

An Extract From:

House of Shadows

by

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Chapter One

In a city of gray stone and mist, between the steep rainswept mountains and the sea, there lived a merchant with his eight daughters. The merchant's wife had died bearing the eighth daughter and so the girls had raised one another, the elder ones looking after the younger. The merchant was not wealthy, having eight daughters to support, but neither was he poor. He had a tall narrow house at the edge of the city, near his stone yard where he dealt in the blue slate and hard granite of the mountains and in imported white limestone and marble. His house had glass windows, tile floors, and a long gallery along the back where there was room for eight beds for his daughters.

The eldest of his daughters was named Ananda. Ananda was nineteen years old, with chestnut hair and pretty manners. She was not precisely engaged, but it was generally accepted that the second son of a merchant who dealt in fine cloth meant to offer for her soon, and it was also generally understood that she would assent. The youngest daughter, Liaska, was nine and as bright and impish as a puppy; she romped through her days and made her sisters and her father laugh with her mischief. In between were Karah and Enelle and Nemienne and Tana and Miande and Jehenne.

Gentle Karah, loveliest of all the sisters, mothered the younger girls. They adored her, and only Karah could calm Liaska on her more rambunctious days. Practical Enelle, with their father's broad cheekbones and their lost mother's gray eyes, kept the accounts for both the household and their father's business. Tana, serious and grave even as a child, made sure the house was always neat. Lighthearted Miande sang as she went about the kitchen tasks, and made delicate pastries filled with cream and smooth sauces that never had lumps. Jehenne learned her letters early and found, even when quite young, that she had a feel for both graceful lettering and graceful phrases.

Nemienne, neither one of the eldest nor one of the youngest, neither the most beautiful nor the plainest of the daughters, drifted through her days. Her attention was likely to be caught at any moment by the sudden glancing of light across slate rooftops, or by the tangled whisper of the breeze that slid through the maze of city streets on its way to or from the sea. Though Nemienne baffled her father and puzzled her sisters, her quiet created a stillness otherwise rare in their crowded house.

For her part, Nemienne could not understand how her sisters did not see the strange slant into which light sometimes fell, as though it was falling into the world from a place not quite congruent. She didn't understand how they could fail to hear the way every drop of falling rain sometimes struck the cobbles with the pure ringing sound of a little bell, or the odd tones that sometimes echoed behind the sound of the wind to create a breathy, half-heard music pitched to the loneliness at the heart of the bustling city.

Even at home, Nemienne couldn't seem to keep her mind on letters of account or business – but then, Enelle was the one who was interested in the prices of stone. Nor could Nemienne be trusted to take bread out of the oven before it burned – and anyway, Miande made much better bread. And when Nemienne went to the market, she seldom came back with what she had been asked to buy, returning instead with a flowering sprig she'd found growing out of a crumbling wall, or humming over and

over three notes of a song she'd heard a street-musician play. When sent to even the nearest noodle-shop, just down the street and around the corner from the house, Nemienne sometimes got lost. She would find herself inexplicably walking down a street with no idea where she might be, so she had to ask strangers for the way home. But then, Tana always struck the best bargains in the market and the shops, so there was seldom a need for Nemienne to go on such errands.

The merchant looked proudly at Ananda, who would surely be happily wed by the turning of the year. He treasured Karah and would not look for a possible match for her even though she was nearly seventeen, for she was his favorite daughter – but then Karah was so sweet and good that she was everyone's favorite, so no one minded that she was their father's favorite too. Practical Enelle was his greatest help in his business affairs; he called her his little business manager and joked that he should make his stone yard over into a partnership with her.

The merchant depended on Tana and Miande when he had his business associates to his home for a dinner, and always the dinners ran smoothly and comfortably, so that even the wealthiest merchants, who had wives and keimiso and children of their own, said they wished they had such a houseful of pretty and accomplished daughters. The merchant beamed smugly. He never told them that the invitations that brought them to his house had usually been written by Jehenne, whose hand was smoother than his. And on quiet family evenings Liaska set her father and all her sisters laughing with her clever puppets, which she used in wickedly accurate mimicry of her father's associates.

Nemienne laughed at the puppets, too. But sometimes, especially on those evenings, she felt her father's puzzled gaze resting on her, as though he understood how each of his other daughters fit into his household, but did not quite understand where Nemienne might exactly fit. Sometimes Nemienne herself wondered what kind of puzzle it might be, that had a Nemienne-shaped piece missing out of its middle.

Then one spring the merchant died, collapsing suddenly in the midst of his work and leaving his eight daughters alone in a city they suddenly found far from friendly.

There were business assets, but these were tied up in the stone yard and could not easily be freed. The assets could be sold in their entirety to the merchant's associates, but all of these men, whom the girls had thought were their father's friends, they now found had been his rivals. All the offers were very low. There were funeral expenses, and then there were the day-to-day expenses and the ordinary debts of business investments which ought to have yielded eventual profits if only the merchant had lived, but promised nothing but losses after his death.

“Must we sell father's business?” Ananda asked Enelle, after the cold edge of necessity had worn through the first dreadful shock of their father's death.

Enelle glanced down at the papers between her hands. They were all seated along both sides of the long supper table. None of the girls had taken their father's place at the head. Enelle, who had always taken the place at their father's left hand, sat there still. She was pale. But her voice was as calm and precise as ever. “We can't run it ourselves. We can't even legally own it,” she said. “Petris could. Legally, I mean.”

