

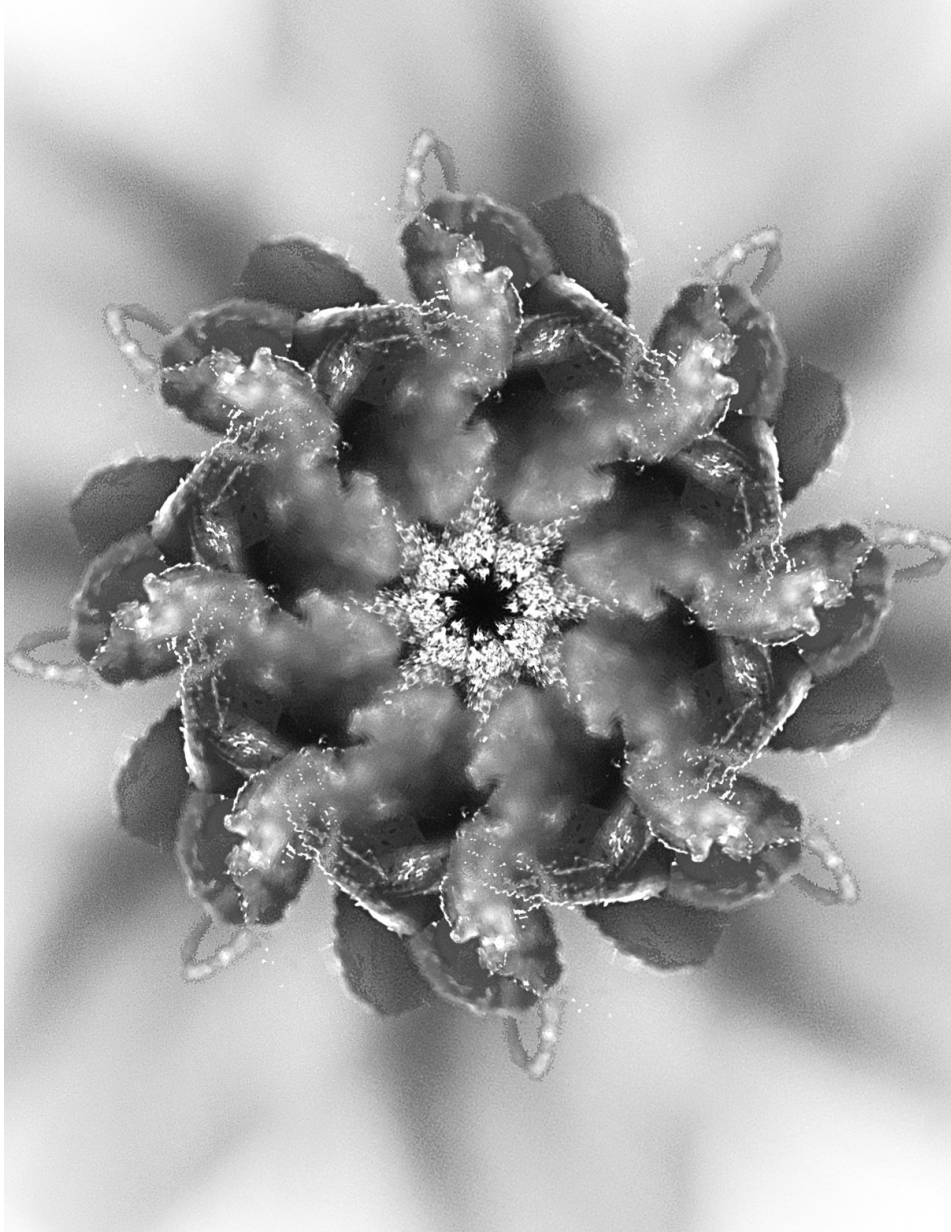
The official organ of the U.S. Grand Lodge of O.T.O.

# Αγαπή

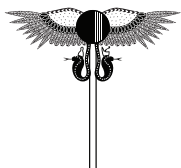


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ANNO VVII

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Mystera Mystica Maxima

Ordo Templi Orientis, U.S.A.



E.G.C.

## FROM THE EDITOR

*Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.*

The U.S. Grand Lodge Strategic Plan report is now available at <https://planning.oto-usa.org/fy20-ev-anno-vvi>.

