



## Prologue

**T**HE RUINS OF THE ANCIENT CITY lay undisturbed in almost unbroken darkness. Sunlight did not trouble its roads, and the moons, with their scant silver light, were likewise invisible; the sky was a thing of curved, uneven rock.

Great stone slabs and the bases of statues lined empty streets; crevices, created by the slow shift of the earth beneath those streets, had widened into a darkness so complete that even demon eyes could not easily penetrate it. But in the ruins, there was a silent, funereal majesty that demanded, and held, the attention. Echoes of voices that had perished centuries ago existed in some of the small statues and maker's works that still adorned deserted buildings—rotting floors in the dry, dark air notwithstanding.

There were gardens in this city that had been swallowed, at once, by the abiding earth, but they were not living gardens; no one tended them. Nor had they any need; they were creations of stone that suggested the fragile and enduring beauty of memory, not life. That they were modeled on living things signified little; they were not, and had never been, alive. Which is why they endured.

Lord Isladar wandered through the subtle pathways of this garden, slowly examining flowers, delicate trailing ivy, shrubs, and the stone legs of benches; the actual seats had long since rotted away. Everything here had been carved in stone by the hand of the maker-born, but the stone seemed to move and breathe and grow; it was an artful and pleasing illusion.

## 2 ♦ Michelle West

He was alone not because it was safest—although in the Hells of his experience this was often the case—but because he had no desire for the company of his kin; the world had opened, had allowed him entry, and he had accepted it. He had forced from it a shape of his choosing, neither too tall nor too short; it was slender and seemed much like the form that had been his when he had first left childhood behind.

Childhood.

He bent, his fingers brushing dust and webs from the delicate curl of open petals before he rose. He admired what remained of this hidden city, but it was not for the city that he had been summoned from the side of the Lord of the Hells by the ambitious, and surprisingly competent, Sor Na Shannen so many years past.

No, Lord Isladar had been chosen because he was one of the few who understood the men who had made gardens such as these; who had watched and encouraged them, in his fashion, during the ages when the gods had walked the world. It was for his curiosity, his observation, and his ability to predict what the merely mortal would say—or do—when placed in a difficult position.

The kin understood pain. They understood how to break things. Even cities as glorious as this one at its height had not been immune. But mortals, especially those born to the gods in their ethereal Between, were still capable of posing a threat, and if not mortals, then the others, firstborn and hidden.

Mortals.

Isladar smiled. Regardless of the danger or the consequence of the summoning, mortals played their fraught games of demonology. They did not, of course, understand what lay at the base of those games; they merely understood that it was both forbidden and powerful. Could he but choose one avenue to open up the world to the demonic kin, again and again, it would be that one. It was convenient, then, that the men and women charged with guarding against just such uses of magic understood their own kin so poorly.

This time, a mortal mage, sequestered in the relative solitude of a rich man's manse, had taken forbidden texts and cobbled together just enough knowledge that he might begin the summoning of lesser creatures. He understood the spells and protections but, again, did not understand that what he was opening was a small door through which something might walk. Yes, demons—but as relevant to the *Kialli* lords as rats might be to

mortals—came at his call, and they danced his cautious tune until they were returned to the Hells.

There, they made their way—as all denizens of the Hells must—to the foot of the mountain upon which the Lord of the Hells ruled, in the heat and the sway of the charnel winds, beneath the angry sky. They were expected to make the climb on their own, and they were expected to survive it; not all would, but this was not considered a loss.

In Isladar's opinion, it was. Because word of a possible mage, a possible entry into the world that was ever on his Lord's mind, would thus escape detection for many years, and by the time the existence of such a mortal reached his Lord's ears, the mortal would likely be dead—of the consequences of his own ambition or of age.

If the mage was foolish or of middling will, he would escape detection completely; if the lesser kin escaped that mage's control in mortal lands, they would seek vengeance and cause inestimable pain—and death—before they were apprehended by other, less foolish mages and sent back to the Hells as dust.

But their vengeance would open no doors, and it was a single such door that was required.

And so it went. Here and there, the promise of a particular mage's name would be whispered in the throne room upon the peaks, and Isladar would listen and nod. He would take the measure of the kin who made his enraged report—for who among their kind willingly submitted the whole of their will to another and, at that, a *lesser*, being?—and in so doing, would gain some measure of the summoner. But the powerful were not summoned often, and if they were, they did not return to the Lord in a way that provided useful information.

Instead, they lived in the mortal world, evading both detection and the absolute grip of the Lord's rule. It was as close to freedom as the *Kialli* could now come.

Time passed in the Hells, as it passed everywhere: slowly. The screams of the damned, or their whimpers, were sedating and soothing; they brought comfort and peace to the kin. Not so Lord Isladar, although he, like any of the kin, felt the call strongly. What he wanted, what he had wanted from the moment he had first set foot upon the plains of the Hells and understood just what his service had brought him, was more complicated.

To his surprise—and he, like any of the *Kialli*, abhorred surprise, be-

cause it was so often the final emotion in a powerful existence—Sor Na Shannen, a cunning but ultimately insignificant demon, had been summoned by an enterprising and ambitious mage. It was not the first time she had been summoned, and it was unlikely to be the last, for even mages had their base desires, and she had littered her name across the ancient texts and reliquaries with deliberate malice; it was not hard to find. She had not returned, but in her captivity she had found the privacy and the time to call her Lord's name across the divide. He heard.

He heard, and he informed Isladar of both her captivity and her master: Davash AMarkham, a mage-born mortal in the city over which the god-born now ruled in relative peace. It was not the ideal geographic location; it was too close to the most dangerous of their enemies and far too close to those who might detect such summoning and end it abruptly before larger work could be done.

It was Isladar's suggestion that she subtly provide the mage enough information to summon one of the *Kialli* lords in the stead of a less powerful creature. Only the lords—and even then, not all—had the power and knowledge to open gates and to struggle with the names and the will of those they summoned, binding them.

But Sor Na Shannen had, again, proved clever and resourceful, and perhaps it was a gift that she was not a significant power in the Hells, for she was accustomed to both the loss of dignity and the cunning indirection necessary for those who could not contest power in any direct fashion. She had captivated the mage, reducing him, over the course of months, into a willing servant, transferring lust for power to a more malleable lust. What she could not do, she was not willing to summon a greater Lord to do; she now demanded the mage give her the knowledge she lacked, and she *learned*.

Over the months, molding her power and her understanding of the mortal world in which she increasingly moved freely, she studied, practiced, swallowed her pride—such as it was—and became one of the few of the kin who might summon her kind to the mortal plane.

The Lord of the Hells had bid her summon Lord Isladar. Had he not, had Isladar not witnessed the command himself, he would have destroyed Sor Na Shannen for her arrogance and her hubris the moment he reasserted his existence in the lands of the living. As it was, it was close, far closer than he cared to admit—for she had attempted to control him, to subvert his ancient and unfaltering will to her own.

She had, of course, failed. He played at subservience, thinking it was useful; he had played at the contest, allowing her some sense of her own worth. But it was never in doubt; only she could assume as much, if vanity dictated such an assumption. It did, of course, and he allowed it.

After Isladar, she had summoned—again at the behest of the Lord—Karathis. She did not even attempt to control him; the only compulsion Karathis felt at all was the compulsion to travel to the point at which she stood, and even prepared for it, he was enraged. But he was also well apprised of the Lord's growing regard for the resourcefulness and the knowledge of this singular lesser kin; he held his hand.

Holding it, he had watched Isladar. Isladar had said nothing, indicated nothing; he observed, no more, no less.

*I will kill her for her presumption,* Karathis had whispered.

*Yes. But not now. Not yet. She is needed. Come, brother, let us open the ways; we will disinter the oldest of our cities, and we will find what we need there. Do you not wish to walk its streets? Do you not wish to see what remains of its glory?*

Karathis had not replied.

Nor had he need; the only one of the *Kialli* who might openly express such a foreign desire to see the site of their greatest failure was, indeed, Lord Isladar.

But there was beauty in failure. It was an understated, attenuated beauty; it could be seen only if all pride could be cast aside. Isladar alone of his kin had both the memory of the city in its living glory and the ability to cast aside the rage and the fury caused by its fall, so it was Isladar who walked these streets, guided by memory, even when that memory failed to unearth the map of what now remained. It was Isladar who could see the promise of the city as it had once been; it was Isladar who could remember the beauty of its heights, could hear the echoes of the whisper of the wild wind as it drove them to those heights at their command; Isladar who could see the ghosts of the great statuary erected in reverence and fear of Allasakar.

It was Isladar who could see the beauty not in defeat but in the strange dignity of defeat, in the effort to grab and hold what little remained. There, he thought, fell Siandoria, who could not—would not—bow to the will of the conquering gods. He could mark the spot, although it now lay shadowed by fallen rock and natural darkness.

Siandoria, bloodied but calm, his face white, his hands mailed, his eyes

a flashing silver gray. His armor had been rent as if it were cloth, and the wild wind no longer heard his voice, but these were simple, calculable losses from which he might recover in time. His shield had been riven and his sword, broken, their light forever guttered.

Yet without them, he fought.

Siandoria understood that he faced death; he had no hope of survival and needed—at that moment—none. As if memory were stone, Siandoria's expression was now chiseled, in just the same way the garden had been, into the hollows of Isladar's mind. He could look and see its exact likeness, and feel *life* in it, although it spoke only of, always of, death. Not for Siandoria surrender; not for Siandoria the choice to follow or abandon Allasakar in his defeat.

