

There came a sudden tap at Irène's open window.

"Tis I, Lady Healer. LaRoche."

The obsequious constable, Guy LaRoche. Here to seize her trade if he could. He'd never liked Irène, viewing as unseemly any female who ventured beyond needlework and housekeeping and holding a special distaste for her dabblings in the mystic arts.

"Bonjour, Constable."

She rose from her chair and approached the window, which she'd kept open for the breeze.

"Good morning." LaRoche smoothed his sleeve where his wife had sewn a new orange brocade. "I trust that you haven't been turning tarot." He didn't bother to look at Irène as he spoke. Didn't look in her direction. His eyes remained on his embroidery—a fashion of their recent invader, Duke Domenico, whose style several families had started imitating.

"No, Constable. No tarot. I've made stew today and collected lemon balm. Are house chores legal in Les Échelles, still?"

"A remark like that." He scowled. "It would enrage Monsieur le Duc. We finally have a real noble at our helm. With gold livery. An orange plume in his hat." The constable looked upward as though he, too, wore the rare decoration. "We mustn't appear unmannered. Though I must say, that alchemist friend of his puts on airs. As though he were highborn." LaRoche sniffed. "I'll visit again, Irène. Keep clear of the cards. There is an official sanction. And mind the sunset curfew. I wouldn't want to confiscate your goats."

With that, the lawman strolled back toward the village.

Irène gritted her teeth. Not only was the constable making a public show of lambasting her healer's profession on a *Sunday*, he'd clearly shown his neighbors exactly where he was going. Why would he wear a newly brocaded uniform to her cottage if it weren't for show? More than half her patients had taken leave of her practice since last year's plague—the pestilence she'd treated in almost every home, but from which she had saved no one.

*Zahara, keep me patient.* She nodded in the direction of her cobalt divining bowl in which she kept an armful of heather to hide its scrying purpose. *You too, lord.* She inclined her head to the hearth where a wooden crucifix stood. God had given her the gift to heal, but Zahara kept her skillful. It was the strength of the mountain plants that treated Les Échelles' sick. Plants Irène picked for healing were nourished by a goddess's sacred spring, holy since ages before the Bible.

Irène's fire was out. And she was hungry. She'd finished the stew she'd mentioned to LaRoche last night, but there remained a hare in the shed—payment from the tailor's apprentice who'd wanted a wooing draft. She'd prepared him a tincture of anise and peppermint. For a boy in love, he had terrible hygiene habits.

Trusting the wounded kestrel to decide on its own whether or not to accept the new nest, Irène went out to her shed. There, she reached for the hare she'd strung from a beam. But while doing so she heard a crash.

"What's happening?" She dropped the hare and ran for the door.

The sky had darkened under a thunderhead outside. But in the pear tree between Irène's shed and cottage . . . lights! A dome of them, circling and pulsating—animated stars!

Only they weren't stars, of course. They were so much closer, and were somehow . . . dancing.

A radiance of angels from the Gospel page.

"What is that?" She raised her hands toward the filaments.

"Lady Wisdom?"

She jumped.

A stranger stepped from behind her woodpile. "Lady Wisdom. That is what they call you?"