Petris was the cloth merchant's son who had been expected to marry Ananda. "And we could run it with his name on the papers. But that is supposing he would be willing to marry a pauper. The business could be an asset to build on, but it isn't a ... a fortune to marry into." Even her steady voice failed a little.

"We aren't paupers!" Jehenne exclaimed, offended at the very idea.

Enelle looked down, then lifted her gaze again. "It's strange about business. While father was alive, we operated at a profit. But now that he is ... gone ... we own a net loss. We are, in fact, paupers. Unless one of us can very quickly find a man to marry, someone sensible who will let me run the stone yard. Ananda?"

Ananda, across from Enelle, had her fingers laced tightly together on the polished wood of the table. She looked at her hands, not at her sisters. "Petris would still marry me. But his father won't permit the match if I don't have a dowry. A dowry up front, nothing tied up in future profit."

"We can't get you a dowry right now, without the stone yard," said Enelle. Her voice fell flatly into the room and there was a silence after it.

"But what shall we do, then?" Tana asked, and looked at Enelle, who seemed, uncharacteristically, at a loss for words.

"We must all think together," said Ananda.

"You already have an idea," observed Karah, studying Enelle. Faint lines of concern appeared on Karah's forehead – not worry about the difficulties they faced, but concern because she saw Enelle was distressed. "What is it? Is it so terrible?"

"It can't be *that* terrible," declared Miande, always optimistic. But even she sounded like she didn't have much confidence in this statement. They all understood now that sometimes things *could* be that terrible.

Enelle drew a breath without lifting her gaze, started to speak, and stopped.

"Enelle, no," said Ananda, firmly.

"We could sell parts of father's business?" suggested practical Jehenne, but doubtfully. "Or the house?"

Enelle glanced up. "The business would be worth ten times less broken up than it is intact. And if we sold the house to get a dowry for Ananda, we would have nowhere to live until the business begins to yield a profit, which will take years, now, no matter what we do. None of our creditors will set favorable terms for us right now. Everyone expects trouble in the spring, you know. Because of the Treaty."

She meant, as even the little girls knew, the Treaty of Bredde. Its term would run out in the spring, and everyone knew that when it did, Kalches would immediately repudiate the peace and resume its war with Lirionne. Nemienne hadn't thought of

how this would affect business in Lonne, but once Enelle pointed it out, she saw that her sister was right: nobody could afford to be kind if the war was going to start again.

“They expect the business to fail quickly now that father is ... is gone,” said Enelle. “Before spring, they think. I ... I would not like to live in the sort of house we would be able to afford, if we sold this house.”

“But ...” said Jehenne, her voice trailing off as she found nothing else to suggest.

Nemieenne drew a triangle absently on the polished surface of the table with the tip of her finger, and fitted a smaller triangle inside it, and then another inside that. Then she looked up and said, since Enelle clearly could not bring herself to say it even if Ananda would let her, “Some of us will have to be sold.”

The silence this time was fraught, but it did not last long. It was broken by Liaska, who leaped to her feet and cried, “No!”

“Or have you thought of another way?” Nemieenne asked Enelle. She might be wrong. Nobody else seemed to think this was obvious except her. Perhaps Enelle was thinking of something else. But, surely, if Enelle had thought of some other way, she wouldn’t be so hesitant to explain it.

Enelle looked up, and then down again. She was only sixteen, just a year older than Nemieenne herself. It was a horrible decision for her to have to make. But it was not, of course, her decision to make. Not really. It was only her responsibility to tell them all that it was going to have to be made. Nemieenne could see she had talked about this idea only with Ananda, and it was obvious Ananda had forbidden her to suggest it. Poor Enelle.

“How many of us?” Nemieenne asked.

“No,” said Ananda sharply.

Enelle didn’t look at Ananda. She didn’t look at any of them. She said to her tight-laced fingers, “At least two. Maybe three. It depends on the price we’d get, you see.”

“Who would we – who would – who would be sold?” asked Karah.

“No one will be sold!” Ananda exclaimed. “We’ll think of another way.”

“I don’t think there’s another way,” said Enelle, still looking at her hands, which had now closed into fists on the table. “And there’s not much time to think of one.”

“There is another way!” Ananda said fiercely. “There must be!”

“Me,” said Nemieenne, since that was obvious. “But who else?” She looked around the table. Not the little girls. Not Enelle, who was needed to run the stone yard and keep track of household expenses.

“No!” said Ananda. “No one will be sold.”

“I am the most beautiful,” Karah said simply, putting into plain words a truth they all knew. “A keiso House might be willing to give a large gift for me. That – that is an honorable life.”

It wasn't that simple, of course. First Ananda and Miande and Jehenne had to argue bitterly that there had to be some other way. Enelle obviously couldn't bear argue back, but her figures spoke for her. She had a whole long scroll of figures. She'd plainly tried very hard to find another way. It was equally plain that there wasn't another way to be found.

Jehenne looked at Enelle's figures and then ran out of the room in tears, because she knew Enelle was right but couldn't bring herself to argue for selling anybody. Liaska, who idolized the glamorous keiso and collected painted miniatures of all the most famous ones, was nevertheless outraged into a tantrum at the idea of losing Karah – and a little bit because she at least half wanted to be a keiso herself and knew none of her older sisters would consider selling *her*. In the end, Miande took the little girls away and the older ones looked at Enelle's papers.