Here's a list of upcoming deadlines for future editions of *Agapé*:

January 15, 2022 EV

April 30, 2022 EV

Please note that we are ALWAYS accepting submissions to *Agapé*. All articles, reviews, artwork, poetry, and photography are submitted by our members! Submissions can be sent to [agape@oto-usa.org](mailto:agape@oto-usa.org).

*Love is the law, love under will.*

Andrew  
Editor, *Agapé*

# Agapé

The official organ of the U.S. Grand Lodge of O.T.O.

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## FROM THE GRAND MASTER

*Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.*

### Same-Sex Unions

I cannot speak for areas outside the U.S., but the sacerdotal clergy of E.G.C. within the U.S.A. are fully empowered to perform same-sex marriages.

### A Note on Consent

Sexual ethics can be a difficult topic in an organization that stresses freedom of sexual expression. But freedom of sexual expression is a two-way street. Sexual relationships are not free when one party is not a fully willing participant.

In Sweden, the rape conviction rate rose 75% after they changed the definition of rape to “sex without consent.” Prior to this change, prosecutors had to prove that violence or coercion were either employed or threatened.

“Significant non-consensual sexual conduct” is an example of an offense in U.S.G.L. for which disciplinary action up to and including expulsion may be appropriate.

Consent must be established in advance, and if one party asserts that the act was non-consensual, then the burden of proof will be on the other party to show otherwise. Consent for sex cannot be given by a minor, or by a person who is unconscious or heavily inebriated.

A finding of “significant non-consensual sexual conduct” is necessary for expulsion, but it is not necessary for lesser disciplinary actions. When does non-consensual sexual conduct become “significant”? There is no question that any cases that involve sex with minors, or the use or threat of physical force, are significant. These are typically crimes, anyway, and should be reported immediately to the proper authorities. However, other factors may arise that demand a finding of significance for our purposes; for example, it becomes significant if coercion, retribution, or misuse of power is involved, or when there are repeated or multiple

complaints against the same individual establishing a pattern of adverse behavior—especially if that behavior disrupts local or regional harmony, or leads to resignations, or alienates potential applicants. Grand Lodge has the right and duty to evaluate significance on a case-by-case basis.

*Love is the law, love under will.*

Sabazius



## UPDATES FROM THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

*Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.*

The Electoral College took the following actions pertinent to local body leadership at the Fall meeting held online on October 16, 2021 EV:

- Passed mastership of Horus Camp (Salt Lake City, UT) from Sr. Holly Stuart to Br. Aníbal A.
- Passed mastership of Serpent and Lion Oasis (Tampa Bay, FL) from Br. Jason Norris to Br. Tim Simmons.
- Confirmed Br. Thomas W. as Master of Anabasis Camp (Indianapolis, IN).

The Electoral College wishes to thank the outgoing masters for their years of service and to congratulate the new masters.

Procedurally, we approved a requirement that all local body web resources be associated with a Virtual Valley officer account.

We are pleased to announce that at our Fall meeting two new Electors, Sr. Lori L. and Br. Derek B., were formally seated on the College to begin their eleven-year terms of service. Sr. Lori and Br. Derek take the seats of outgoing Electors (and former College Presidents) Br. David H. and Sr. Hattie Q., whom we wish to thank for their many years of dedicated service to the College and to the Order.

Fraternally yours,  
Mike Estell  
President  
U.S.G.L. Electoral College

## About the Electoral College

**Appeals** – Those wishing to appeal decisions of the Electoral College may do so in writing to the Supreme Grand Council through the Grand Secretary General ([gsg@oto-usa.org](mailto:gsg@oto-usa.org)). Those wishing to appeal verdicts of the Grand Tribunal to the Areopagus may do so with the sponsorship of a seated Elector.

While there is no appeal process for Notice of Pending Bad Report at a Local Body, if an initiate feels the notice they have received did not follow the process as outlined in the C.O.L.M.H. for issuing notice, believes there was inappropriate motivation behind the notice, or can prove the notice is patently false (through disputation of facts), they may contact the Secretary of the College outlining the manner in which the Notice was deficient or false.