*Siandoria, we will not see your like again.* There was pain in that. But in pain, there was also beauty; no architect of the Hells could deny that. He bowed his head a moment before he continued to traverse these empty streets.

They had worked to open the ways, and the work was long and arduous. It was not work that Sor Na Shannen could sustain for long; indeed, it was work that, in its entirety, depended upon the powers of Lord Isladar and Lord Karathis—and it was not to Karathis' liking to be sent to dig in the dirt like the least of human slaves. Karathis was quick to show displeasure, and Isladar intervened in his subtle fashion to ensure the survival of Sor Na Shannen.

But if Karathis had the arrogance and the power of a Duke of the Hells, he also had wisdom and cunning; he understood that she was necessary. It chafed. But any form of dependence on others always did.

The first such labor undertaken by Karathis and Isladar had nearly destroyed the Cordufar manse, for Lord Karathis had attempted to leash the Old Earth in their service. It was a mistake he would make only once, for that was the nature of mistakes: If one survived, one learned. Many did not survive, but that, as well, was the nature of the Hells.

Isladar could still hear the echoes of the Old Earth's voice; it was angry. Slow to wake, it was also slow to sleep, and the rumble of its anger, its sense of betrayal and loss—had they not, in the end, chosen to disavow it, to leave forever the lands under which the Earth held dominion, in its fashion?—lingered for weeks.

So the excavations under Cordufar were undertaken the arduous, slow

way, and Karathis did not suggest, then or ever, that the Old Earth be invoked. *Do you feel the loss, brother?* Isladar thought, and had thought. If he did, he did not expose it.

Those excavations were the most complete; they were the most heavily guarded. The first door opened, foot by onerous foot, into the most ancient of cities.

Even Sor Na Shannen, not notable for her tact or her self-control, fell silent when they had first set foot not into dank tunnel or new earth but into the streets of the city itself. Only the lesser buildings now remained, and of those, only the ones that had relied less heavily on wooden beams and supports. Facades, however, stood in the black day of the city. Glimmers of ancient magic, contained by stone shapes, statues, gargoyles, could be felt or detected, but it was not for these that they had come.

No.

They had come for one thing and one thing alone, and although it took weeks, they finally found it: the coliseum. “Here,” Isladar told them softly. “We will build here.”

The stone, of course, had proved problematic. To build the arch, to enchant the stone, to inscribe it in the necessary fashion, had been both difficult and costly. In this impoverished, mortal world, there were no great quarries; the mortal quarries were simple things of dead stone, and it was not dead stone that they required. Even so, Lord Isladar had traveled to several quarries to the east of Averalaaan; he had inspected both the visible rock and the rock that had not yet been broken, seeking some hint of the ancient in their sleeping forms.

It was not to be found, not there.

Sor Na Shannen was ill pleased. Karathis might have been as ill pleased, but her foul humor often amused him. *What, then, shall we do, brother?* he asked.

*I will retreat,* Isladar replied gravely, *to the Deepings, if they even remain. If not, we will work with what we can obtain.*

*It is too much of a risk.*

*It is a risk,* he agreed. *But if we have no choice, we will take it. The arch will either hold, or it will not, and it is my suspicion that we will know before the long summoning begins. If you desire, begin your construction and your invocation now; I will search while you . . . experiment.*

That had been to Sor Na Shannen’s liking. Although she, like the rest

of the kin, did not age, she was nonetheless impatient. Such impatience had often been their downfall; Isladar had no intention of allowing it to run unchecked here.

Isladar had then traveled south, past the borders of the Empire in which the god-born ruled, and he had found, again, a travesty of power, a mockery of its substance, in the rulers there. But there, at least, without the god-born to hamper them, the rules of power were clearer and cleaner.

He spent some years in the South, traveling; he observed the differences in custom between the Northern Empire and the Southern Dominion. When at last he was satisfied that he understood these diminished people well enough, he encountered his first danger: the Voyani.

They were both of the South and entirely separate from it, and they had the knowledge and power of their ancient ancestors, albeit in shreds and tatters. They did not own land, and for this reason, he had missed them during his first sojourn in the courts of the powerful. No, they traveled in their wagons, led by their Matriarchs.

And their Matriarchs? They knew him. Understood what he was, what his presence might presage. He had been forced to flee, for the power to destroy them, while his, would not guarantee his survival. Lord Isladar had very little pride when it came to displays of power; he did not care whether or not the merely mortal held him in contempt.

But he took note of the Matriarchs and the Voyani caravans, and when he was quit of them, some hundreds of miles away, he endeavored to learn what he could. He accepted—as Karathis did not—that the mortals, the *mere* mortals, could be a threat to the plans of the Lord, and as such, some caution and knowledge were required.

He made his way to the Green Deepings. They were bounded on all sides by either mountains or the ferocious superstition of Southern slaves in their small enclaves and villages. He was *Kialli*; he understood fear in all its nuances, and he understood, as well, that the *only* people who dared the Old Forests were the Voyani themselves. It was, of course, a warning.

Accepting the warning with the cool grace of a powerful, free man—albeit a stranger to these villages—he had smiled. He did not ride, and free men of any power were expected to take to horseback as if born there, but the slaves were cautious, regardless. It was not their position to ques-

tion the identity of strange men of rank; that was the responsibility of their lords and owners. He accepted their warnings with gravity.

But of course, he entered the Old Forest, as they'd called it.

There, he found the elder trees, preserved somehow against the graying and dwindling of mortality. He walked among them, as he had not walked among them for years beyond count, and he whispered their names. They could not—or would not—hear him, and this was bitter, but it was not unexpected, for there were older and darker things than even Lord Isladar in these forests. Some slumbered, some did not.

But it was here, for the first time, that he touched the hidden paths. They were not obvious, and they were not visible in a way that mortal vision could easily discern; nor, apparently, immortal vision. But between one step and another, the wind changed, and the sunlight; even the color of the leaves above and the forest growth beneath his feet changed. He heard the wind's voice so clearly he could call it—and he did, for a moment, speaking its endless litany of names, and asking from it no task but response.

Wind, of the wild elements, was quickest: quick to anger and quick to forgive. It carried dead leaves in its folds with as much grace and force as it tickled the living, pulling them from their branches. It was not the Earth. And it was willing, on this hidden path, to converse as wind did.

He walked the path and understood at last the heart of the Old Forest, for the forest's roots touched this path, this narrow road in which the Green Deepings lived and breathed. The mortal slaves feared the powerful—with reason—and they therefore found only fear in the lee of the forest's edge.

Isladar did not fear power, and he did not fear the unknown—for in the end, very little *was* unknown to him. He found rivers upon the hidden path, and they spoke with the voice of wild water, although water, like earth, was not his friend, and it rose in fury at the sound of his voice. But what it would not willingly give, he could force from it, for he had the time. He did not find fire here, but fire alone welcomed the *Kialli* to their ancient home.

And so it went. He was almost foolish in his desire to explore, and it was a sentimental folly—this had once been *home*.

But he had abandoned home for the love of the Lord, and it was no longer his. He found the first signs of the Wild Hunt while he followed this path, tracing its curving and unpredictable lines toward the distant

mountains. He did not encounter the Hunt itself, for it was not Scarran, nor close, but the wind whispered the name of the Queen of the Hunt, the Queen of the Hidden Court: Ariane. Hoof prints had been stamped into the very rock that adorned the side of one river, as if stags had been driven up the face of cliffs in search of prey.

Yet even this reminder of ancient enemies, ancient enmity, filled him with yearning. It was Winter in these lands. The Hunt rode only in Winter.

Yes, the trees seemed to whisper, and he understood then why they did not speak or listen or grow enraged—as water and earth did—by the sound of his voice: it was Winter in the forest. Winter. How long? How long had it been since the forest had seen Summer?

The forest itself did not reply. Later, he would seek the answer in more unobtrusive ways, but the task of the moment demanded his attention. He did not, however, stray from the hidden path, and it traveled from the Green Deepings to the farthest edges of the Northern Wastes, land of brilliant, biting light, howling winds, desolate beauty. It traveled to hidden oases, to endless caverns, to vistas that had not been touched by either god or man since the gods last walked the world, and it almost pained him to leave them, so stricken was he by the visceral desire for *home*.

He did not speak of this; not then, when there were no witnesses, and not later. The home of that longing, the brief and unexpected pain, was long, long lost. What existed now was the Hells and, if he was ultimately successful, the whole of the mortal plane.

To this end, he continued, with more caution and less curiosity, until he at last found the remnants of the Stone Deepings. He did not delve there long, nor could he; magics had been wrought there, and if he did not recognize the caster, he recognized the power: They were ancient, and they barred the way. But they were subtle as well; he could not discern the whole of their purpose, and it both troubled and irritated.

It signified little. He had found the living stone, and he carved it with care, piece by piece, each of a size and shape that might support the magics that must be worked upon it. It was not quick work, and it required a raw power that he seldom used, but this far beneath all that was human he did not fear detection; he feared, instead, to somehow set off the strange and unidentifiable magic that hid all but a small part of the Deepings from view. The mountains rumbled in their slow and thunderous way, and he spoke in their ancient tongue. But they, kin to the earth, resisted.

Had he been any other Lord, he might have died and returned, lessened, to the foothills of the Lord.

But he was Isladar, and although time was short, he took the time he needed, not to defy the living stone but to soothe it.

Only then, the first arduous steps taken toward relearning an ancient tongue made foreign by his departure from the plane and his sojourn in the realm of the Lord, did he make his return to Averalaaan.