Karah didn't examine Enelle's figures. She only believed them. She absolutely rejected any plan that involved selling the house. Nemienne saw that Karah's stubbornness surprised Ananda, though surely it should have been obvious that Karah would never agree to see the little girls forced to live in a violent, filthy part of the city.

Not that Karah argued. She simply continued to insist that she would do very well as a keiso, that it wasn't as if she was suggesting she might become an actress or an aika or anything disreputable. Then she announced that she would sell herself without Ananda's approval if she had to, and from this position she would not be budged. Ananda declared wildly that she herself could as well be sold as anybody, but of course that wasn't true. Nobody else had a merchant's son ready for a quick wedding and for the struggle that would follow to get the stone yard back into profitability.

Nemienne didn't argue either. She just waited for all the arguments to come to their inevitable conclusion. Two days later, she and Karah and Enelle took their father's small open carriage and drove to Cloisonné House, which all their cautious inquiries indicated was the very best keiso House in the candlelight district. Karah drove the carriage, with Enelle and Nemienne crowded close to either side of her on high bench. None of them had wanted Tebbe, their father's driver, to accompany them on this particular errand.

Karah had cried. Then she had fixed her face and her hair very carefully. She was not crying now. Enelle was: Nemienne could see the sheen across her gray eyes. Enelle was gazing out at the city streets, one hand gripping the seat against the jouncing from uneven cobblestones, but Nemienne doubted her sister saw the city through which they drove or noticed the roughness of the cobbled streets.

Nemienne had not cried, though she felt a low, tight sensation in her stomach. She knew very well that Karah would make a wonderful keiso, but when Nemienne tried to picture *herself* learning to be charming and glamorous so that she might win honor

and acclaim and eventually become a rich nobleman's flower wife ... nothing about that future *fit*.

Lonne spread itself out around them, loud and busy. To Nemienne, she and her sisters seemed like ghosts, not nearly as solid and real as the cobbled streets through which they traveled, nor the mountains that loomed over the city. Nemienne stared up at the mountains, watching the low clouds coiled and uncoiled in sinuous dragon-shapes around their jagged peaks. The Laodd loomed among the cliffs, its sheer white walls and thousand glass windows glittering in the light, seeming from this distance no more a thing of men than were the mountains.

Yet keiso mingled freely with the powerful lords of the Laodd. Many girls dreamed of becoming a famous keiso and being chosen as a flower wife by an important courtier. But Nemienne had never collected painted miniatures nor dreamed of glamour and fame. Now that the prospect lay before her, she found it ... disturbing. She trusted Enelle's figures, and she also knew she was right to have argued that she herself should be one of those sold. But she wanted desperately to still have the actual moment ahead of her, waiting in some other day, not arriving in this one.

They came to the candlelight district and then to Cloisonné House far too quickly. The House proved to be an angular brick building, four stories tall, with wide balconies overlooking the street. Pink flowers and silver-variegated ivy poured down from the balconies despite the chill. The ivy did not exactly soften the look of the brick, but it made Cloisonné House look old and respectable and deserving of its good reputation.

At the same time, Nemienne thought that the shadow of the house and the edges of the bricks seemed to possess a strange, faint echo that she did not recognize. Then she blinked and looked again, and the house seemed perfectly normal. Servants quickly arrived to take the carriage away and welcome the sisters into the House, so there wasn't time to wonder about what she might have seen. But, as they passed under the lintel, a faint reverberation seemed to echo through the brick and the wood of the door. Nemienne tried to pause in the doorway, but Enelle was in front of her and Karah behind, and she went in after all without saying anything. Once within the house, the strange echo vanished, and as a tall woman approached them, she forgot about it.

The woman wore a gray overrobe, with white and blue underrobes showing at throat and hemline. She took their names and their request to see the Mother of Cloisonné House. From her assured manner, Nemienne had thought this woman might herself be the Mother, but she only acknowledged their request, her eyes lingering thoughtfully on Karah. She left them in the hands of a servant girl and went away, carrying news of their arrival into the interior of the House.

Karah, nervous, glanced around with wide eyes that did not light on anything for more than an instant. Enelle was white-faced, with a determined set to her mouth. She had her whole attention fixed on their purpose, with none left for anything beyond that necessity. Nemienne thought neither of her sisters even noticed the gracious warmth of the House's entry-hall and parlor.

For, once inside, Cloisonné House indeed presented a gracious appearance. The walls of the entryway were paneled with wooden screens. Against the screens were little tables with mother-of-pearl inlay around their edges. Each table held some small object: the stylized pewter sculpture of a doe, a little finger-harp with pearl knobs and silver strings, a decorative piece of cloisonné jewelry in muted colors. Each of these displays was framed by a washed-ink sketch of mountains or sea or sky. Looking at the grace of the hall, Nemienne felt a new and unexpected kind of sadness rise into her throat. She didn't truly expect – or even want – to remain in this House, but for the first time she felt that this would might be something to regret.