**Attending Meetings** – Dues Current Members in Good Standing of V° are invited to attend regular meetings of the Electoral College. We request that those planning to attend first contact the Master of the hosting body to R.S.V.P. Online regular meetings may be observed by being physically present with a willing Elector.

**Communications** – In addition to hosting email lists for masters, mentors, and communication with Grand Lodge, we also maintain a blog of Updates, News, and Transmissions on our website (<https://ec.oto-usa.org/electoral-college-blog/>) and are experimenting with a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ECUSGLOTO>).

Initiates with specific concerns or questions regarding the operation of the Electoral College are invited to write to either the President or Secretary. See the included U.S.G.L. Officers Directory for contact details.

**Revolutionary** – Members in Good Standing of the Sovereign Sanctuary of the IX° living within the United States but not currently serving as Officer or Voting Member of any Governing Body of U.S.G.L. are heartily encouraged to volunteer to the post of Revolutionary by contacting the President or Secretary of the Electoral College. Thus may progress be effected.

**Website** – The official website of the Electoral College can be found at <https://ec.oto-usa.org/>. In addition to the aforementioned resources, one may find information on volunteering to host a meeting or organize a study group in new areas, and other services provided by the College or expected of local bodies within U.S. Grand Lodge.

*Love is the law, love under will.*

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## GRAND LODGE NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

*Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.*

### Basic Conflict Resolution

Misunderstandings, problems, or disputes can happen to anyone. When this disrupts the harmony of the camp you should be aware of an appropriate response and the resources available for effectively dealing with these issues.

Be aware that this document does not apply to certain serious situations: if you are witnessing or experiencing an assault or another crime, notify the local master and go directly to the police. Also, we do not tolerate harassment; be familiar with the documents on harassment in the soon-to-be issued Minerval packet and do not hesitate to report it immediately.

For less urgent matters, the most effective means to resolution is generally on the personal level. First, consider that you may have a role in the problem; understand and take responsibility for your own feelings, thoughts, and actions, as well as their effects on others.

Next if you are comfortable proceeding alone, go directly to the sibling with whom you are having a problem. Approach your sibling respectfully, rationally, non-reactively, and with discretion. Strive to express your thoughts and feelings in such a way that the other person can understand what you are saying without having to take a defensive posture. Refer to the soon-to-be issued Minerval packet *Appendix III: Communication & Emotional Literacy*.

If you are not comfortable enough or calm enough to take this approach, bring the problem to the attention of the local master. Alternatively, if the local master is in any way part of the problem, bring it to the attention of a Chapter member, or to the Office of the Ombuds. They can advise you further and may be able to assist directly.

Members have rights. If you feel your rights may have been violated, or if you wish to delve deeper into this subject, you are strongly encouraged to contact one of the following:

- Ombuds general contact: [ombuds@oto-usa.org](mailto:ombuds@oto-usa.org)
- Ombuds female: [ombuds-f@oto-usa.org](mailto:ombuds-f@oto-usa.org)
- Ombuds male: [ombuds-m@oto-usa.org](mailto:ombuds-m@oto-usa.org)
- U.S.G.L. Parliamentarian: [parliamentarian@oto-usa.org](mailto:parliamentarian@oto-usa.org)

Last, all members are encouraged to study the following foundational documents *Liber 101: An open letter to those who may wish to join the Order*, and *Liber 194: An Intimation with Reference to the Constitution of the Order*, as well as the *Camp, Oasis, and Lodge Master's Handbook* (C.O.L.M.H.), the *U.S. Grand Lodge Bylaws*, and our initiation rituals (up to your degree).

Many of these documents can be referenced from the U.S.G.L. website at <https://oto-usa.org>, or from your local O.T.O. body.

*Love is the law, love under will.*

## The Flame that Burns in Every Heart of Man Part Two

Vivian Caethe  
Crux Ansata Oasis  
Valley of Denver, Colorado

*For Part One, please see Agapé Vol. 21 #2*

Babalon is high in the astral realms, the city on seven hills with a tower that reaches far up into the sky. We approach it through a series of leaps and jumps, cutting through shortcuts in the aether to make a journey that would take others months a mere minute or two. I keep an eye out for adversaries, but none seem to be following us in our circuitous path.

Even though the journey takes little time, the distance from my body is straining. Pausing, I try to catch my breath; the loss of such a vital part of myself has proven taxing, but I have no choice but to push forward. Death is the only thing that will greet me if I turn back. Jack allows me these breaks, but his expression shows his concern.