There he gave the stones into the keeping of Lord Karathis, and together they began to build the arch, imbuing it, at each iteration of pillar, each placement of stone, with the power of the *Kialli*. Only once it was finished, only once they had spent the three days in the long invocations, sacrificing the mortals they had scrounged for that purpose from the streets of the city above, did the long journey of Allasakar at last begin.

And they watched, joined by Sor Na Shannen in her wild impatience. Centuries had passed since the Lord to whom they had dedicated the whole of their existence while they lived had walked this world. He would walk it again, but this time—ah, this time, there would be no gods to hinder him. Sor Na Shannen had, centuries past, destroyed the worship of the only one who *might*.

So it stood, day by day. Lord Karathis assumed the form and shape of Lord Cordufar in the manse above, and Lord Isladar spent time traversing the plane. He spent some years in the Southern Dominion, witnessing the wars of the Tyrs and Tors, as the nobles there were called, as they struggled for supremacy against both their northern neighbors and their internal rivals.

He traveled, as well, to the far North, before returning to Averalaaan. And everywhere he went, he assessed the powerful, and he examined the colors of their souls, judging them, searching for those among their number who might be both competent and malleable under the right circumstances.

But he returned, always, to venture to the standing arch, with its single runed keystone; he knelt not two feet away from where it stood, and he bowed in complete subservience to the heart of the gate. He had often stood by the side of the Lord's throne in the Hells, and of the *Kialli* who had done so, Isladar was the only one who had survived either his Lord's attention or the suspicion of the rest of the *Kialli* Court.

The Court was distant now, but if those who currently labored within

the confines of the Empire of Essalieyan had success, it would not remain so; only the surroundings would change. And the souls, he thought; those, too, would change. The Shining City would once again rise, as if from slumber, with the Lord upon the throne.

But he returned to the undercity when he desired privacy or silence, and he walked among the ruins there, conjuring the ghosts of their former grandeur as clearly as only the *Kialli* could.

On one such excursion, Isladar discovered, alone among the notable and powerful buildings, one that he did not recognize. It was not—could not—be of any recent construction, for it was here, beneath the earth and the sullen mortal streets above. It must have been erected *after* the fall, for the plummet of the city into the waiting, ancient earth had not destroyed or marred it.

He approached it with a suspicion that hardened almost to certainty by the time his feet touched the first of the large, carved symbols perfectly laid in stone, for the lights in this building cast his shadow against the ground so sharply they might have been sun. He felt, for a moment, the touch of the gods upon the stone; saw the dim impression of their fingerprints upon the walls; saw their work in each carved symbol.

It had been so long since he had seen even a hint of their language, for not even the Lord of the Hells spoke it now—what use had he for a tongue meant for communication among the gods? He was, and had always been, solitary. He spoke to destroy and to render to those who were worthy of his respect an epitaph. To the gods, the god-tongue.

Isladar had chosen to follow only one, but he was aware that, follower of the one or no, he was not immune to the presence of even his sworn enemies, be they but gods. They were like the heart of the wild elements, like the tallest of mountain precipices, like the most savage of coastal storms. They existed as a force beyond comprehension and control, and they inspired awe; something as petty as envy could not touch them.

And so he had approached this new building, this edifice that had never been touched by memory. In size and shape it was a lesser architectural work, but the grandest of buildings that adorned the Shining City had required the living power of Allasakar to sustain its impossible heights.

Isladar had walked the length and breadth of the streets of Averalaaan above. He had glanced at the many so-called cathedrals, and he had looked

for some sign that power—that beauty—existed within the mean streets; he had found none.

Therefore even this lesser work, this lesser edifice, fanned the dying embers of wonder and awe in him. He was surprised at how those embers could burn, but he was *Kialli*. He remembered, and memory was painful. It was their art.

Alone, he traversed the terra-cotta floors, his feet skirting the deep grooves the circular runic forms made. He did not touch them, but he read their meaning slowly and with care. He understood that the sigils were meant as a warning and as a lament, and he cursed, in silence, his partial ignorance. But none of the *Kialli* spoke the tongue of gods, not even the most learned.

Lights had been wrought here, in crystal, in glass, in gold, each warm and luminescent. Even fallen, even buried, the gods did not choose to accept the fact of endless Night. The gods, like the firstborn and the lesser mortals who had followed, were proud. He considered destroying that light, but in the end, he held his hand. He could not say why.

The long, wide halls, broken with runes that told the story of the fall of the Shining City and the desertion of this world by its gods, he traversed for days. He spent hours studying each glyph, learning its shape and its pattern; its sound was lost to him forever, for matters of such a simple thing as pronunciation were not the type of question he could ask of the only god he now knew. It frustrated him bitterly, but he accepted his ignorance, galling though it was.

He did not accept that he would always be ignorant, however; who, in the end, could predict what might or might not occur in the future of this world? So, he walked, and stopped, and studied; he consigned shape and height and texture, as well as positioning, of each such sigil to memory.

Was it any wonder, then, that he took days? He required no sleep and no sustenance, and the hours and days and months of the long unfolding of the Lord's plan left him little to do in the darkness; he considered the study a worthy endeavor, even if he suspected where the end of the tale they told must lead, and why. He let it unfold, in its mystery, its partial glimpses of ancient history, as if, at the tale's end, he must once more emerge into darkness and the gray world of mortals, riven from even the hints of ancient magic and majesty and true wilderness.

Thus it was that Isladar finally came upon the Sleepers in their chamber of eternal repose. And Isladar, in the glory of the light they shed, paid

them the respect that was their due; for in the end, were it not for the treachery of the Sleepers, the Lord of the Hells might now be dead, his body scattered ash, his followers riven from both himself and each other.

He had seen them ride in the full glory of the Winter Hunt, by the side of their cold Queen, and he had seen them fight, and kill. No matter that they fought his own kin; the *Kialli* might curse them or taunt them in the heat of battle, but they respected power, and the Sleepers had been powerful. He knew their names, but he did not speak them, not aloud.

They had faltered once; they had failed once. This was the result of their failure, this deathlike sleep, the splendor of this dream.

At the behest of the Winter Queen, they had ridden to war at the side of Moorelas; they had ridden to war with the godslayer. Yet Moorelas was no *Arianni*, no *Allasakari*; he had been born to mortals, and he had aged greatly in the mere handful of years he had wielded the sword that alone might strike a fatal blow against Allasakar. Moorelas did not comprehend the wonder and the savage beauty of the gods—how could he? He was mortal.

No more did he understand the light and the brilliance of the princes of the Queen's realm. They were his allies, and they were necessary; but he did not revere them, and he did not fully trust them. In such a way, he proved himself exceptionally wise for one of his mean origins.

Isladar understood the treachery of the Sleepers. Had they not been princes of Ariane's realm? Had they not been the strength and the pride of both Winter and Summer Courts? Had they not ridden at the head of her grim and ancient host to stand against the very gods themselves? They understood all the glory of the world, of the gods, of the wars that rearranged mountains and plains and rivers before one side or the other might at last claim victory.

They, like the *Kialli*, had been born in blood, raised to war, trained to attain the heights of its savage glory, to see the beauty in the death that followed in its wake; it was their truest test. They did not raise livestock and cut firewood and shear sheep for rough, poor fabric; nor did they trundle with battered wagons and poor guards to deliver these pathetic goods. They were the princes of the firstborn.

And were they to strike to diminish and humble the whole of their known world for the sake of the merely mortal? Were they to bleed the numinous and the eternal from the world until all that remained was the

essence of mortal soul? Nor did the mortals fight and struggle and craft these souls, these shards of the eternal; they were born wrapped around them and lived in ignorance of their existence, all but a few.

They would have welcomed the ride, he thought. The four against Allasakar. They would have risked their own oblivion, without the host of the Queen, for just such a battle. But for the sake of the *mortals*?

They could not do it, he thought.

Perhaps there were other reasons for their treachery; he was certain there must have been. But driving them to it, the anger, the love, the desire for things that were not beholden to the weak, the short lived, the pathetic.

Now, they slept. Their shields were defaced and blank, their swords sheathed. Their armor, of course, was finely crafted, ornate, a statement in and of itself; no easy death by spear or arrow or fire or magery would take them unaware. Their hair was the white of their kin, and their eyes, closed; they were tall, and fair, and, even in their slumber, proud scions of a lost age.

He bowed again. He could not say for certain how long he remained within that chamber, although he knew why: Here again was youth, some evidence that memory was true. Could he but wake them, he might know battle and death—his or theirs—and feel again the quickening of the ancient in his veins. He desired it greatly—desired it even more than he hungered for the momentary satisfaction of the fear and the pain of dying mortals.

But he had understood just enough of what he had so carefully memorized to understand the warning laid in wall and floor: When the Sleepers wakened to the world again, gods would—gods *must*—perish. Allasakar would be, once again, upon the mortal plane, if Isladar's long game were to at last begin in earnest.

He had therefore set his wards upon the building itself; were it disturbed, were it entered by so much as a bat, he would know. No one must disturb the Sleepers, for even the *Kialli* now knew what their waking presaged.

That done, he waited. He had waited for millennia; he was capable of patience. He heard his Lord's voice more clearly as the mortal years passed. Time, he thought. It would be time, and soon.

But he did not smile. Not yet.