They waited for the Mother of Cloisonné House in a small parlor that seemed made of sea and sky. Tapestries embroidered to suggest clouds and cliffs hung on the walls, and the chairs were upholstered in soft blue-gray fabric. Beyond the chairs, a cheerful fire burned in a slate hearth. A plump woman in robes of gray and blue brought hot spiced cider, assured them that the mother of the House would attend them shortly, and went out again.

The Mother of Cloisonné House did not come in any haste, though servants brought iced cakes and dishes of sugared nuts and nikisi seeds. Karah had always loved sugared nuts. She only looked at these, clearly struggling against tears. Enelle turned away hastily, also blinking, and pretended to be absorbed in examining the fitted slate tiles of the hearth. Nemienne sat down in one of the chairs and looked into the fire. She felt numb, encased in a cold shell that stopped speech and thought and emotion.

The Mother of the House proved to be a stately woman with the dignity of a court lady, though her only crown was her own white hair braided into a coronet around her head. She was as richly dressed as a queen, though, with a sweeping blue-on-blue pattern washing down her overrobe like the waves of the sea down from one shoulder to the opposite hem. Two little girls attended her, each carrying a covered tray. They settled gracefully by the door to wait for any commands she might give.

The woman's face was fine boned, with elegant cheekbones and shrewd dark eyes accentuated by violet powder. Her manner was reserved but not, Nemienne thought – hoped? – unkind. Her gaze moved quickly from one of them to the next as they rose to their feet. That gaze settled, unsurprisingly, on Karah. And widened slightly. That was surely promising.

The three sisters had risen to their feet. Enelle cleared her throat, and the woman at once turned her attention to her. She said, with a kind of brisk sympathy, “Welcome to Cloisonné House. I am Narienneh, Mother of Cloisonné House. May I hope for the opportunity to serve the daughters of Geranes Lihadde?”

Enelle blinked and lifted her chin. Karah and Nemienne exchanged glances, likewise understanding why the mother of the House had kept them waiting in her parlor. She had had time to find out everything. Karah blushed and lowered her eyes, waiting for Enelle to speak. Color rose up Enelle's cheeks also, but she kept her gaze on the Mother's face. “Then you know why we have come –” she began.

“Yes,” said Narienneh. “Please, sit. Accept the hospitality of Cloisonné House.” She waited as one of the brown-clad girls quickly uncovered a tray and came forward to

pour steaming tea. The girl served the mother of the house first, then Enelle, then Karah, and finally Nemienne. Nemienne wondered what governed the child's decision to put the sisters in that order.

“Cloisonné is an exclusive House,” said Narienneh. She spoke with dignified courtesy. “That is why you chose to come here, I presume. Any knowledgeable person advising you would certainly suggest Cloisonné.” She sipped her tea, regarding them over the gilded edge of her cup. Then she set the cup down with a tiny clink of porcelain against glass. “You do understand, many keiso from this House become famous and wealthy. We flatter ourselves that their keisonne esteem their flower wives even more highly than they do their proper wives.” She waited for their respectful nods; then, satisfied, went on, “We do not take on many girls.” Her tone, though cordial, almost suggested that a girl ought to pay a dowry to the House for a place, rather than a gift being made to her family for the transfer of the girl's name to the House.

“Oh,” said Enelle. She had never looked younger, Nemienne thought. None of the sisters could help but look young and naïve and, no doubt, vulnerable. They had certainly learned a good deal about vulnerability since their father's death. And about the willingness of people to exploit vulnerability when they found it.

Then Enelle, recovering, said in her best impersonal business manner, hiding any trace of their desperation, “We are sorry you have no room. Perhaps you might suggest a House that is less crowded. We understand that the House of Butterflies is also a fine establishment.” She, too, put her cup down on a glass-topped table with a decisive little click. Karah and Nemienne exchanged glances. Karah looked genuinely modest and sweet. Nemienne tried to copy her manner, though she doubted she succeeded.

The mother of Cloisonné slid a sideways glance at Karah. “Well, now, it is true that for an unusual beauty such as this, an exception might perhaps be made. If – that is, I presume you are suitable for a keiso House?” she added to Karah. “This is not an aika establishment, you know. Keiso are expected to be pure, ours more than any.”

Karah, speechless, blushed fiercely. Narienneh, studying her carefully, gave a satisfied little nod.

“Of course Karah is pure!” Enelle declared, outraged.

Narienneh gave a second little nod. “I am confident of it. And here in Cloisonné House she will remain so, which is, of course, what you wish. Indeed, as a father desires his daughter happy and well-settled, so you desire for your sister. If not with a husband who will be kind to her and respect her, then with a keisonne who will do the same. Naturally you wish this.

“There are few Houses in all of Lonne in which a truly discerning family would wish to see its sister placed in the flower life. But in Cloisonné House, your sister will be surrounded by accomplished women of good character, women who would enhance her honor and beauty by their example and company. However, keiso must be polished, you understand? And there is so much to learn.” She glanced at Karah

again, and then, clearly as an afterthought, Nemienne. “Even so, despite your sister’s age, Cloisonné House might offer a gift of ... a thousand hard cash, to have the pleasure of counting such a lovely young woman among its daughters.”