We approach the rainbow-sheened walls and I take a moment to take them in, feeling the tether to my reality shake and bend in the currents of the aether. Although I rarely go this deep into the other worlds, I am not unfamiliar with them.

We join the stream of aetheric denizens with the same destination: Babalon the Great. Although almost lost to human memory, the great city abides in astral form forever as the confluence of information and secrets among those who inhabit the heavenly realms. Humans may be foreigners in this place, but the creations in our world have long shadows here and once forgotten in the modern era, long lives amongst the strange and bizarre worlds beyond.

The gates loom above me, close to twenty meters tall and twice as wide. There are no guards to protect the city, why would there be? The city protects itself and to this point, none has dared challenge its sovereignty or the might of Babalon herself.

Our goal is the towering structure at the center of the city and so we make our way through the madding crowd, dodging the occasional spirit and efreet. Babalon deals in secrets and knowledge but there are no storefronts or merchants to hawk their wares. Instead what a human would call cafes line the streets, where the oppidans and travelers meet to consume confidences and drink deep of the wells of knowledge that pool here.

As we pass, moving up the wide roads paved with words too ancient to read, some of the inhabitants and their guests eye us balefully but no one speaks to us or seeks to bar our passage. Humans may be foreigners, but in Babalon, all are welcome.

As long as they have something to trade, that is. Jack was not wrong in that I needed to bring Babalon something to trade for the location of my heart. My initial thought would be to trade the story, but as I watch those watching us, I wonder if the story of the theft of hearts is already well known.

I keep my wits about me and, although my gaze remains on our goal, I don't fail to observe those who take notice of me. Even some of my attackers, the antagonists, watch me balefully as I pass. But the peace of Babalon is unbreakable. To breach it is to break the deepest of taboos and to invite the worst tortures.

Babalon herself has decreed it so.

The crowd thins as I near the base of the tower, as if none want to linger so close to the memory of humanity's challenge to the gods. While the story goes that on Earth, the people were scattered when the tower fell, their tongues confounded, here the tower stands tall, inviting all who would speak to the most powerful.

We enter the structure on foot. Even though the laws of gravity don't apply on the astral planes, there are certain forms and formalities that must be obeyed to seek an audience with she who reigns here. And one of those is to approach her throne as a supplicant, humbly and without fanfare. Like many here, she despises the show and opulence as a conceit to demonstrate the power of others.

As Jack and I climb the stone stairs that circle the inside edge of the building, spiraling up higher and higher with every flight, I look out the regularly spaced windows at the city below. The metropolis teems with life and sound, a minor roar of languages that mutes the further and further I go. The ache in my chest grows with every step I take, and I grit my teeth against the hollow sensation as I continue to ascend.

"Are you all right?" Jack asks.

I pause on the stairs, my hand on the warm stone wall. Catching my breath, I lean against the stone and feel it give to the pressure of my immaterial form. Jack, still strangely able to interact with my fading spirit, grabs my hand and pulls me to safety. I nod my gratitude, "Thanks."

A scream echoes from the clouds above and a spirit falls from the heights, limp and tattered. They have displeased Babalon and have paid for their folly. The petitioners like myself on the stairs pause to watch the pitiful soul descend to the city and disappear, to be eaten by the things that live under the streets. Babalon is merciless to those who would challenge her.

And there's always someone who thinks they're better than everyone else, even in the ethereal worlds. I lose interest in the sight and we continue our climb, passing curious seraphim and titillated demons who gossip about the one who fell.

I catch snippets of their conversation as we continue the long slog upwards and learn that the spirit was human, one like myself, but apparently on the other team. What he would want with Babalon, much less what would drive him to be in such a hurry as to not obey her rules, is beyond me. Not every person from Earth has as conscientious a teacher as myself, and despite my focus on my goal and the pain in my chest, I let the fact that there is one fewer adversary cheer me.

The aetheric air grows thinner the higher and higher we climb, my tether to my body stretching thin and wavering in the winds that blow through the windows and spiral down the staircase to the landings below. Carried on the wind is the sound

of the city, the murmurs of the multitudes, and with it sheets of paper with the hopes and dreams of the sleeping worlds scribbled on them. If I wanted to, I could reach out to take one from the swirling air, but I keep myself on the path upward and upwards. To be distracted now is to invite danger.