## Chapter One

*22nd of Scaral, 410 A.A.  
Undercity, Averalan*

**S**OR NA SHANNEN was incandescent with rage; had light been required for the kin to see, she would have nonetheless been visible in the night of the ruins, so potent was her fury. Stray strands of ebony hair flew, limned in blue and red.

“Sor Na Shannen.” It was Lord Isladar who spoke. Even Karathis was silent.

She wheeled, her hands now shaped in fists, the perfect length of her nails also glittering with traces of dark light. She waited for his anger, his accusation, or the cool tones of his mockery; failure, if it did not destroy, had other consequences. She was not of a mind to accept them with grace.

But he was Lord Isladar, the least predictable of the *Kialli* lords. “We have been prepared for discovery for some time. It has come later, rather than earlier.” He glanced at Lord Karathis, who nodded.

“Ariane has . . . disturbed the gate; she is now aware of what she faces. Whether or not she can intervene again remains to be seen—but it is my suspicion that she cannot.” He knelt; the marble into which she had driven her sword was cracked, and the crack ran the length of the polished stone from one side of the coliseum to the other. “We have failed in our attempt to take House Terafin, but it was never necessary; it would have been convenient, no more.”

“It would have given us the opportunity,” Karathis cut in, his voice

rumbling and crackling, “to destroy the god-born in the heart of their own domain. With their destruction, the Empire would have been in chaos just as the Lord emerged.”

Isladar nodded; that had, indeed, been the plan. It was not, however, the first time a plan would be frustrated; nor was it likely to be the last. Individually, mortals were beneath notice. This was an acknowledged truth. But in the aggregate? They were powerful and capable. This second truth, however, was less acknowledged, and when it was, in however reluctant a way, it was qualified: The god-born were mortal, but they bore the blood of the gods.

“We will not now have that opportunity,” Isladar continued softly. “But it was never required.” He tendered the enraged demon a brief nod. “We have what we require, if we are *careful*, and if your servitors can be kept in check.

“We will begin, Karathis and I, to close the ways.”

“We will not now have Scarran,” she said, grudging the slower burn of her rage.

“We will. The damage done by the Winter Queen will require the whole of the darkest night to repair. Can you do it?” he asked. It was a challenge.

But it was, as well, a gift, and it mollified her. “Yes.”

“Then stay; we must go in haste. Tell us only what you know of the entrances that Ararath once used to wander these streets; it is there we will go first.”

“Does it matter? If they are found, we will merely add to the numbers of sacrifices required to dedicate the standing ground at the ceremony’s close.”

Isladar’s silence was not gratifying. But, inasmuch as a *Kialli* lord could be, he had been gracious. She waited. “It matters,” he finally said. “If, by unforeseen circumstance, one such mortal should escape, the Kings will know.”

“They will *know now*,” she snarled.

Isladar chuckled. “You have been decades in your dance among mortals of power,” he pointed out. “But you have not observed The Ten or their relationship with the Kings closely. I do not believe that it is so simple an affair as that. I believe that The Terafin will ask for—will indeed *require*—proof, before she approaches the Kings. Yes, if she chooses to do

so without proof, they will hear her, and they will listen. But it might be politically costly for Terafin to do so.

“It is therefore urgent that we find, and seal off, all entrances that Arath used before his death. Or,” he added, “all of the entrances gleaned from his thoughts before his death. They will be the most common, I think, and will also be the first searched.

“We must give them nothing.”

*22nd of Scaral, 410 A.A.*

*Healerie, House Terafin, Averalan Aramarelas*

Arann woke in the late afternoon.

The slightly rounded ceiling of the healerie was the first thing he expected to see, and when he opened his eyes, it was there.

Although he'd never been in this room before, he knew it almost as well as he knew the den's apartment. He knew where the beds were laid out; he knew, as well, what the cupboards, recessed along the far wall, contained. He knew the women—and men—who had learned their craft from Alowan. He knew that Alowan, almost revered in Terafin, had steadfastly refused to take the House Name, and he even knew why: A House Name was a political statement, a statement of allegiance. Alowan's allegiance was to life, in all its forms, and more, to the preservation of life. Healer-born, and scarred by his talent—more than most—he had nonetheless chosen to serve. But service to The Terafin was not, in the end, service to the House. It was, in its entirety, service to the woman. Amara's Handernesse ATerafin.

Alowan had healed her, just as he had healed Arann. And he had left her, just as he had left Arann, bereft and on the shoals of life, as if life were an unexpected burden.

But *she* had borne it. She had accepted the gift, and in return, she had offered Alowan the healerie for as long as he was willing to stay within her walls. She had offered him the House Name, but she had never expected him to accept it. And he had not disappointed, in the end.

Arann knew Alowan's life.

Alowan knew Arann's.

“Arann?”

He glanced down from the curve of a ceiling beyond which the sun shone cool in the coming Scaral evening. Finch was seated beside his bed, her face pale, her hair clean and bound above her face. She wasn't Jay; tendrils didn't escape to cover her eyes.

She wore a pale cream dress with a simple belt; he couldn't see her feet, but it didn't matter. He reached for her with his left hand, and she met him halfway with both of hers. He tried not to crush her fingers.

She tried not to notice when he failed.

"Finch."

She nodded. "Jay told me to tell you—" she hesitated. "There was trouble, in the House." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "A mage came. There was magic. And Jay says . . . something tried to kill The Terafin."

"Something?"

She nodded. "It looked like Rath." She glanced around the empty room. "I'm not supposed to upset you. Or talk much, really."

He nodded. Waited. Neither of them had ever been big talkers, and it was always awkward when two quiet people had no loud buffers between them.

"We're not sure what happened. Jay's going to talk with The Terafin tonight." Drawing a breath, she added, "The Terafin's given us rooms here. Big rooms. And our own kitchen. And an old guy, Ellerson. I think he's one of the servants." She hesitated and then added, "But his only job right now is us."

Arann nodded again.

"Jay will come later if Alowan lets her in."

"He will."

She hesitated and then asked, "Should I stay?"

He nodded again and closed his eyes. After a few minutes, he said, "I think this is a good place."

"The healerie?"

"The House."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "The Terafin."

"Why?"

"What she wants isn't that different from what Jay wants."

"Jay wants to protect the rest of us."

"She wants to protect the things she loves. Right now, that's only us." Arann opened his eyes. "But it won't *always* be only us." He glanced at

the ceiling again, at the small cracks there. “Jay thinks she failed,” he said quietly. “Because of Lefty.”

Finch didn’t mention the others by name, but he felt the small accusation in her silence. “What do you think?”

Coming from Finch, the question surprised him enough that he pushed himself up the headboard into a seated position. He didn’t, however, let go of Finch’s hand, so the shift in position dragged her half out of her chair.

“I think she failed,” he said, after a long pause. “She failed Lefty.”

Before Finch could find words—and it was pretty clear she was searching for them—he added, “But it wasn’t her fault. All of us failed him. He’s gone,” he added.

“He’s—”

“Dead.”

She didn’t ask him how he knew. She knew where he had almost gone.

“I was so angry, Finch. I was *so angry*. At myself. At Jay. At everything.” He forced himself to release her hand, to lay his, white and trembling, against the coverlet across his lower body. “But we don’t fail if we don’t try. Jay will always try. She won’t always succeed.”

“Arann—”

“It’s better to try. Because she won’t always fail, either.” He looked at Finch, then. Finch, who, like Arann, was still alive.

“Yes,” a new voice said, and Finch turned to see Alowan, standing in the arch that separated the arboretum from the beds. “She will not always fail.”

Arann tensed. He couldn’t help that. But he didn’t try to stand; he didn’t try to go to the old healer.

“Tell me about your Jay,” Alowan said quietly. His voice carried; there was nothing to break it. Even breath was almost silent in this place.

Finch glanced at Arann.

Arann said, “He knows what *I* know. He’s not asking me.”

Alowan grimaced slightly but nodded. “Tell me, Finch, about the first time you met Jay.”

Finch hesitated. But Alowan’s age and the peaceful wisdom he radiated couldn’t be reduced to simple threat; it couldn’t be ignored as distant authority. “Why?” she asked, at last.

“She reminds me of someone, I think. And I would like to know what you see in her.”

Finch spread her hands. “She’s Jay. She saved my life.”

“And you stayed with her?”

“I had nowhere else to go.” She hesitated again and then added, “But even if I had, I would have wanted to stay with her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s Jay. She knows things. She believes in things. I think she wants to change the world. I know I can’t, not by myself—but if I stay with her, I might be able to help.”

“Does she know this?”

“I don’t know. It’s never seemed important to her. Why we stay, I mean. I don’t know if she really questions it.”

Alowan nodded, as if that answer satisfied him. “She doesn’t question it; she is young, and she is not yet what she will be. But it is there.”

It was dark, and the moon’s light filtered through the arboretum, silvering leaves and hanging plants, by the time Teller came to relieve Finch.

“Jay’s back,” he whispered. He glanced at Arann, who was sleeping.

“He sleeps a lot,” Finch told him, as she vacated her chair. “But so does Alowan.”

“Alowan’s old.”

She nodded. “But . . . I like him.”

Teller smiled. He took Arann’s hand from hers and settled in. “Jay’ll come in the morning. She’s cleared the kitchen,” he added, with just the hint of a smile.

“How did Ellerson take it?”

“About as well as she expected.”

Finch’s grimace was delicate.

“Did she speak with The Terafin?”

Teller nodded. “The Terafin offered her two solarii a day.”