Enelle looked abstracted. Nemienne knew she was calculating sums in her head. Her sister would be afraid of losing this offer, Nemienne knew; they had put off this moment almost too long and now badly needed the offered money. But neither could they afford to take an offer that was too low. She said cautiously after a moment, “My family will be devastated by the loss of a beautiful and accomplished sister. Though Cloisonné House is a beautiful setting for any – any flower, and we are overwhelmed by your generosity, still, I fear that even such a generous gift could not compensate us for this loss.” She couldn’t come right out and name a price that would, of course: one did not use the mercantile language of the stone yard to sell a member of one’s family. That just one sister would find a place here was obvious. No one was raving about *Nemienne’s* beauty.

They settled at last on what seemed to Nemienne the extremely generous sum of eighteen hundred hard cash, to be paid directly from Cloisonné House to the family’s bank. The mother of Cloisonné House made out a slip of credit and signed it with her name and her House name, in a graceful flowing hand. Enelle read the House contract carefully and then signed it, her mouth set hard. She gave it to Karah with a nod. Karah’s writing was also graceful, but her hand trembled as she signed the contract. She was not weeping openly but a single tear blotched the paper beside her name.

“Come, now, daughter,” Narienneh said to her, not unkindly, “you are not boarding a ship for Samenne, you know. We are strict here, yes, but this is for your own protection. In time, you will be allowed to visit your first family, and you may send and receive letters on the ninth and eighteenth days of every month.”

“Yes,” whispered Karah.

Narienneh eyed her, and added, “I believe you will come to cherish your place with us. Cloisonné House does not in any way resemble a dock ... establishment. We have no ‘trash keiso’ here.” Her lip curled in elegant contempt.

“Yes,” Karah whispered. “No. Of course. Forgive me. Only I had ... I had so wished Nemienne at least would stay with me.”

Everyone looked at Nemienne. Nemienne tried to look beautiful and suspected she only managed, at best, an unremarkable prettiness.

“You are not precisely a beauty,” Narienneh said to her at last. “Keiso need not be extremely beautiful, but then have you a gift for music? For dance? Have you unusual skill for charm and conversation? No?” She paused, considering. “Your eyes are interesting, however. Very like smoked glass. They seem to me to have an uncommon quality. I do not think you will find a place at a keiso House, child, but I believe I have seen eyes such as yours once or twice.” She gave Enelle a thoughtful look, then turned her glance back to Nemienne. “If I may be so bold as to suggest ... you might go to the Lane of Shadows and look there for a place.”

“At mages’ houses?” Enelle said, startled.

After the first surprise, however, Nemienne found the idea somehow not astonishing. *Mages*, she thought, and then with an odd questioning note to the thought, *Magic?* She had passed by the Lane of Shadows from time to time on errands; it twisted along one side of the city, nearly lost in the shadow of looming Kerre Maraddras. She had imagined she could almost see magic rolling like mist down the steep barren slopes of the mountain and piling up behind the mages’ houses.

Nemienne asked, “Which mage would you suggest?”

At the same time, Enelle asked, “Mages look for –” Their words tangled together and they both fell silent.

“As you ask for my suggestion ... you might go to the third house on the Lane of Shadows and inquire there for Mage Ankennes. He is a generous patron of ours, and I believe he is quite a powerful mage. I think he may be interested in finding a young person with eyes such as yours. Mages do not, I believe, find it a simple matter to locate suitable apprentices.”

“Apprentices?” Karah and Enelle said together.

“Your sister is a little old to begin such an apprenticeship, I believe, but then seventeen is quite old to begin as a deisa at a House. Mage Ankennes has mentioned, once or twice recently, his difficulty in finding a suitable young person. Perhaps he will make an exception as I have done. And,” she added delicately, “I believe you will find your young sister will be safe in his house. His inclinations do not lie in that direction.”

Enelle looked quickly at Nemienne and nodded, looking at least moderately reassured. Nemienne did not say anything. She was thinking of mages, and the Lane of Shadows, and magic rolling off the flanks of the mountains like mist.

“Well,” said Enelle, rather blankly after she and Nemienne had left Cloisonné House. She gathered the reins of the carriage into her hands, but her hands were shaking so that the horses tossed their heads and sidled away sideways.

Nemienne took the reins away from her sister and started the horses moving toward the nearest bridge that crossed the Niarre toward the Lane of Shadows. She herself now felt a tremendous sense of relief. She had liked Cloisonné House. Or not liked, but *admired*. She’d wanted to stay with Karah rather than have either of them thrown out into the world completely alone. And yet ... and yet ... “Karah will do well there,” Nemienne ventured, giving Enelle a sideways glance to see whether her sister was of any mind to hear an optimistic prediction. “That Narienneh is clever, don’t you think? She’ll want Karah to be happy.”

Enelle gave a stricken little nod. “I hope so. I can’t believe ...” she fell silent.

How big a hole Karah left in their lives, and how immediately. And poor Enelle would have to leave Nemienne also, and drive home all by herself. They should have let Ananda come. But none of them had thought ahead to Enelle's painful, solitary drive. "None of this is your fault," Nemienne told Enelle, as they had all been at pains to tell her over the past days.

"No," Enelle whispered. "Do you think ... do you think she will be happy?"

"Yes," said Nemienne. And when her sister gave her a shocked look, added, "Why not? Everyone will love her. She'll be famous and wealthy. Girls all over Lonne will fix their hair the way she does and embroider their robes to echo hers. A hundred men will admire her and give her gifts. I'm sure dozens of them will want to be her keisonne." She gave Enelle a sideways look. "I know you were never interested in glamour, but you must know how many girls would like to be keiso, except they haven't the accomplishments or the beauty. Just think how Liaska admires keiso and always wants to follow the fashions they set."

