove that sent him crashing into the wall, then wrapped one big arm almost casually around Jamie’s body and, with a snap of his head, butted him in the face.

Jamie had turned his head reflexively and thus avoided a broken nose, but the impact crushed the flesh of his jaw into his teeth, and his mouth filled with blood. His head was spinning with the force of the blow, but he got a hand under Mathieu’s jaw and shoved upward with all his strength, trying to break the man’s neck. His hand slipped off the sweat-greased flesh, though, and Mathieu let go his grip in order to try to knee Jamie in the stones. A knee like a cannonball struck Jamie a numbing blow in the thigh as he squirmed free, and he staggered, grabbing Mathieu’s arm just as Ian came dodging in from the side, seizing the other. Without a moment’s hesitation, Mathieu’s huge forearms twisted; he seized the Scots by the scruffs of their necks and cracked their heads together.

Jamie couldn’t see and could barely move but kept moving anyway, groping blindly. He was on the floor, could feel boards, wetness...His pawing hand struck flesh, and he lunged forward and bit Mathieu as hard as he could in the calf of the leg. Fresh blood filled his mouth, hotter than his own, and he gagged but kept his teeth locked in the hairy flesh, clinging stubbornly as the leg kicked in frenzy. His ears were ringing, he was vaguely aware of screaming and shouting, but it didn’t matter.

Something had come upon him, and nothing mattered. Some small remnant of his consciousness registered surprise, and then that was gone, too. No pain, no thought. He was a red thing, and while he saw other things—faces, blood, bits of room—they didn't matter. Blood took him, and when some sense of himself came back, he was kneeling astride the man, hands locked around the big man's neck, fingers throbbing with a pounding pulse—his or his victim's, he couldn't tell.

Him. Him. He'd lost the man's name. His eyes were bulging, the ragged mouth slobbered and gaped, and there was a small, sweet *crack* as something broke under Jamie's thumbs. He squeezed with all he had, squeezed and squeezed and felt the huge body beneath him go strangely limp.

He went on squeezing, couldn't stop, until a hand seized him by the arm and shook him, hard.

"Stop," a voice croaked, hot in his ear. "Jamie. Stop."

He blinked up at the white bony face, unable to put a name to it. Then drew breath—the first he could remember drawing for some time—and with it came a thick stink, blood and shit and reeking sweat, and he became suddenly aware of the horrible spongy feeling of the body he was sitting on. He scrambled awkwardly off, sprawling on the floor as his muscles spasmed and trembled.

Then he saw her.

She was lying crumpled against the wall, curled into herself, her brown hair spilling across the boards. He got to his knees, crawling to her.

He was making a small whimpering noise, trying to talk, having no words. Got to the wall and gathered her into his arms, limp, her head lolling, striking his shoulder, her hair soft against his face, smelling of smoke and her own sweet musk.

"*A nighean,*" he managed. "Christ, *a nighean.* Are ye..."

"Jesus," said a voice by his side, and he felt the vibration as Ian—thank God, the name had come back, of course it was Ian—collapsed next to him. His friend had a bloodstained dirk still clutched in his hand. "Oh, Jesus, Jamie."

He looked up, puzzled, desperate, and then looked down as the girl's body slipped from his grasp and fell back across his knees with impossible boneless grace, the small dark hole in her white breast stained with only a little blood. Not much at all.

He'd made Jamie come with him to the cathedral of Saint André and insisted he go to Confession. Jamie had balked—no great surprise.

“No. I can't.”

“We'll go together.” Ian had taken him firmly by the arm and very literally dragged him over the threshold. He was counting on the atmosphere of the place to keep Jamie there, once inside.

His friend stopped dead, the whites of his eyes showing as he glanced warily around.

The stone vault of the ceiling soared into shadow overhead, but pools of colored light from the stained-glass windows lay soft on the worn slates of the aisle.

“I shouldna be here,” Jamie muttered under his breath.

“Where better, eejit? Come on,” Ian muttered back, and pulled Jamie down the side aisle to the chapel of Saint Estèphe. Most of the side chapels were lavishly furnished, monuments to the importance of wealthy families. This one was a tiny, undecorated stone alcove, containing little more than an altar, a faded tapestry of a faceless saint, and a small stand where candles could be placed.