Finch couldn’t whistle, and she seldom regretted the lack. She did make the attempt, now, and it fell into a quiet huff of breath, as it always did. “For what?” She was wary, but she wasn’t entirely suspicious. Just a little. They would always have that “little” when dealing with the powerful.

“Work.” Teller hesitated. “We’re not entirely certain *what* she wants, but she said—” he glanced at Finch. “Maybe you should go back to the wing and let Jay explain.”

“She won’t say anything you don’t.” They both knew that Teller’s

memory was better. He was, as far as they had one, a keeper of records, a minihistorian. It was Teller who transcribed Jay's dreams.

"Jay says The Terafin wants proof that the undercity exists. She—The Terafin—sent people out to explore Rath's place and the subbasement. They found *nothing*."

Finch frowned. "In the basement?"

He nodded. "Nothing at all."

"But we've *used* that entrance—"

"About a hundred times. They couldn't find it."

"Maybe they—"

"Jay thinks it wasn't there."

"How could a hole that size just—just disappear?"

Teller shrugged. He reached over and touched Arann's forehead with the back of his hand before nodding and returning to his chair. "Probably magic," he told her, still gazing at Arann's sleeping face. "We almost lost him."

Finch touched his shoulder gently.

"We lost Duster."

She had saved Finch's life. Finch said nothing, waiting.

"Jay wants to find the body if she can."

"Why?"

"Bury it. Have a funeral. She says we'll never find the others."

"Did she say when?"

Teller shook his head. "But she's serious about the work for The Terafin. Because The Terafin promised two things in exchange for the work. The money."

"And?"

"We get to stay. Here, in the wing, while Jay works."

"And when she's done?"

"If she can prove her value to the House and to The Terafin, we—" He swallowed. "We get to stay."

"Stay?"

"She'll offer Jay the House Name."

Silence then. Of all the things they'd been foolish enough to hope for, to dream of, in the streets of the twenty-fifth, in an apartment that was smaller than their single rooms, becoming *ATerafin* wasn't one of them. "Jay won't look for Duster," Finch said quietly.

Teller nodded. Even in the gentle dark, his face was expressionless.

“She’s practical,” he said softly. “While there’s *any* chance that she can do this, that she can prove she’s useful, she’ll concentrate on that to the exclusion of almost everything else.”

“What does she want us to do?”

“She hasn’t said. Angel’s biting through walls,” he added, “because Jay’s going to be searching—on her own—with the mage. He asked to go, and she said no.”

“Did she take Carver?”

“She’s taking *no one*.”

“So . . . we’re supposed to sit around in our rooms and wait?”

Teller nodded.

“We’ve done worse.”

“I told Angel that.”

“He wasn’t impressed.”

“Not much.” Teller hesitated again and then added, “She’s lost too much. She can’t stop, and she can’t think about it. This is better, for her.”

Finch agreed. But the presence of a mage—a known mage—made her uneasy. “I’ll go back,” she told him and turned toward the arch.

“Finch?”

She paused.

“Talk to the others. Talk to Ellerson.”

“What should I—” she stopped. “I will. Watch Arann. He’s really, really lonely,” she added, searching for words and finding all of them inadequate.

“It’s the healing,” Teller replied softly.

She wanted to ask him how he knew. But she didn’t; he was Teller.

“Rath told me once.” He paused and then added, “Rath’s dead.”

So much death. So much death to bring them to the edge of House Terafin, upon the Isle.

She surprised herself when she spoke. “Let’s make it mean something.” Looking back, she saw that she had his attention. “The deaths,” she said. “Let’s make them count.”

“For what?”

“For anything, Teller. Duster died so the rest of us could live. Let’s make it count.”

“You sound like Jay.”

“There are worse things to sound like.” They both smiled, and she turned then and left the room, pausing for a moment to dip her fingers into ripples of moon-dappled water in the arboretum’s fountain.

\* \* \*

She would have gotten lost on the way to the West Wing, but a servant was lingering in the halls when she pushed the heavy door open and stepped outside of Alowan's domain. He bowed once and then smiled at her slightly rounded eyes.

"Burton ATerafin," he told her, with just the hint of pride.

"ATerafin?"

He nodded. "I led Teller to the healerie, and I thought you might want to return to your wing." He carried a small lamp in one hand; it swayed as he stood.

"Do you know your way around the entire manse?" she asked as she fell into step beside him. He was much taller than she was, and he was also older—although not as old as Torvan ATerafin, and not quite so intimidating.

He nodded, his smile deepening. It was not an unkind smile; it had the faint air of pride but none of its edge. "I got lost a lot for the first two weeks, though."

She gazed at the height of the ceilings as they turned into one of the large galleries. "I think it will take us a lot longer than two weeks not to get lost," she admitted quietly. And then, because he seemed friendly and the prospect of Terafin was so daunting, she asked, "Is there anywhere in the House we shouldn't go?"

"Probably not the kitchen; the cook is a bit of a bear."

"Which kitchen?"

He smiled. "You can, of course, do whatever what you want in the kitchen in your wing; I spoke of the main kitchen, in which The Terafin's meals—and the meals of the rest of the House—are prepared."

"Anywhere else?"

"You can go anywhere you want. If there's an area you shouldn't be in, someone will tell you."

"I'd like not to offend whoever that someone is."

"They won't take offense. You're new here, and everyone pretty much knows it."

The idea that the den was being talked about by this nebulous "everyone" didn't bring much comfort. "What else do they know?"

He laughed. She liked the sound of it, realizing that in the past few days, or weeks, they'd laughed so very little at home. "They know your names and your general descriptions. They know that a domicis was hired

for the West Wing and its guests. They know that The Terafin opened up the West Wing for your personal use.”

“That doesn’t happen often?”

He raised a brow. It was an orange bronze in the lamplight and the softer, nocturnal glow of magelights. She could almost pretend she was walking in a street—but the facades of buildings had been replaced by shadowed paintings and tapestries, and the round, hard cobbles, often cracked, by the flat slats of finely oiled and waxed wood. And rugs.

“It hasn’t happened in the years I’ve served the house.”

“Oh.”

He laughed again. “They know that your den leader—that’s what you call her, isn’t it?” He waited until she nodded before continuing, “. . . saved The Terafin’s life. Believe that that has made her very popular.”

“But—but how—”

“If she didn’t tell you, I shouldn’t,” he said. But he didn’t seem terribly afraid of doing so.

“But how did you hear?”

“Servants have ears,” he replied with a grin. “Just the way walls do in this place. You see one of the Chosen marching down the halls at speed, and word carries; people watch where he’s going and with whom.

“But be that as it may, your den leader went and got the Chosen, and the Chosen summoned the mage. We didn’t know why until later—but apparently there was a mage of some sort who meant to assassinate The Terafin; if not for the summoning, he would have succeeded. The Terafin is loved in this House, and your Jewel Markess has done us all a service, whether she knew it at the time or not.

“She cares about you,” he added, the smile dropping away from all but the corners of his lips. “And she knows damn well you’re *all* out of place here. What we can do to make your stay easier, we will do.

“So get out of the West Wing when you can, and wander about the House; look at it, meet people. Most of them will be friendly.” He paused and then added, “I’ll try to send a rough floor plan to your domicis. I’ll mark the rooms of the House Council and the members of the House who are a little on the frosty side; you can avoid those.”

She smiled at him, hesitantly, and then said, “Thank you, Burton.” Extending a hand, she added, “I’m Finch.”

He hesitated for just a moment and then grinned again, accepting the offered hand.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Technically, yes. Ask your domicis. I’m sure he’ll tell you.”

“I’d rather not.” She grimaced. “I *think* he’s nice enough, but he’s got so many rules.”

“We all have rules; I’ve just broken at least three of them.” He shrugged. “But some of the rules come into conflict, and then we’re left with a choice.”

“And shaking my hand was bad?”

“Technically,” he repeated. “I know your name, of course; I have to. I’ve been assigned to keep an eye on the West Wing. But you’re not here as a servant. I’m supposed to be invisible.”

He was rather tall and rather well dressed for an invisible man. “Why?”

“Good servants always are. We keep the place clean. Impeccably clean,” he added, with a mock severity that indicated he was mimicking someone. “It’s hard, however, to be an invisible guide. You’ll see less of me as the days go by—and if you don’t, I’d ask that you at least *pretend* to see less of me.” His grin was broad.

She stared at him. “You know that you’re better dressed than I’ve ever been, until now?”

He nodded. “We know you’re from the old holdings. They don’t generally have dens in the new ones.”

“And it doesn’t bother you to be told to serve the likes of us?”

“I told you, Finch—your den leader saved The Terafin. Obviously The Terafin had some inkling of her abilities, or she would never have opened that wing. We don’t question.” His smile gentled. “I like what I do. I know it’s not what people daydream of doing with their lives—but I like the order, the tidiness, the sense of purpose.

“I’m never going to lead. I never want to lead. I want to do what I’m doing now, for as long as House Terafin stands. One day, I’ll train men and women to do as I’m doing. That’s the whole of my ambition.” He glanced at her.

“I don’t know what I want,” she confessed. “Mostly, not to starve.”

“Your leader’s earned that, at least. But you should think about it. What you want defines what you do, at least in this life. And the Houses—The Ten—prove that it’s not just birth that counts. I wasn’t born to a family that served a grand House like this one, but I’m here.”

She nodded and smiled again, following Burton ATerafin to her den.

\* \* \*

There was a small commotion in the wing when it came time to bed down. Jay came out of her room and started a frenzied search of the dining room and the kitchen, looking for “nothing,” as she very curtly put it. Five minutes of intense and testy questioning reduced “nothing” to “magestone.” They were all silently horrified, and they all joined her in her fruitless search.