"But –" Enelle began, too upset to admit the obvious.

"Karah might have preferred to stay with us, and of course we'll miss her terribly, but she'll be a wonderful keiso. She'll find a keisonne from among the men of the court – half the men who frequent Cloisonné House must surely be from the Laodd, don't you think? Some of them must be perfectly nice. She'll choose the nicest of them, of course, someone who loves her. Her sons will grow up with the children of princes."

"I ... you're right. I suppose you're right," Enelle murmured doubtfully.

"Of course I am."

The Niarre River, running out of the shadow of the great mountain to the sea, seemed to carry the sound of magic with it as it washed around the bridge pilings. Nemienne glanced down at the water, her attention momentarily caught. Then they were across the bridge, and she tucked their little carriage behind a much bigger four-in-hand and turned down Herringbone Lane to the east, heading for the mountain's shadow.

"I ... I never noticed anything about your eyes," Enelle confessed quietly. She was not quite looking at Nemienne, but rather off along the streets. It seemed to have caught up with her at last that she was on her way to losing a second sister, and in a way that carried less esteem and more – well, if not peril, then at least uncertainty.

Nemienne herself would have liked a chance to look at her eyes in a mirror. But there wasn't even a clear puddle of water on the street. "Probably you have to meet lots of mages before you'd see – whatever Narienneh saw. Look: there's the Lane of Shadows. Which house did she say?"

"The third." Enelle leaned forward to look for it. They had left the traffic behind them as they passed under the shadow of Kerre Maraddras, entering a district of quiet dimness which seemed only minimally connected to the city proper. "Is that it?" She sounded a little uncertain.

Nemienne could understand Enelle's doubt. The third house on the lane was a small, crooked structure, built of weathered gray stone. Set as it was into a fold of the mountain, the house looked less like a purpose-built structure than a natural outcropping. Light slanted obliquely across the glass windows – the house's one extravagant touch – so that the windows seemed blind, nothing anyone could look into. Or out of.

"It's a bit ... it's rather ... have you ever seen a less likable house?" Enelle asked. She looked appalled. "This was a bad idea. You needn't ... we mustn't ..."

"Oh, no," Nemienne said, her eyes on those blind windows. Light reflected from them, like light off of water, so that anything might be hidden beyond sight in the depths. "No. We're here, and I know we still need more money. Though you did wonderfully well with the Mother of Cloisonné, you know you did," she added hastily. "But we're here. We must certainly ask." She drew the horses to the side of the lane, set the brake, wrapped the reins around the driver's bar, and jumped down to the cobbles, steadying herself with a hand on the near wheel's high rim.

"But –" Enelle began, her voice a little too high.

"Anyway," Nemienne said, as gently as she knew how because she knew her sister wouldn't understand this, "I rather like the house."

Enelle gave her an astonished stare. "You don't really."

"I think I do." Nemienne came around to the other side of the carriage and held up a hand to help Enelle down. If she would come. Her sister was actually shivering, Nemienne saw. Was it the house? Or had leaving Karah behind taught her to fear partings? Nemienne continued to hold her hand up, waiting for her sister to reach down and complete that grip. At last Enelle reached down her hand to meet Nemienne's.

The steps of the house were like the house itself: rough and oddly angled, with unexpected slants underfoot. The polished statue of a cat sat beside the door, gray soapstone with eyes of agate. Nemienne touched the cat's head curiously. The stone was silken-smooth under her fingertips.

"There's no bell-pull," Enelle said, stating the obvious because she was nervous.

"I think the cat is the bell," Nemienne said with an odd certainty, running her hand across the statue's head a second time.

Before them, the door unlatched itself with a muffled click. Enelle flinched slightly, but Nemienne put her hand out and touched the door. It swung back smoothly, showing them a dimly-lit entry and a long hallway running back farther than seemed plausible. A gray cat sat bolt upright in the middle of the foyer. It was the image of the statue on the porch, except for one white foot and a narrow white streak that ran up its nose. The cat blinked eyes green as agates at them, then rose and walked away down the shadowed hallway, tail swaying upright, white foot flashing.

Enelle hesitated. “Do you think we should –”

“Of course,” said Nemienne. She caught her sister’s hand and stepped into the gray stone house after the cat. Stepping through the door was like stepping into the mountain itself: there was a sense of looming weight overhead. Unable to decide whether she found the unexpected presence of the mage’s house oppressive or simply interesting, Nemienne almost hesitated herself. But if she retreated now, she suspected that she’d never get Enelle back inside this house. And if they paused for long here on the threshold, the cat would get too far ahead for them to see even its white foot.

The hallway did indeed run back a disconcerting distance before opening onto a landing. A stair came up from the left, turned on the landing, and went on up to the right. They passed no doors or windows along the length of the hall, only the occasional lantern hanging on a chain. The cat was just vanishing up the right-hand stair as they reached its foot.

“I hate this house!” Enelle whispered vehemently, staring down into the bottomless shadows down the stair to the left. She glanced up the other way, after the cat, and shuddered. The tremor was too slight to see, but Nemienne felt it through their joined hands.

“It could be more cheerful,” Nemienne conceded.