It is not an easy climb, nor one made casually. Only the truly needy approach Babalon with their petitions, or the truly desperate.

Jack seems to be enjoying the climb, showing no signs of distress as he follows me up the rough-hewn steps. I would envy him had I not known he was dead. How strange, then, for me to be the one fading, and him to be the one strong.

Finally the climb ends as the stairs open to a wide landing where spirits of all shapes and sizes congregate and mingle. Like me, they are petitioners before her throne, all waiting their turn. The order of supplicants is determined solely by the queen herself. I could be made to wait forever if I don't prove interesting enough to catch her attention from her throne on the far side of the room.

I push my way through the crowd, determined to get as close as I can. I leave Jack behind; he knows as well as I do that I must bring my supplication to her alone.

Babalon lounges on a red velvet chaise lounge, a giant beast at her feet with seven heads and ten horns. The beast gazes impassively, perhaps with boredom, at the spirits below, licking its chops from time to time as if pondering which of us would make the tastiest snack.

The crowd thickens the closer I get to the woman until I can no longer edge and dodge through the throng. Frustrated, I pause behind an immense angel that ignores me, its many eyes blinking from behind flaming wings that rotate about its spherical form. Its attention is on Babalon and the one that kneels before her, head bowed low to the ground. Some attendants come here not to plead for her mercy or her assistance, but rather to watch the spectacle of the other supplicants' possible demise. Babalon can be a cruel mistress to some but is renowned for her kindness to others. There are those who would

gamble on the results of the petitions as well, as I see coin exchanging hands and paws. Money is common even here on the aether, but representing knowledge more precious than gold.

I come before Babalon as a poor petitioner. I have no great secrets to trade, nothing that could catch her attention but for the strange condition the adversaries have left me in. She is known to have a soft spot for humans, but as whimsical as her moods can be, this does not guarantee me safety or succor.

But I must seek an audience with her, lest I lose my heart forever. Desperation drives me to continue to push my way through the crowd, sometimes literally, as the spirits who are more solid than I don't move.

Breaking through the other side of the crowd, I stumble to a stop in front of the towering throne and the giantess recumbent thereon. Hastily, I slide to my knees and bow before her, risking her wrath, but also her curiosity.

"Small human..." her contralto voice shakes me to my core and even some of the throng behind me takes a step back. "What brings you here?"

"Glorious Babalon, ageless font of understanding, defender of the weak," I search my mind for the appropriate forms of address, but I sense impatience from her and, risking a quick glance up, I realize I'm losing her attention. "I need your help, great Lady."

"They all need my help," she says, waving a languid hand at the crowd. The beast before her raises its head and assesses me for the snack I might be. "What makes you so special?"

"Nothing, lady. Only I have had my heart stolen and humbly request your assistance with its return."

"Careless, were you?" she asks.

I don't know how to answer that, so I simply keep my head bowed and hope for the best.

"I know where your heart is." She yawns, and reaches down to scratch the beast's head, her immense fingers digging furrows into its dense fur.

“Why do you need it so badly?”

“It is...” I pause, realizing I had never considered its purpose outside of pumping blood through my body. But as above, so below. A heart in the physical realm sustains the body, a heart in the spiritual realm sustains the soul. “I would die without it, great lady. I must get it back, lest the Earth lose one more defender, and the battle be turned to the adversaries.”

“Is the balance of Earth that fragile? How sad.” She looks away, then I feel the full force of her gaze on the top of my head. “I will tell you where your heart is, small one. But it will not be a secret. A heart is a precious thing in these realms, and many would seek to have it from you. You must get there first, before the others, to reclaim it.”

I lower my face further to the marble floor, “Great lady, but how must I reclaim it if so many would seek it as well?”

“Figure it out, small one.” Her voice is not unkind, but I can tell the audience is over. I stand and bow, trying to keep the disappointment from my features. One of her assistants comes forward and gives me a tarot card, face down. I nod my thanks and tuck it into my pocket.

Making my escape, I dodge the clutching laughter of the demons and angels alike as I make my way back to the stairs to where Jack waits for me. Silently, for we know the ears of many are strained to listen, we descend the tower.

