

CHAPTER ONE

Terafin Manse, Averalaaan, 14th day of Maran, 427 A.A.

She woke screaming.

It was nothing new. She'd woken them, screaming, every night for the past eight days, and she'd remembered so little of the dreams that had sent her back to the waking world in such terror that she'd probably had no choice but to do it all over again.

Teller, Finch, Carver and Angel -- they were used to this. They'd lived with it for many years, first in the twenty-fifth holding and then as part of House Terafin, although it had seldom been this bad as she'd grown into her talent. Daine -- given leave by a testy Alowan to sleep outside of the healerie -- found it more trying.

"It's not the screaming," he said, as he joined the weary procession in the hall that led to Jewel's room. "It's the frenzy. It sounds as if she's going mad with helplessness."

"Unlike the rest of us, who are just going mad with lack of sleep." Light glinted off the surface of an expensive dagger. Shadows hugged the undersides of Carver's eyes.

"Hey, you know what they say," Finch told him, shoving a very stubborn swathe of hair out of her eyes for the fifth time.

"No. At this hour of night I barely know what *I* say, never mind anyone else. What do they say?"

"No one has a right to sleep. It's a privilege."

Daine snorted. "Sounds like you've been talking to midwives."

"Yeah, well. The cook's wife just gave birth to her first child, and the mid-wife gave a long lecture the entire time she was birthing." Finch snorted. Angel stepped around her with practiced ease, and pushed the door to Jewel's room open. "I'd've decked her, myself. Hold that thing steady. She'll want the light."

"She already has light," Jewel said, interrupting their conversation.

Of course. Avandar stood in her room, unwavering shadow that he was. His fist was glowing, or rather, the rock that sat cradled in the curve of his palm was. The shadows beneath his eyes made Carver's look handsome.

"You look like crap," Finch said sweetly.

He gave her the frown she more or less expected.

They'd grown around him, the way vines do around rocks, but they'd never managed to make him one of their own. Daine had already been swallowed whole. Of course, that might have more to do with the fact that he'd had to call Jay back from the brink of death, holding her soul inside his as he walked her back into the land of the living.

Which, she thought, only barely described the den this particular evening.

"Get anything this time?" Teller asked hopefully. What he meant, what he wouldn't expose her by saying, was, are you willing to talk about it yet?

She shook her head. Stopped. Nodded.

#

The door to her room was open; she could see them so clearly in the lamp-dimmed dark, she wondered if her vision weren't augmented somehow. If it was her gift, it was a bad sign.

But the clearest face, pressed as it was between the shoulders of Angel and Carver -- who would never lose the habit of drawing their weapons, even if the weapons drawn had changed, when they heard that cry -- was Teller's.

"Jay," he said. Quietly.

Teller, to whom she could never lie. At least not successfully.

Avandar was in the habit of correcting her den when they questioned her too commonly; he was not in the habit of interrupting them when their questions -- or accusations, in this case -- were contained beneath the surface of a single inquisitive word.

Her shoulders slumped; she slouched into her height.

"Jay?"

"Kitchen," she whispered.

#

She dropped into her chair, sliding it against the rugless kitchen floor with a satisfying squeak. Her feet were bare. Everyone got to see them; she propped them up on the table's edge and leaned back on two of the chair's four legs. It was warm enough that slippers made her feet sweat, and she hated sweating

Angel dropped the lamp at its place by her side, or in this case, by her feet. Teller took a seat, quill in hand, inkstand long and shadowed by the flickering of burning oil. His hands were steady. Hers, oddly enough, were not; she kept them in her lap. They all knew that as a bad sign.

"You should be practicing," Avandar said quietly. "Whatever it is you've seen, it should be coming to you in your waking hours, and at your command. You are the seer; your visions are subject to your will."

"Avandar --"

"Or they should be."

"We've had this argument before."

"It is not an argument, Jewel. I merely state fact."

"I like your jaw enough to ask you to stop stating fact, okay?"