“Stay here.” Ian planted Jamie dead in front of the altar and ducked out, going to buy a candle from the old woman who sold them near the main door. He'd changed his mind about trying to make Jamie go to Confession; he knew fine when ye could get a Fraser to do something and when ye couldn't.

He worried a bit that Jamie would leave and hurried back to the chapel, but Jamie was still there, standing in the middle of the tiny space, head down, staring at the floor.

“Here, then,” Ian said, pulling him toward the altar. He plunked the candle—an expensive one, beeswax and large—on the stand and pulled the paper spill the old lady had given him out of his sleeve, offering it to Jamie. “Light it. We'll say a prayer for your da. And...and for her.”

He could see tears trembling on Jamie's lashes, glittering in the red glow of the sanctuary lamp that hung above the altar, but Jamie blinked them back and firmed his jaw.

“All right,” he said, low-voiced, but he hesitated.

Ian sighed, took the spill out of his hand, and, standing on tiptoe, lit it from the sanctuary lamp. “Do it,” he whispered, handing the spill to Jamie, “or I'll gie ye

a good one in the kidney, right here.”

Jamie made a sound that might have been the breath of a laugh and lowered the lit spill to the candle’s wick. The fire rose up, a pure high flame with blue at its heart, then settled as Jamie pulled the spill away and shook it out in a plume of smoke.

They stood for some time, hands clasped loosely in front of them, watching the candle burn. Ian prayed for his mam and da, his sister and her bairns...with some hesitation (was it proper to pray for a Jew?) for Rebekah bat-Leah, and, with a sidelong glance at Jamie to be sure he wasn’t looking, for Jenny Fraser. Then for the soul of Brian Fraser...and finally, eyes tight shut, for the friend beside him.

The sounds of the church faded, the whispering stones and echoes of wood, the shuffle of feet and the rolling gabble of the pigeons on the roof. Ian stopped saying words but was still praying. And then that stopped, too, and there was only peace and the soft beating of his heart.

He heard Jamie sigh, from somewhere deep inside, and opened his eyes. Without speaking, they went out, leaving the candle to keep watch.

“Did ye not mean to go to Confession yourself?” Jamie asked, stopping near the church’s main door. There was a priest in the confessional; two or three people stood a discreet distance away from the carved wooden stall, out of earshot, waiting.

“It’ll bide,” Ian said, with a shrug. “If ye’re goin’ to hell, I might as well go, too. God knows, ye’ll never manage alone.”

Jamie smiled—a wee bit of a smile, but still—and pushed the door open into sunlight.

They strolled aimlessly for a bit, not talking, and found themselves eventually on the river’s edge, watching the Garonne’s dark waters flow past, carrying debris from a recent storm.

“It means ‘peace,’” Jamie said at last. “What he said to me. The doctor. ‘*Shalom.*’”

Ian kent that fine. “Aye,” he said. “But peace is no our business now, is it? We’re soldiers.” He jerked his chin toward the nearby pier, where a packet boat rode at anchor. “I hear the King of Prussia needs a few good men.”

“So he does,” said Jamie, and squared his shoulders. “Come on, then.”

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BY DIANA GABALDON

(in chronological order)

Outlander

Dragonfly in Amber

Voyager

Drums of Autumn

The Fiery Cross

A Breath of Snow and Ashes

An Echo in the Bone

Written in My Own Heart's Blood

The Outlandish Companion (nonfiction)

The Outlandish Companion Volume Two (nonfiction)

The Exile (graphic novel)

(in chronological order)

Lord John and the Hellfire Club (novella)

Lord John and the Private Matter

Lord John and the Succubus (novella)

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The Scottish Prisoner

A Plague of Zombies (novella)

Other Outlander-Related Novellas

A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows

The Space Between

Virgins

About the Author

DIANA GABALDON is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the wildly popular *Outlander* novels—*Outlander*, *Dragonfly in Amber*, *Voyager*, *Drums of Autumn*, *The Fiery Cross*, *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* (for which she won a Quill Award and the Corine International Book Prize), *An Echo in the Bone*, and *Written in My Own Heart's Blood*—as well as the related Lord John Grey books *Lord John and the Private Matter*, *Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade*, *Lord John and the Hand of Devils*, and *The Scottish Prisoner*; two works of nonfiction, *The Outlandish Companion*, Volumes 1 and 2; the *Outlander* graphic novel *The Exile*, and *The Official Outlander Coloring Book*. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her husband.

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