I wait until I am down the stairs and outside before I look at the card she gave me.

The Moon.

Of course. I put the card in my shirt pocket, close by where my heart used to be. Briefly closing my eyes, I try to center myself, but lacking my center, I find it more difficult than usual. I feel myself wavering on the edge of a precipice and it takes a dedicated effort to not fall down into the abyss.

“I can get you to the moon.” Jack says. “The djinni are bored and curious creatures, and your story may be enough to engage their interest for a time.”

“How did you know?”

“Babalon granted all attending the knowledge.”

“That’s not particularly reassuring.”

“So what is your plan?”

I sigh and internally acknowledge that he has a point. “How will we get there? The mansions of the moon are far and the way is not easy.”

“Take my hand and see.”

It’s a leap of faith, but what other choice do I have? Even on the astral plane, there is no free lunch. But I can’t do this on my own.

Despite my misgivings, I take his hand, noticing how pale and transparent I am compared to his spiritual self. His hand solidly holds mine, despite its translucence. Am I growing thinner the longer I am separated from my heart? The thought makes me panic, but before I can spiral down into fear, Jack tightens his grip on my hand and yanks me away from the rainbow walled city and into the aether.

Even though I am well versed in navigating the astral planes, Jack makes me look like an amateur. I grasp his hand for dear life as he strides easily and swiftly from one flow to the next. The astral world passes by in a dizzying array of colors and sounds, the subliminal roar of the multitudes of Babalon fading to quietude of a noonday forest, then to the somnolent echoes of mountains, and finally to the sounds of an ocean at midnight.

He stops after what feels like an eternity and I take a deep breath to center myself. I find that we are standing in a flow that slowly wends its way from the earth to the heavens, a glimmering river that bifurcates, then splits again and again on its way to the moon.

But the moon is not singular in the sky as it is in the physical world. Instead, each flow goes to a



different phase, all of which chain across the sky, one mansion for each house described in the Arabic zodiac. Twenty eight mansions in total, each ruled by a djinn as lord of their domain.

“Which mansion is my heart in?” I ask, taking in the many moons that span the sky like a string of pearls. There’s so many of them, and I don’t even know where to start.

“Didn’t Babalon tell you?” Jack asks.

I pull out the tarot card given to me by Babalon, searching its cryptic symbolism for any clues. On the card, a river tinged with blood passes between two mountains, then two towers guarded by Anubis and his jackal minions. At the bottom, a scarab brings the sun through the night, hidden beneath the earth. It is the eighteenth card of the tarot, but it is possible that she meant for the card to merely bring me this far and no farther.

As I stare at the card, I hear a groaning sound like the beginnings of an earthquake. Hastily stuffing the card in my shirt pocket, I look around for the source of the threatening noise. Jack meets my frantic gaze, “Hold on.”

The flow around our feet quakes and shivers, the vibrations resonating through my core and making my breath come short. I reach for and grab Jack’s hand as he offers it to me and hold on as tightly as I can.

The astral plane stops shaking and for a moment I wonder if it was merely one of the normal vibrations of the moving ethereal worlds. But as I catch my breath, Jack sees something behind us. “Run.”

Having no choice but to trust him, I dash up the flow toward the closest mansion. As we flee, the flow behind us twitches and starts rushing backward. My tether to my body shakes and writhes as well, like a guitar string plucked by a toddler.

I risk a glance over my shoulder and see tens to hundreds of the adversary and their human minions behind us, surrounding a hole in the aether through which the flow has started to become a waterfall. Jack looks back too and his usually cheerful

expression becomes concerned. He grabs my hand and together we fight our way up the retreating flow to the nearest mansion.

Behind us, the adversaries cackle and grasp for our ankles. Dodging while fighting the stream is nearly impossible and I nearly fall but for Jack’s grip on my hand. An adversary’s clawed hand goes through my leg as it lunges for me and it loses its balance, shrieking as it falls into the growing void below.

As we fight our way to the solid landscape of the moon, I feel a strange stirring in my chest, as if my heart is near. Literally heartened by the sensation, I double my efforts, and with Jack’s help I manage to break free from the flow and land on solid ground. Bracing myself on my hands and knees, I debate kissing the dusty moon surface in gratitude. Jack gives me no time for such silly demonstrations. “We have to get to the mansion.”