It wasn't entirely impossible that she'd lose her temper and slug him, although she almost never did anymore. House training had taken her temper away from her in bits and pieces and forced her to hide it in the strangest places.

"Very well," Avandar said, not at all bothered by the threat. "Your dream."

"It involves you, so pay attention."

That got their attention. She didn't really want it. "I've been having the dreams again."

Carver snorted. "So tell us something we couldn't guess."

"You know the drill. Three dreams. Three nights."

"You've had 'em longer than three nights, Jay. It's been -- what -- at least a week. I think tonight's the eighth night. If it's the same dream, that's some wyrd, all right."

"It's the same dream."

"What is it?" Teller.

"I'm alone. I'm travelling alone. I think I'm the scout at the head of an army, but whenever I turn around, there's only one man behind me."

"Who?"

She raised her head. "He's wearing armour. But it's so bloody it looks like red steel. He's carrying a sword that's jagged and curved, a great sword -- but he holds it in one hand. I know that I wouldn't even be able to lift it. A great helm hides his face, but not his eyes -- his eyes --"

She could hear the scritch of Teller's quill against paper as she paused to draw breath.

"In his wake, as if he's a tide, there are just so many dead. I can only see them truly in the shadow he casts, but everything is there -- it's as if he's just walked through all of history leaving a corpse behind for every year that's passed. Children. Women. Men in the strangest armour I've ever seen."

"He --"

Silence. They were waiting. She hated that they were waiting, but she appreciated that they could. "I've never done anything really important without you," she said quietly. Her voice was the dream's voice, but her words were her own. She saw Carver and Angel glance side to side; saw Finch frown. Aaron wasn't with them; Daine looked -- because he was smart -- to Teller.

Teller continued to write.

"I realize that he only walks when I walk. That if I stand in place, his shadow doesn't grow any longer. So I stop."

"Then," she said softly, "I hear horses. Or something that sounds like horses. They come from where I've been heading. I look up, and I see her."

Silence. Edged now, sharp with things unsaid.

They waited while the oil burned.

"She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. Her skin is fair and unblemished, her hair is long and pale and fine."

Teller frowned. "Long and pale and fine, like blade's edge, she pierced their hearts and led them, led them all, the fine chase, the dark road."

They all turned, even Jewel.

"It's the poem. Shurtlev's Winter Hunt. You remember it."

"I...remember it." Jewel closed her eyes. "But this woman...She is mounted on -- on a creature that was once human. At least I assume it was; it has a human face." Her eyes almost snapped open; she was denying the clarity of vision; replacing it with the familiarity of friendship.

"I want to run. But she's already seen me. She knows who I am. She knew who I was, even though I've said nothing. She lifts a horn to her lips and blows it; they appear at her side."

"They?"

"Her host."

"Jewel."

She turned to look at Avandar, who had only barely learned not to interrupt her.

"When you say host, what do you mean? This...hunt...Teller is correct. It is described in Shurtlev's Winter Hunt, and it may be --"

"Thousands."

"Pardon?"

"Thousands. She's emptied her court."

"How do you know this?"

"It's my damn dream," she snapped back, irritable. "How the hells do I know anything in a dream?" But she choked back the rest of what was only hysteria trying to find expression. "She -- god, she is so beautiful -- she says, 'we've come for the hunt; the hunting has never been so good.' And then she calls my name.

"I know I'm dead. She's just so compelling, I'm not sure I care. But then he speaks, I mean, the man who's been following me. He says, 'Only give me the word, and I will save you.'

"He steps forward. And as he does, the dead pile up at his back. Only this time, I can hear them screaming; I can see them falling; I can see the shadows swallowing them whole. It makes him stronger. It feeds him.

"I tell him to stop. I tell him to stop. And she -- she rides in." The lamplight flickered. She stared at it, into its heart. "The bodies appear to either side of her, as if they're some sort of afterthought, as if they're just dust from the road.

"And then he says, 'Do not challenge me.'