Finch almost sent Jester to relieve Teller, because Teller was *good* at finding things. Angel stopped her and shook his head, gesturing in den-sign while Jay was crawling under the table for the fifteenth time. Finch responded in kind, but den-sign wasn’t designed for difficult conversations, and by the time they’d negotiated their way through half of this one, Jay emerged on her hands and knees, flyaway strands of her hair hanging, as usual, across her eyes.

An hour later, she shoved that hair out of her eyes and glanced out of the windows. The windows here were glassed, and although they could be opened—and not simply with warped shutters you had to tie to keep closed—they were shut and barred; it was Scaral. It was also, by the rise of the bright moon, late.

Jay’s shoulders sagged as she turned to the wall. She punched it. Hard.

Finch thought she heard bones crack, and she winced in sympathy. She knew why Jay had searched for so long. They all did. But they were silent, and they let her retreat to her cavernous room. Only when the door slammed—and it did—did Angel slump against a wall, pausing to kick Carver on the way down.

Carver, who had not quite given up, threw something at Angel’s head, and Angel’s spire of hair caught it. Jester leaned up against the wall to one side of the large window, folding his arms across his slender chest.

“Mage’ll be here in the morning,” he said.

“Yeah. And Jay’ll meet him on next to no sleep.”

They shared another glance. Jay never went to sleep without light. If Carver and Duster were out, they took the stone, and Jay worked in the kitchen until they were back, burning candles until there were no more candles to burn.

But she slept with the light when it returned, taking it from Carver’s palm and walking it into the bedroom she shared with Duster, Finch, and Teller. There, she’d drop it into the pedestal Rath had given her, and she’d tuck in, in any weather; Jay hated to sleep exposed. Even in the grim

humidity of the worst summer nights, she covered herself with blankets and sweated a lot.

The light was gone.

“It’s not just that,” Finch said softly, trying to be fair. “Rath gave her the magestone. It was one of the first things he gave her.”

Angel nodded.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” Jester said. “There are guards all over the damn place. Maybe she’ll be able to sleep without it.”

Finch glanced at Carver. Carver shrugged. She sighed and headed toward the kitchen. After a moment, the others picked themselves up off the floor and followed her.

Ellerson watched in silence. He watched from the back corner of the dining room until the last of the den—Angel—disappeared from view, and then he stepped lightly and briskly across the expanse of rug toward the kitchen’s swinging double doors. Before he reached them, he heard the clatter of dishes—pots and pans, by the sound, and not very carefully handled.

He did not rush in but waited for the din to cease. When it did, he pushed the doors open a crack and slid between them. Not all of the domicis chose this sort of subtlety in their approach to their masters; one chose the methods that worked, after all.

The den was now seated around the large, wood-block table that was meant for food preparation. They had removed some of the hanging pots and pans that overlooked the table’s surface, and Ellerson surmised that this was because neither Carver nor Angel could stand without hitting them.

They had pulled stools and chairs from beneath counters also situated for kitchen work, and they had arrayed these around the table. He made a mental note to ask for suitable chairs; this type of untidiness, if the den sought to make use of the kitchen as a meeting space, was unacceptable to Ellerson’s organized soul.

Finch was speaking. Her voice was low and, to Ellerson’s ear, gentle; she and Teller had this in common. “No, Arann’s fine. The healer didn’t hurt him.”

“He healed him. Why won’t they let him come back to us?” Carver was leaning precariously back on the rear legs of his chair.

“I don’t really understand all of what happened,” she replied carefully, “but he’s safe in the healerie for now. Teller’s with him. You’re up next,” she added to Carver. “Because Teller needs to get *some* sleep.”

Carver nodded.

“And we need to figure out what we do while Jay is with the mage.”

“It’s only going to be a day.”

But Angel shook his head. “You were eating, not listening, idiot. She said The Terafin sent men to Rath’s, and they *couldn’t find* the maze. Jay’s not going to be a day. If she’s damn lucky, she’ll only be a week.”

Finch nodded. “We’re not going with her. We’ll be here. But we don’t have to do nothing while we’re here.”

“What can we do here?”

Finch shrugged. “Learn.”

“Learn?”

“Learn how the House operates. Learn who’s in charge of what. Learn who thinks they’re in charge of everything else. Just—learn. We can keep an ear to the ground here. She has to prove she’s worthy to The Terafin, but she won’t be here—she’ll be with the mage. *We’ll* be here. We’ll learn what she can’t, and we’ll tell her about it.”

Angel nodded. “I hate that she can’t take any of us with her,” he added. It was perhaps the fiftieth time he had said it. “Even Carver would be better than nothing.”

“Hey!”

But Ellerson nodded quietly, watching them. Listening to them. Gone were the discussions about what might be stolen and secreted from the manse.

“Let’s just hope she sleeps,” Carver said quietly.

“She can do without much sleep for a week or two,” Angel replied. “And even at her pay, we can’t afford to replace that stone anytime soon.”

There was a moment of silence, but it was a silence filled with the day-dreams of the hopeful; Ellerson was certain that each and every one of this den was thinking of ways in which they might find—or replace—what Jewel had lost. They were surprising, these children.

But he could work with them. What they brought to the table—even as inappropriate a table as this one—he could not have supplied. The finishes, however, he could, and if it was not to be easy, and in Ellerson’s opinion, their age and their set ways would be very difficult to overcome, that was acceptable; he dealt not in easy but in possible.

*23rd of Scaral, 410 A.A.*  
*Twenty-fifth Holding, Averalaaan*

“This,” Meralonne APhaniel said, with the rise of a single brow, “is where he lived?”

Jewel, standing by his side in Rath’s admittedly dingy basement rooms, nodded. They were not, obviously, the first people to come through the apartment, although they were possibly the only people who had the keys. “It wasn’t usually this messy,” she added.

Which was true. The contents of his room had been scattered across the floor; even the ancient trunk he had tucked away beneath the bed had been removed and opened, its contents upended.

Whoever had done this was clearly not in need of money; a sword in an old scabbard lay half-buried by Rath’s many jackets and shirts. “Is it all right to touch things now?” she asked as she knelt.

Meralonne nodded absently. “You can hardly,” he said, “do any more harm.”

*Thanks.* She managed to keep the sarcasm—and the word—behind tightly closed lips. It had been a single day since she had last set foot in these rooms. It felt like weeks. Or months.

The pedestal that held Rath’s magestone was on his desk. The magestone, however, was not. Jewel stopped for a moment in front of the table across which the maps she had once rescued—or stolen, depending on your viewpoint—from an illegal brothel lay. It was empty.

Meralonne could be the world’s most irritating man. “What,” he asked, although she had said nothing, and hadn’t moved, “is the problem now?”

*You need him,* she reminded herself. It was funny just how hard it was to cling to that reminder; she’d only been partnered with him for all of a very damn long morning. He even managed to make smoking a pipe irritating, and Jewel generally found the familiarity of the smoke’s smell a comfort. *You need his good opinion, because The Terafin is going to listen to him.*

She took a deep breath and turned to face the mage, with his disconcerting gray eyes and his habitual irritation. “Something’s missing,” she told him flatly.

“I gathered that. What, exactly, is missing?”

“Maps.”

He crossed the room, by some minor miracle not stepping on anything that lay strewn across the floor. It must have been a miracle, because he

sure as hell didn't look as if he cared enough to avoid anything. "Maps of what?"

She took another breath, held it, and exhaled. "Maps," she said quietly, "of the undercity."

He stared at her as if she were speaking in Torra, or at least in a language he didn't understand.

"Ararath made maps?"

"No, Rath didn't make these. He didn't need maps," she added, "and as he'd no intention of ever letting anyone else know about the maze, he didn't want to make it easier for anyone who might steal things."

"Jewel, I realize you've had little sleep, and you've had a long day. I also realize that you are not well taught. I am therefore being as patient as I can, but my patience is limited. If Ararath did not devise these maps, who did?"

"I don't know. We found them," she added. "We saved them from a— from a house fire."

He stared at her for a long moment and then drew his pipe from his sleeve. "Jewel," he said, as he lined the bowl, "Ararath is dead. If he had any plans for you, he fulfilled those when he sent you to House Terafin. There is nothing you can say or do that will protect his memory. I do not know what he told you," he added, as the leaves burst into sudden flame, "but at this point, it is imperative that you tell us what you know."

What she knew was that the entrance to the maze was gone. She had believed The Terafin when The Terafin had told her that no trace of the entrance could be found, of course—but it was still a shock to see the landscape so utterly changed. "They were magical maps," she finally told the mage.

He raised a pale brow. "Magical?"

"They had writing on them—and yes, I know that writing doesn't make them magical—that neither Rath nor I could read."

He didn't think much of her ability to read, but the fact that Rath couldn't seemed somehow significant. "Did he recognize the tongue?"

"No. It wasn't Old Weston, and it wasn't any form of Torra."

Meralonne frowned. "Continue."

"We could touch any two points on the map, and lines—usually blue lines, but some were brighter than others—would travel between them, following the streets."

His eyes widened.

“There were three maps. Rath thought they were in sections,” she added. “I think the—I think they used them.”

“Before they fell into your hands.”

She nodded.

“And you used them, after?”

“Rath did. I couldn’t really make sense of them; I could see some familiar landmarks, and the main streets, but there was too much there that doesn’t exist anymore.”