I nod and push myself to my feet, brushing moon dust from my astral form. I don’t know which of the twenty-eight mansions of the moon we have arrived at, but we can’t be picky about our choice of refuge, especially as a twenty-foot djinn emerges from the gated mansion, his immense red form expanding to tower above us, blocking my view of the marble and silver building behind him.

“Who dares intrude on my domain?” The djinn’s voice doesn’t boom across the landscape as I expected. Rather, it comes to my ears, carrying a quiet sort of power, like the voice of a very angry man who has learned to restrain his temper by speaking slowly and softly.

Bowing before him, I try to project confidence in my voice as I rise to meet his gaze. “As-salaam ‘alaykum, o lord of this mansion.”

“You greet me with peace, but an army pursues you.” The djinn looks at Jack and I with amusement and disdain. “But lest I be viewed as rude, I will respond in kind: Wa ‘alaykum as-salaam.”

Doing my best to try not to appear impatient or afraid, I say, “We ask your protection and a favor, ruler of this domain.”

"You ask much for being strangers. How human," the djinn says, raising an eyebrow.

I would get annoyed at the continual tests and challenges of the astral plane had I not known to expect them. But even as our enemies near, I know this is another trial of my knowledge, determination, and courage.

"Will you break bread with us?" I ask.

"Why would I give you guest rights when I should just take you prisoner?"

"Even Saladin, mighty though he was, gave succor to his enemies and treated them as guests." I fold my arms, daring the djinn to contradict me. "Are you not greater and more magnanimous than Saladin himself?"

The djinn looks down at me, powerful enough that if he so chooses, he can destroy me with a stray thought. After a moment of what appears to be deep contemplation, he nods. "You interest me, little human. Join me."

Before I can inhale, I find Jack and I inside the mansion, seated on sumptuous cushions with veiled forms holding out bowls of scented rosewater. I dip my hands in the comfortably warm water and allow the servitors to dry them. Once cleansed, the forms hand us bread and cups half-filled with steaming, fragrant coffee. I accept the bread with a grateful smile and break it, placing half on the plate for Jack. The djinn, watching us with interest, has shrunk to fit the size of the room that so comfortably accommodates us. His presence, although less fearsome at this size, is no less imposing.

As I chew the salted bread carefully, I take in the mansion, with its silvered walls, hung with diaphanous cloth that sways in an invisible breeze. Words are written in beautiful but unreadable to me calligraphy across the arched entryways and windows that look out on various impossible scenes. One window shows an earthlike pastoral view, cows and all, while another shows an endless desert with purple sands lit by a glowering red star.

"You admire my collection, mortal?" the djinn asks, breaking the silence.

"I admire your lovely residence, o lord of this mansion," I reply, finishing the bread and smiling serenely. If I had complimented one of the scenes, he doubtless would have had reason to place me in it, lost and wandering a foreign planet. By finishing the bread and complimenting his mansion, I gave him no excuse to trap me.

The djinn laughs in amusement, "Humans have become clever in this new era. Too clever, some would say."

Jack snorts as he finishes his bread. I wonder how these many years in the astral plane as a wandering spirit have molded him. How much does he remember of his humanity?

"Most powerful lord, I still would ask of you a boon." I say, sipping the perfectly brewed coffee.

Jack glances at me in warning, but I feel safe enough to ask the djinn directly. The djinn has given us hospitality. By their rules, he can do us no harm unless we break them first. Even if I know very little else, I do know that the djinn are all about their rules and norms.

"You are a bold one." The djinn looks at me with avid curiosity. "I have already delivered you from your enemies. What more would you request?"

I place my empty coffee cup on the table between us and place both hands on my empty chest. "The enemies of which you speak have stolen something very precious to me. I have been told by a great power that you or your brothers hold it in one of your mansions."

"And you wish that it be returned to you? This thing we have acquired at great cost?"

"What use is it to you? In your hands, it is a mere curio."

"Yet it gives me pleasure to possess it." The djinn folds his arms across his chest and leans back. I

hide a breath of relief that we have indeed found the djinn who has gained possession of my heart.

“Would it not give you greater pleasure to demonstrate your magnanimousness? Certainly others would hear of your generosity and regard you warmly.”