"She says, 'I have her name.'

"He says, 'The name gives you the right to combat, but it is power that decides her fate.'

"And she waves her hand, her unmailed, pale hand, and the land to either side of the road we're standing on is suddenly turned to desert; it falls away. Behind her, behind the body of her host, is a lake that glitters like diamond; cold, beautiful. She says, 'These lands were my lands, and I mark them, still. What was given was given, and thanks are offered and my ceremonies performed, however weak those have become.'

"And he says, 'I will pass through and I will take what I have claimed.'

"Jay?"

"He lifts his helm, then."

She turned, in her chair.

Her domicis stiffened in the silent kitchen.

"Avandar?"

"Yes."

"It was you."

He nodded. Stepped back.

It was Teller who said, quietly, "It isn't finished yet."

The domicis lifted a dark brow.

"No," Jewel said softly. "It isn't. He takes two steps forward. More dead. I tell him to stop. She stops as well. There's movement from the North -- and as they look North, their faces are lit with a sudden light; red light, bright light. It seems to go on forever.

"A voice speaks out of that light.

"It says, 'This world is mine, and all deaths serve my purpose.'

"And then," she said softly, no longer looking at domicis or lamplight -- or anything at all -- "the killing starts.

"I'm in the middle of it; it's suddenly real. There are faceless people running around screaming in terror; there are dying children, dying women, dying men. They become dead so quickly they slip through my fingers, but if I don't sift through the dying, I won't find them in time.

"And that's why I'm there. To find them."

"To find who?"

"I don't know. *I don't know*. I've ridden this dream out to its end eight times, and I don't know what it is I'm supposed to know. I only know that I can't fail, or we all --"

Teller put the quill down. Rose. "Jay?" He asked quietly.

She looked across the table at him. Reached out with a shaking hand. "No."

"But we --"

"No."

"What's going on?" Carver's voice. Strained.

"She's leaving," Teller said quietly. "And she doesn't intend on taking any of us with her when she goes."

#

Moonlight. Darklight, nadir at its strength.

Why was it that she always came to be here when the darkness was strongest? She knelt. She was too weak to stand. The truth. The dead weren't faceless.

Teller knew. She was certain that no one else did.

"I can't do this," she said, into night, into the clarity of emptiness. Avandar had not even contested her desire to visit the shrine without him; although he hovered in the distance, he had chosen to retreat into a privacy as solid as any she could impose upon herself.

But that was acceptable to her. She knew that he understood her dream

far better than he wanted to. Knew it. Did not choose to question him. She had her own ghosts, her own demons, her own guilty secrets.

"I can't do this," she said again.

"Then why," he replied, answering at last, "does Teller know that you're leaving?"

She turned, putting the altar firmly behind her.

In the moonlight, pale and thin though it was, she recognized the face he had chosen to wear. Teller's.

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

His eyes were like moonlight. "Why have you come, ATerafin? This is the altar upon which service is pledged. To my House. To me."

"I can't do what you ask of me."

"You have already decided to go."

She looked away. Cursed, not bothering to restrain herself. The night heard the words, and the dead. Neither of them were moved. "Years of dealing with merchants," she told him softly, "and I still can't bluff my way through a negotiation."

A brow rose.

"Yes. This is a negotiation. It just doesn't sound much like one 'cause it's late, I've had no sleep for a week, and I'm always at a disadvantage when dealing with the dead."

"A negotiation occurs when there is something to be negotiated. I fail to see that here."

"Yeah, well. Being dead probably doesn't help much." She tried for flippant. Got most of the way there. But her heart wasn't in it.

There was only one thing her heart was in. "I want you to take care of them."

"Jewel."

"Not the Terafin. I know it doesn't work that way. But them. My den. I want you to protect Teller. And Finch. I *need* you to watch over them."

"If I could, Jewel Markess, I would watch over all members of my House."

"There must be something you can do. You speak to me."