“We could go back,” Enelle suggested, but not as though she expected her sister to agree. However reluctantly, she let Nemienne draw her forward and up the stairs.

There was a door ajar at the top of the stairs, friendly yellow light pouring through it to pool on the higher landing. Enelle let her breath out and went forward eagerly, so that this time it was Nemienne who followed her sister. The door was heavy but well-balanced. It swung wide easily at the touch of Enelle’s hand.

The room behind the door was wide and warm, filled with light from lanterns and from four generous windows on its far side. The windows did not look out into the Lane of Shadows, but rather over the mountain heights. Nemienne, fascinated, went to the nearest and put her hands on the sill, standing on her toes to peer out. Cold struck, knife-sharp, through the glass of the window. Mist blew across the jagged peaks, veiling and unveiling gray stone streaked with ice. Nemienne could almost discern the unfolding wing of a great insubstantial dragon in the shifting of the mist. Sunlight glinting from the ice was like the opening of a crystalline eye.

Enelle crossed the room and put a hand nervously on Nemienne’s, as unhappy with the strange sharp beauty of the mountain heights as Nemienne was drawn to it. Her hand trembled. Nemienne turned at once and put an arm around her sister, turning away from the windows. Indeed, once her attention had been pulled from the heights, she found herself looking with real fascination around the room in which they had found themselves.

An enormous table stood, surrounded by mismatched chairs, before an even more enormous fireplace which took up almost the entire wall behind it. The fire that burned in that fireplace occupied only a small area in the center of the fireplace, but it

was intensely hot and very fragrant. Nemienne wondered what kind of wood the mage might be burning.

The entire surface of the table was cluttered with glass jars, piles of loose papers, angular metal objects that Nemienne thought might be a geometer's tools, and a tall stack of books that seemed likely at any moment to slide down and crush a spun-glass confection of no obvious purpose. A much smaller and neater writing desk sat to one side of the fireplace, its tall-backed chair pulled out and turned as though inviting somebody to sit down in it. At the moment, the cat was sitting in that chair. No one else was in the room. The cat groomed its shoulder, ignoring the girls.

Enelle let out a breath and gazed around with interest, looking much happier in the warmth and light. "Isn't this just *exactly* the workroom of a mage?" she said in a low voice to Nemienne. "What do you suppose that glass thing on the table is for?"

Both the comment and the question were so precisely what Nemienne had been thinking that she blinked, and so missed the exact instant Mage Ankennes entered the room.

The mage was a broad man with powerful shoulders; he looked at first glance more like a man accustomed to earn his bread with the strength of his body than with his magecraft. But a second look found that his face was carved with lines of discipline and silence, and his slate-gray eyes were as secretive as the windows of his house. He looked at Enelle and Nemienne curiously, as he might have looked at two odd foreign insects that had inexplicably turned up in his workroom, and Nemienne felt a shiver of disquiet run down her spine and lift the fine hairs on the back of her neck. She leaned closer to her sister, and Enelle simultaneously leaned toward her, so that their shoulders touched.

Then Ankennes smiled, and immediately the impression of chilly secretiveness vanished. His eyes met Nemienne's, and if the curiosity in them sharpened, this was offset by the warmth of his smile. He said courteously, in a deep smooth voice, "May I hope for the opportunity to serve you?"

"I—" said Enelle, with some confusion. "We—"

"The mother of Cloisonné House suggested we might come to you," said Nemienne, quickly, to cover her sister's distress.

"Charming Narienneh!" said the mage. And added, his eyes still on Nemienne's, "Clever Narienneh. Yes, I can well believe she might. By all means, please sit. Will you have tea?" At the table, two of the chairs slid back, turning invitingly, and hot tea poured itself out of the air into a pair of heavy white porcelain mugs that had suddenly appeared amidst the clutter.

"I believe I may guess what has brought you young women to my house," said Ankennes, pulling a steaming mug out of the air for himself and dropping heavily into the biggest chair at the table. The cat leaped lightly down from its chair, wove its way among table and chair legs, and jumped up on the table to sit at his elbow. The mage

made room for it absently, shoving jars out of the way. He said, “But you had better tell me, eh?”

Enelle sat gingerly down in a chair, mindful of a stack of papers weighted with a jar of round red marbles close by her left elbow. Nemienne took the other chair and breathed in the fragrant steam from her mug. The tea was spiced with something unfamiliar and not quite sweet.

Enelle cleared her throat. “Our father was Geranes Lihadde,” she said. Her tentativeness was giving way again to her practiced businesslike manner.

“Yes,” said the mage, both interest and sympathy in his tone. “I had heard of your father’s untimely death. I sorrow for your loss.”

“You see –”

“Yes, indeed; I understand. Thus your visit to Narienneh of Cloisonné House. Quite so. Did you then leave a sister in Cloisonné? Yes? Well, there is honor as well as beauty in the keiso life, and there is surely no better keiso House than Cloisonné. I am certain your sister is a flower that will flourish in that rich garden. And Narienneh, discerning woman, sent you on to me.”

“We are sorry to intrude –”

“Not at all,” the mage assured her. “Not at all.” His attention shifted again to Nemienne. “Forgive the familiarity, if you will be so kind, young woman, and permit me to ask your age.”

“Fifteen,” said Nemienne.

“Hmmm. And what do you think of my house, eh?”