Meralonne removed the stem of the pipe from the corner of his mouth and walked over to the desk. He searched there a moment and then, cursing, bent to the floor to retrieve scraps of paper. These, he placed on the empty table. “Find me an inkwell in this mess,” he added.

When she did, he took it from her hands, opened it, and then cursed again. She handed him the quill she’d found as well.

In spite of herself, she watched with fascination as he slid carelessly into Rath’s working chair. His fingers were long, but smoke hadn’t stained them; they looked almost delicate as he took the quill and began to write.

What he wrote, she couldn’t say—he didn’t write the characters in Weston letterforms, if they were letters at all. But something about the bold lines he’d scribed was nagging in its familiarity.

“Was this the language?”

“I—I don’t know.” She frowned. “I don’t think so.” She looked up at the shelf above the mantel without much hope; it, like the tabletop, was empty.

“What do you see here?”

She forgot to look at his face or his expression; instead, as if he were an echo of Rath, she looked at what he’d written, at the small, precise shapes that were more like geometry than any language she’d learned.

“They look familiar to you,” he said. It wasn’t a question. She nodded hesitantly, because they did. “Where did you see these runes?”

“Not these ones,” she finally said. “But ones that were similar in shape. In the undercity,” she added. “But they were much larger. One of them was carved into the floor.”

He was utterly silent for a long moment. Then he left the chair. Blue smoke wafted from his compressed lips.

“What does it mean?” she asked quietly.

“It means, Jewel Markess, that we must work—quickly—to find this

undercity of which you've spoken." He shook his head. "I confess I don't understand the timing."

She waited, and after a moment, he said, "It was Scarran last night. Anything that happened should have happened then. Perhaps Ararath bought time in some unexpected way; we will likely never know."

"You knew him, didn't you?"

The mage raised a silver brow. "I did not know him as you knew him, but yes, we were acquainted, and yes, I was aware of some of his activities. I was not, however, aware of *where* those activities occurred, and had I been, much might have been prevented."

"Would he still be alive?" She hadn't meant to ask the question, but it left her lips of its own volition, shadowed by, of all things, a twinge of guilt.

Meralonne met her gaze and held it. He doused his pipe. "I cannot say. He played a game that I would have said was beyond him, and in the end, he won."

"It killed him," she replied, her voice steady and flat.

"Yes. But victory is not always defined by survival."

Jewel shook her head. "For Rath, it was."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. If he hid things from you, he had his reasons for doing so, and I will respect his implicit wishes in this. But more than that, I cannot do. Come, Jewel. We must find this maze."

Jewel nodded and once again glanced at the debris strewn across the floor. At the velvet jacket that had once seemed so fine to her, at the shirts, the various jars of color, lids cracked, contents spilled. But her eyes returned to the sword in its scabbard. Bending, she retrieved it in shaking hands.

"You have use for a sword?"

"No. Not me. But . . . it was important to him. It was from his old life, and I think it's the only thing he couldn't make himself throw away. He almost never wore it—but he did; I saw him use it once." To save Arann, she thought, when Lefty had come at a desperate run to their home.

Lefty.

"I can take this?"

"I think it fair to say you can take anything at all that is left here. If you do not, the landlord no doubt will."

She hesitated again and then, making a decision, asked, "Can you help me carry the books?"

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Jay came in just before the middle dinner hour, and she looked both dirty and exhausted.

“We saved you food,” Finch began, but Ellerson cleared his throat. Jay, weary and pale, looked up at a man who was starched and perfectly clean.

“Bath,” he said firmly. “Everyone else has.”

“But not quietly,” Teller added, glancing at Carver. Carver shrugged; it was his only response. Finch watched as Jay glanced at the table. Saving food in this case didn’t mean much; Angel couldn’t eat his way through half of what was left on a good day.

“Bath,” Jay said, forlornly, and headed down the hall.

After dinner, they gathered in the kitchen. It had gone past the middle and into the late dinner hour, but as they had no guests—and the den privately thought the idea of having guests when they *were* guests was ridiculous—Ellerson made little comment. He did, however, join them in the kitchen.

Finch noted that there were actual chairs—matching chairs—around the butcher-block table, and she glanced at Ellerson’s completely neutral expression before she took a seat.

“I’ll keep it short,” Jay told them, as she shoved her hair away from her eyes. The weather was cool and dry enough that it almost stayed that way; it certainly didn’t have the springy quality it adopted in the humidity of the summer months. “I spent the day with a very irritating mage.”

“Member APhaniel may be many things,” Ellerson said, clearing his throat slightly, “but simply irritating would not be among them.”

“He can be whatever he wants—he can clearly get away with it,” Jay snapped back. “But he *is* damn irritating.” She folded her fingers together and cracked her knuckles, which caused the domicis to frown.

“Did he do anything magical?” Teller asked. They all wanted to know, but only Teller was willing to risk the question.

“Yes. He lit his pipe.”

Silence, followed by a disappointed, “That’s it?”

“Pretty much. He’s got eagle eyes, though. He notices everything.”

Meaning, of course, that he noticed things she wasn’t happy to have noticed. Finch glanced at Angel, and Angel nodded.

“We went by Rath’s place first. Meralonne wanted to see it.”

Ellerson cleared his throat, and Jay glanced up at him; he stood by the doors. “What?”

“Member APhaniel is what he is most frequently called.”

“He told me to call him Meralonne.” Her expression made clear that it was a lot better than anything else she might have called him.

“Be that as it may,” Ellerson replied, “it is possible your familiarity will draw more attention to you than you would ideally like at this stage in your career.”

“My what?”

He didn’t blink. “Your career. Your performance will be evaluated, and while it is unlikely that the mage will consider the use of his personal name to be of note, others who are not as familiar might.”

All of the den were staring at him now.

After a long moment, Jay spoke. “It might not matter,” she told them softly, staring at the tabletop, and the glow of lamplight against it.

“How so?”

“What The Terafin said was true. There is no entrance to the maze from Rath’s place.”

“But—but where did it go?” Finch asked.

“We don’t know. Meralonne—Member APhaniel—examined the basement for an hour, and he found nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Dirt. Rock. Old, rotten wooden boards. Nothing else.”

“But—”

“He said none of it seemed new, either. It’s not like they covered over the hole—it’s just not there anymore.”

A thought occurred to everyone—except possibly Jester—at more or less the same time. “Do they think you were lying?”

Jay’s shoulders sagged. “No one’s said that,” she told them, placing her hands flat against the surface of the table. “But it’s got to damn well look that way.”

“It’s only one entrance,” Carver began.

Jay nodded, but it wasn’t a particularly good nod. “The entrance by Bronson’s is gone, as well.”

“What, the chute?”

“Yeah. We pulled up the boards; we went down into the basement. We even pulled up the trap that led down. It led to dirt and the stone foundation.”

“Where else did you go?”

“There and the entrance by the edge of the thirty-second.”

No one asked her what she'd found. They didn't have to.

Jay still stared at the tabletop. Then she rose, restless, and shoved hair that wasn't in her eyes out of them. "It's got to be there," she told them all, spreading her hands. "And we've got to find it. If it weren't for the—the creature that tried to kill her, she'd probably have us bouncing off our asses in the high streets by now."

They weren't yet up to the task of showing gratitude for a creature that graced their nightmares.

"We just need to find entrances that Rath didn't use much," Jay added. "Meralonne—the mage, I mean—"

"Member APhaniel."

"Member APhaniel thinks they're somehow closing the entrances that Rath knew about. He thinks they knew a lot of what Rath knew. But they obviously didn't know it all," she added.

"Why?" Ellerson asked.

"Because if they had, I'd never have come to Terafin. They'd have known about the letter. They'd have known what it told me to do." She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I'm beat," she told them. "And I have nothing else to say. I'm going to bed."

Finch opened her mouth to speak and closed it again, aware of Ellerson's presence in the room. "Go," she said, instead. "We'll clean up here."

"No," Ellerson told her quietly, "you will not."

"But the dining room—"

"It is already cleared."

"But—"

"Finch, there are servants whose sole duties are to this wing. If you attempt to do their work, one of two things will happen. Either they will take it as a criticism of their work, and they will be somewhat justifiably aggrieved, or they will be judged by the quality of *your* work, with the same result."

Finch stared at Ellerson.

He waited a beat. "You are here, for the moment, as The Terafin's guests. The servants take their duties to her guests seriously; it is a matter of House pride. If you feel you must be considerate of these servants, do your best not to make too much of a mess. Anything else would be interference.

"It cannot have escaped your notice that many of the servants have the House Name. They did not come to that name by extraordinary acts of

heroism; they achieved their names by diligent service in *her* name. Do not deprive the servants here of their ability to earn that rank.”

Carver snorted. “Rath was right,” he muttered. “The patriciate is insane.”

“Even their servants,” Jester added.

Jay didn’t sleep well. Even a room away, Finch could hear her cries as she woke from sleep into an unfamiliar darkness. The third time it happened, she woke, found the robe hanging by the bedside table, and put it on. Then she dragged herself out of her room, pausing only long enough to pull the counterpane and one pillow from her own bed. Teller’s door was slightly ajar. She went to knock on it and nearly shrieked as it opened.

“You too?” he asked quietly.

She nodded.

They walked over to Jay’s door. It was closed. Finch pushed it open and walked in. The room was huge; it was bigger than any of the others. It seemed empty, although there was furniture to navigate in the darkness that was alleviated only by moonlight through the unshuttered glass.