"Yes, I do," he said softly. "Just as I speak to The Terafin. You understand this, Jewel." He paused. His mannerisms were nothing at all like the man whose face he wore, and she wondered why he'd chosen Teller.

"Why don't you take them with you?"

"You know why."

"Do I?"

"I don't know if anything is going to survive where I'm going."

"But you know there's no safety here. The truth, Jewel."

She knew why he wore Teller's face, then. Teller was the only one of her den she couldn't lie to. Or rather, the only one who knew when she was lying, and who seemed -- by the complicity of silence -- to understand why.

"If they're not here, the House falls."

"Yes."

"And if I'm not there, the House falls."

"Yes."

"Gods, I hate this." She spun to altar and back. Once. Twice. Three times.

"And I," he said softly. "But I will tell you this: they must stand in your stead. Trust them."

She was stony faced. She'd never understood that expression before.

"They offered me their service. I accepted it." The night began to dissolve him. "It may surprise you, but you are not the only ATerafin of import; not the only ATerafin whose service the House depends on. You have surrounded yourself with people you trust. This is not uncommon.

"What is uncommon is that they are -- all of them -- worthy of that trust. You see clearly. You chose well.

"If I had any choice, I would keep you here. But it comes. Remember this: I left my House to ride with the sons of Veralaan."

"What am I going to tell the Terafin?"

"The truth," he said softly, his voice now as thin as the façade he wore. "She will accept it."

#

The Terafin sat across the length of the familiar, spotless table. Nothing adorned it; no books, no paperwork, no inkstands or quill, no lamp. But the lights that ringed the edge of the open glass work above it cast soft reflections. Hers. Jewel ATerafin's.

She had chosen to forego the domicis; Morretz, seldom excluded, had made his feelings plain by a slight compression of lip even as he bowed. Avandar, on the other hand, had darkened. Had, in fact, turned from The Terafin to Jewel, forcing them both to acknowledge that Jewel was his chosen master, no matter whose gold had paid for -- and continued to pay

for -- the contract.

Jewel, however, was more politic.

Or perhaps more stubborn.

The two women sat in the room, experience, as always, the thing that separated them. But not, the Terafin reflected, so much as it once had. They were older. Wiser, perhaps.

Alone.

She waited for the younger woman to speak first.

Jewel acknowledged the right rank gave her; she spoke. "I'm going south ahead of the armies."

Amarais inclined her head. "I suspected you might. Commander Allen will not, I think, be pleased."

"He might be."

"Oh?"

"If I don't go South, he loses the war. If I go, he has a small chance of winning it."

The Terafin smiled at that. Commander Allen was not an obviously proud man, and he had never been boastful; his way, rather, to let louder men underestimate him until they had no choice but to acknowledge superiority. He was not, however, a man to accept that he had either a slender chance of winning or that his chance amounted to a single woman with no knowledge whatever of the strategies or tactics of war.

"And besides, it means I won't have to deal with the Hawk and the Kestrel, and I can tell you he wasn't looking forward to that."

The Terafin's smile was the only natural thing about the moment, and it faded. They sat alone as if they had always been two solitudes.

"Avandar, of course, will go with you."

"Of course."

Silence.

"Will you take care of my den?"

"Your den, Jewel, is as capable of taking care of themselves as my Chosen."

Silence.

It was awkward. It could hardly be anything but awkward. There was an unspoken assumption that neither woman wished to touch, but that had to be touched upon. The Terafin bowed her head. Took a deep breath. Smiled, the smile itself more of a wince than an expression of happiness or

mirth.

"I do not think that I will be here to greet you upon your return."

Jewel had been fidgetting, her eyes drawn from one side of the library's expanse to the other, flicking here and there off book and shelf and table surface. It hadn't been obvious to the Terafin until the moment her words were exposed to the silence -- because at that moment, Jewel became part of the silence.

She broke the stillness by rising.

"Isn't that why you came?" The Terafin said, pressing her, rising in turn. "To say good-bye?"