“What need have I of the regard of others?”

I can't tell if the djinn is teasing me or not, but from what I know of his kind, they are proud creatures and I must tread carefully. A roaring sound builds in my ears, which I at first think is a trick of my mind. But as it slowly grows, I realize that the adversaries have grown so prideful that they would even take on a djinn.

Knowing I have little time to plead my case, I speak as quickly as I dare while still remaining polite. “Although your generosity is lauded through the planes, there are many who would doubt it. I have heard whispers even among my own kind saying that the djinn hide their secrets and hoard their treasure. But imagine the story it would be, the tale of how you saved me from the ravenous horde of my enemies and restored to me that which is most precious.”

“Would that not merely bring more beggars to my door?” The djinn asks.

“Not if I tell them of the dangers my companion and I faced to arrive, prostrate, in your domain. Nor when I tell them of how you towered over my enemies and struck them down, tens and hundreds fold for breaking the peace of your demesne. I will tell such stories to my people that they will fear to tread here unless they be pure of will and peaceful in intention.”

“But by lying to them of my prowess, would you not be proving yourself not pure?”

“There would be no lie, my lord,” I say. “Even now my enemies come to your door. They have minds with which they do not understand, eyes with which they do not see, and ears with which they do not hear. Their greed to control my world blinds them to the beauty of the planes, and the songs of

the ethereal inhabitants. They are hungering voids, determined to destroy all that is good and beautiful in the world. It is for this reason they have stolen my heart, and it is to stop me from reclaiming it that they assault your domain.”

The djinn eyes me speculatively for a moment, then nods, “If you will truly tell of my works, and honor the name of the great Adrieb when you speak to God, then I shall assist you.”

“With every meditation I make, from the course of one moon to the next, I will sing your praises to all who listen,” I vow.

“Then you and your companion shall join me in battle.” Adrieb grins brightly, showing brilliant white, sharp teeth. “Gird yourselves with the tools of your kind.”

Exchanging glances with Jack, I nod, trying not to let my fear show on my face. What can two humans do in a fight against so many?

I guess we're about to find out.

Two of the djinn's servitors appear before me, carrying a chest that seems heavy even for them. They place it before me and, at my confused look, the djinn grins. “You may choose from my treasures the one you most seek. But choose carefully, little human.”

I nod and the servitors open the chest, revealing treasures that must have taken millenia to gather. Cups and swords in shimmering gold, coins from countless planets, platinum crowns and, on the top of the pile, the beating red muscle of my heart.

As I reach for it, the other treasures murmur to me, offering rulership and power to rival Babalon's, dominion over my enemies and the power to save the Earth once and for all, life everlasting beyond the mere prison of my flesh.

What am I, one human, to choose my own survival over that of an entire planet? Would it not serve our cause better for me to choose one of these better, more powerful tools to defeat those who would oppose us?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, then take my heart from the pile. It may not be the best choice, but it is the only choice that will keep me human. If we are not fighting for our humanity, then the fight is already lost.

The djinn chortles and I open my eyes. My heart beats, red and vibrant, in my palm. But the treasures of the chest have all crumbled to dust and a slight breeze from one of the windows causes even that to disappear.

Taking a deep breath, I place the hand grasping my heart to my chest and press it into my body. I feel a strange sensation, like a joint about to pop, and then it clicks into place, jarring me with the sudden rush of sensation. I hadn't realized how thin and pale I had become without it.

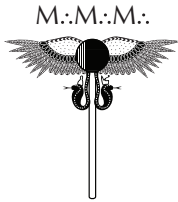
"They're coming," Jack says.

I nod and cross my arms to touch my right fingers to my left shoulder and my left to my right. Following my will, my magical tools appear about me, the sword on my right hip, wand on my left. The cup swings from a holder on my belt and the coin becomes a shield strapped to my right arm. I uncross my arms and nod to Jack, who is similarly equipped.

Adrieb strides to the great door of his mansion and Jack and I follow. As my feet carry me to what may be my death, I feel a certain calm. I did what I came here to do. My personal quest is complete. Even if I am defeated in battle, I have denied the adversaries what they desire.

Jack grins at me and salutes. I return the gesture and draw my sword as the djinn opens the door.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*



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