They made their way to the bedside, and they arranged their blankets and pillows in a familiar way. The blankets were much finer, and the pillows were thick and heavy with down; the floor was flat, and it didn’t creak much beneath the carpets.

They bedded down on the same side of the bed, nearest the window, placing their blankets at the same distance they’d been in their old home. The edges were touching.

“I don’t know if it’ll help,” Finch told Teller.

“It can’t hurt,” he replied. She couldn’t tell whether or not he smiled as he said it, but it didn’t matter; it was comforting to know that, absent starvation and the fear of street dens and cold, they could still worry about the same things and come to the same conclusions.

Not everything had to change.

When Jewel woke in the morning, the first thing she saw was Finch, and the second, Teller. They were sleeping in blankets far finer than the ones they’d owned back home, but they were curled on a stretch of floor as if bound by invisible walls. She knew why they were there, and she felt two things at once: gratitude and guilt. She struggled with the latter as

she slipped out of bed and walked toward the closet—which was a large room—that Ellerson had been slowly filling.

They knew about her nightmares. They knew she always had them. They also knew that she was sleeping, or trying to sleep, in the dark. Teller had hesitantly—and privately—suggested that she tell Ellerson that she needed a lamp, at the very least, when she slept, and she almost bit his head off. *I can't be seen as a child who's afraid of the dark*, she said between clenched teeth, when she'd managed to rein in a very frayed temper.

Teller, however, had endured her anger. *You can't go without sleep and do what you need to do. Ellerson won't tell.*

But *she'd* know, damn it.

So Teller and Finch—who both finally had beds, *real* beds, of their own, and gods only knew for how long—were sleeping on her floor. She should have been angry. She should have felt humiliated by the need for their company and its familiarity.

Instead, she made every effort to move quietly as she approached her second day of work for The Terafin. Even if things didn't work out well here, it didn't matter—the solarii Jewel earned would see them through the hard times. They could find their own place in the holdings again. They could take back their life.

Because her duties lay in the dark and damp basements of the old holdings, Ellerson hadn't insisted she immediately learn to dress, as he put it, properly; he'd allowed, and requisitioned—his word—practical clothing that was nonetheless of matching, rather than clashing, colors. This practical clothing didn't feature skirts, and it did boast large pockets in several places.

He'd allowed her to keep her boots because on her return from the holdings they'd been encrusted with dirt and dust. The boots she would have insisted on keeping, in any case; they were good. She knew they were good. They'd certainly cost enough.

She slid into an undershirt, covered it with a heavy shirt, and then did the same with the wide pants; she selected a jacket as well, a heavy blue fabric that seemed too fine or soft to be wool. Ellerson, however, assured her that it was.

She didn't argue with him.

When she slid out of her door, he was waiting for her in the hall. He bowed, ignoring her sharp intake of breath.

"Make noise," she told him sharply.

“As you wish,” he replied. “Breakfast is waiting.”

“Is anything else?” she asked as she followed him down the hall.

“The rest of your den appear to be sleeping.”

She shrugged. “There’s not much for them to wake up to,” she pointed out.

“That might be a concern.”

She hesitated. Shrugged. “We usually head out to the Common in the morning and to the well; we do laundry once a week in rotation.”

He nodded, as if this were somehow relevant.

“But in the past few weeks, any real work we’ve done, we’ve done in the evening.”

He didn’t ask, and she didn’t elaborate. But when he led her into the breakfast room—which was a much smaller version of the dining room with a table that wasn’t so insanely long—it wasn’t empty. Meralonne APhaniel was seated in front of a plate, smoking.

The plate was covered with food he hadn’t touched. Jewel recognized most of it—bread, cheese, some sort of soft fish. “Am I late?” she asked, struggling to keep anxiety out of her voice.

“No.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m endeavoring to make certain that you are not. Late,” he added, blowing rings into the still air.

Jewel opened her mouth and snapped it shut again. She glanced at Ellerson who stood, impassive, by the wall.

“I would like, if possible, to make a list of the entrances that Ararath showed you, starting at the most commonly used and ending with the least common. We can compose this list while you eat,” he added. “With luck, we’ll have more success today than we had yesterday.”

With her luck, Jewel thought, scraping a chair across the floor and sitting heavily in it, success was not in the cards. Breakfast, apparently, was not in the cards, either, at least not according to her appetite. But she ate. Her Oma had never liked to see food wasted, and Jewel had a lifetime of ingrained habit, against which lack of appetite counted for little; she chewed, she swallowed, and she made her way through whatever was on her plate.

As she did, she began to do what the mage had asked. It wasn’t hard. During the long bouts of sleeplessness, she’d been mentally composing the list he’d asked her to make.

"I don't know all of the entrances he knew about," she admitted. "I know which ones we found on our own."

The mage nodded. "Are you certain you found exits—or entrances—that Ararath didn't know?" He sounded dubious.

Jewel shrugged. "We didn't compare notes, if that's what you're asking. Not after we left his place."

The mage raised a silver brow. Smoke wreathed his face.

She knew what he was asking. She didn't feel like answering. Instead, she said, grudging every word, "He showed us how to get into the maze; he showed us how to search it. He showed us a little of what to search for, but he didn't particularly like to see us in there on our own."

"He knew we went; he handled the sale of anything we found."

"You . . . sold . . . things from the undercity."

She nodded. She shouldn't have been pleased to get a rise out of the mage, but, perversely, she was. "They weren't useful to us in any other way."

"To whom did you sell these things? And what things, exactly, did you find?"

She shrugged. "Useless things, mostly. Candlesticks. Old bowls. Bits of things with writing on them. And I have no idea who we sold them to—Rath did all the selling. I told you."

Meralonne removed the pipe stem from very compressed lips. "He never mentioned his clientele?"

She shrugged. "Some of it went to the Order of Knowledge. Well, to people in the Order."

"He didn't mention names."

"No. He wouldn't let us try to sell anything on our own, and we didn't want to cross the bridge."

But the mage nodded, and his usual irritable expression shifted into something that, while smoother, was vastly less comfortable. "It's possible that's how he was detected," he finally said. "There can't have been many men who offered antiques of that particular nature for sale in the Empire." He rose. "I see," he told her, pausing to empty the ashes from his pipe's bowl onto the nearest clean plate, "that you've finished. You *have* finished?"

"Yes." She stood as well.

"Then let us depart. If we are not successful within the next few days, we will in all likelihood no longer be working alone."

Jewel nodded. But as she pushed her chair back, she asked, “Have you told the Kings?”

He frowned. “About what?”

Her eyes widened. “About the—the creature—and the attempt on The Terafin’s *life*.”

“Ah. No, I’m afraid I have not. I have been instructed,” he added, glancing at the domicis whom Jewel herself had almost forgotten, “to keep my own counsel in this affair until we have found adequate proof.”

“Of *what*? There were *witnesses*—one of them was The Terafin!”

Ellerson cleared his throat, and she turned. “What?”

“The Terafin is a woman who understands politics well.”

“What does politics have to do with what *we all saw*?”

“She is The Terafin. Her death, no matter how it arrives, will have deep political consequences for both her House, and given its import, the Empire. Anyone—anything—that attempts to bring about that death in an untimely fashion is motivated, in the end, by things political.”

“Ellerson, it wasn’t even human!”

“So you’ve said. But The Terafin will be cautious. Unless there is a catastrophe of a greater nature, she will approach the Kings with care, if at all. She cannot afford to be seen as weak.”

Jewel just stared at him for a long moment. “Rath was right,” she muttered.

“Oh?” Meralonne said.

“You’re all insane.”

As conversations went, it was perhaps not the most politically adept Ellerson had ever heard. It was not, however, the least. Jewel Markess’ hopes for the safety of her den, and her own future in House Terafin, did not appear to cause obsequious deference to the mage. Nor, from Ellerson’s vantage, did the mage seem unduly upset by her lack of finesse, her inability to hold a fork in the correct hand, or her weary lack of guile.

The guild of the domicis had an unusual relationship with the Order of Knowledge. Among those who served as members of the Halls of the Domicis, which was treated as a guild and often called one—although Ellerson was aware that there were articles that were not entirely in keeping with general guild charter—were those who were talent-born. Some had spent some time training with the Order’s mages, before deciding

that their temperament and their inclinations did not lend themselves to a lifetime's seclusion in the Towers.

The Order, of course, tracked those who had learned in their halls and, in particular, those who had evinced some power. Meralonne APhaniel was reputed to be a First Circle mage of the highest order. He did not, however, seem to care a great deal about the nicety of title when he worked; Jewel Markess' marked lack of respect—where in this case respect meant some mixture of fear and groveling—did not seem to annoy him.

He did not, in fact, seem to notice it at all.

Ellerson watched as Jewel started to walk away from the table. She stumbled slightly, righted herself, and stopped moving.

"Jewel?" Member APhaniel said quietly.

She didn't appear to hear him, and time passed as she stared straight ahead, her eyes slightly widened and entirely unfocused. When the mage spoke her name for the third time, she shook herself. She had paled.

Ellerson watched her with care, and he marked the moment her expression snapped into place. He expected her to speak, but he was surprised at what she said when she did.

"The Kings need to know," she told the mage, although she didn't appear to be *seeing* him. "The Kings need to know before—"

"Before?"

She shook her head again, and her flyaway curls fell into a loose drape over her eyes. She did not, however, push them away with her characteristic impatience. "It's—it's nothing," she told the mage. "I was just—I was just thinking out loud."

She was also, Ellerson realized, lying.