Ankennes’ tone was casual. But his glance was sharp, and Nemienne understood that this question was one which mattered – perhaps not the last of those that would matter, but the first, and perhaps the most important. She hesitated, afraid of giving a wrong answer. No one else ever saw the slantwise world that always seemed to show itself to her.

But she had to say something. She said hesitantly, “I think ... I think your house is not really in Lonne at all. I think really your house is high up, among the peaks. That’s why your windows are blind from the outside: they are looking out on rock and ice and don’t see the city, and so the city can’t see into them, either.”

There was a brief silence. Both Enelle and Ankennes looked surprised, but not in the same way: where Enelle was merely disconcerted, the mage was clearly pleased. She ducked her head and looked down into her tea, looking for patterns in the floating flecks of spice. If there were any, she couldn’t find them.

“That is not quite correct,” the mage told her. “But it is wrong in, mmm, an interesting way. Many young people make their ways to the Lane of Shadows, believing they

might like to learn magecraft. Some greatly desire to study with me. A few have families willing to pay for the opportunity.”

“But it doesn’t matter what they want,” said Enelle boldly, when Nemienne didn’t answer. “What matters is what *you* want.”

Ankennes smiled. “True.” He leaned back in his chair, which creaked as it took the weight, and drank his tea, his broad hand almost engulfing the mug.

The cat, its tail curled neatly around its front feet, gazed into the empty air between the three of them. It was purring, but very quietly, so that the vibration was more felt than heard.

“Narienneh was right to send you along to me,” the mage said eventually. “I should hate to discourage her acuity. Perhaps ... I might offer a gift of, shall we say, three hundred hard cash, if young Nemienne here will do me the favor of making a trial of the life of the mage. It is not an easy life, mind,” he added. “But you may return that amount should she prove not to care for it, or I will triple that sum again to compensate her family for her lengthening absence by, say, midwinter, if we should mutually agree that the arrangement has proved satisfactory. Eh?”

It was a gamble, then, but not at all a dangerous one, Nemienne thought. It was indeed all to their advantage, and very generous if she suited the mage well enough for him to keep her. And she was determined that she *would* suit him, however demanding a master he should prove: twelve hundred hard cash was a wonderful amount, without doubt more than Enelle had calculated in her sums of loss and hope. Twelve hundred, above the eighteen hundred Cloisonné had given them for Karah, was surely enough that they would be able to forget about selling a third sister.

And she could see that Enelle was comforted by the thought that Nemienne could get out of this apprenticeship if it turned out badly. But it wouldn’t. Nemienne was determined it would not. She was sure of one thing amid the distress and confusion of the past days: she knew she wanted to stay in this house, to explore its strange angles and startling dimensions. To look out of its secretive windows and see the strange views onto which they opened. To find out what that odd glass thing on the table was for. She tried to communicate this to Enelle with a look.

Enelle returned a little sideways tilt of her head, understanding at least what Nemienne meant if not how she felt. She said to the mage, “A generous suggestion, and one I believe my sister welcomes. If she wants this, though we will be distressed to miss her daily company, how can we refuse her desire?”

Mage Ankennes did not trouble with contracts and drafts of credit, but simply put out his hand. A heavy pouch fell, clinking, into it from the air. He gave this to Enelle with a little flourish and an air of bland satisfaction that somewhat called to mind the attitude of his cat.

Enelle seemed a little doubtful as she took the pouch, wondering perhaps whether cash conjured up in such a way might vanish when the light of the sun fell across it.

“Enkea will show you the way out,” Ankennes told her. “I believe you will find the way back to the door briefer and less disconcerting than the route you took in. Though that depends rather upon Enkea’s whim. She is a whimsical creature, I fear.”

The cat gave Ankennes a wide green stare. Then it jumped down from the table and looked expectantly at Enelle, who rose quickly to her feet but then turned rather uncertainly to Nemienne.

Nemienne also stood. She went to Enelle, embracing her. “Go on,” she whispered in her sister’s ear. “Go on, and don’t let anyone fear for me. This is a wonderful house.”

“Is it?” Enelle asked a little wistfully. “Is it really?”

“I promise you,” Nemienne assured her, glad she could speak with conviction.

“All right.” Enelle returned her embrace with fierce, concerned affection and then stepped back. “If you change your mind – if you don’t like it – if you get lonely –”

“She may write, of course. Or visit, if she wishes. At midwinter, perhaps.” Mage Ankennes was patient, but clearly waiting for Enelle to leave. The gray cat walked out of the room, its tail swaying gently upright.

Enelle hugged Nemienne once more, took a step after the cat, threw one more doubtful glance over her shoulder at the mage, and was gone. Though Nemienne had wanted to stay – though she far preferred this powerful mage and this magic-dense house to Cloisonné House, and though she was very grateful for the mother of Cloisonné’s suggestion that had brought them here – it was still hard to watch her sister step through the workroom door and vanish, leaving her behind.

“Well,” said Mage Ankennes.

Nemienne turned her head and met his eyes. Light slid across them, as across the surface of opaque glass or deep water, hiding everything. She wondered what he saw in hers. He was smiling, an expression that was not unfriendly, but that told her nothing.

The mage said in a meditative tone, “Nemienne, is it, eh? And you like my house, do you? A satisfactory beginning, I should think. I wonder what we shall make of you?”

Nemienne wondered that herself.

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