The younger woman's face lost all colour, all movement; became a mask, but at that a poor one -- one that was translucent, transparent, one that could so easily be seen through if it weren't for its stiffness it might have been no mask at all. There were tears.

She did not shed them. At least she had that much control.

"Yes. Yes, Terafin, I came to say good-bye."

"Without actually saying those words?"

The younger ATerafin looked away. "Without actually saying those words."

"Ah."

"You know."

"We know, but Morretz has difficulty acknowledging the eventual end of his service. It is why neither he nor Avandar are present."

Jewel sat.

The Terafin did not; she did not need to. "Have you no comfort to offer me?"

"I'm not much for comfort. Ask Angel. Or Carver."

"Or Teller? Or Daine?"

Jewel flinched. "I'm not much for offering comfort when there's no comfort to be offered. You don't want it. You don't need it."

"Oh Jewel," the Terafin said softly, "you see, and you do not see. You're wrong. Tonight, in this room, between the two of us, I need comfort.

"I have looked; I have looked as clearly, as harshly, as I dare. I know the end is coming. Your dreams. The House's. My death is not natural. It is not accidental. One of my own will betray me, and if I could see clearly which one, I wouldn't be facing certain death. I see a war beyond the stretch and reach of my life that would have required all of my cunning and

all of my experience to survive.

"This House -- it is not me. But while I live it is mine. I have been told by others with the particular experience I lack that my feelings are not unlike a parent's ferocity of affection for their child." She looked up; the stained glass was dark in the quiet night. From this vantage, the heavens weren't unreachable; they simply ceased to exist. And it was not from the gods that she would make the only demand that would ease her. "I had hoped that you would come to me. And you have." She looked across the table at the stricken younger woman.

"Terafin --"

"You know what I ask of you."

Jewel's mouth opened. Closed. She nodded.

"Offer me farewells, if that will ease you. But offer me something that will ease *me*. I have never asked it, Jewel. But this is the point of no return. When you leave, when you walk through the gates with your domicis, the ties between us are sundered although no one else will know it. I have given you all that I can give, and I have been pleased, even proud, of what you have achieved.

"But what you have achieved pales against what you *must* achieve. This house --"

Jewel backed away from the table.

The Terafin thought she would flee. Was surprised at how much it cut when she did, in fact, walk quickly and stiffly toward the doors.

Was surprised at how much it meant when she stopped there, her hands on either side of the crack between them, her forehead pressed against the heavy wood. She lifted her head. Turned.

Her cheeks were wet with tears.

This, this, was why she had demanded, and received, privacy. Because the Terafin could not be seen to be weak, no matter how unnatural such a façade was.

She said, "I don't want you to die."

The Terafin said nothing.

"I don't want to accept what you offer because accepting -- accepting it means that I've accepted your death."

"It is not an offer, Jewel. Make no mistake. It is a plea. It is a command. It is a responsibility. But an offer? No. Nothing so simple."

"Terafin --"

"No."

"Amarais."

The Terafin bowed. "Yes. Here, in this room, between us, that is all I am. I have no idea how I will die; I accept that I will, in your absence. It pains me. I confess a certain fear, a morbid curiosity, an unsettling anger. I will, of course, fight it. That is my nature. But I will have your word, here, or I will have your name."

It took a moment for the threat to sink in. She was patient. Wished that she could be more patient -- but the time for waiting had passed. *I had hoped*, she thought, staring at this woman who, born into power, might have been her younger self, *that you would come to me on your own*.

Ab well.

"This House means many things to me. But it stands for something. The sword is Justice and it is the House Sword."

"What do you want from me?"

"Everything. Protect Alowan. Preserve my Chosen, if they will it. Preserve my House from the war that will divide it if they do not. Become Terafin, Jewel. Become The Terafin."

"You're The Terafin. I know no other."

It was spoken so quietly The Terafin could have chosen not to hear the tremor in the voice, the break, subtle and slight, between syllables.

"You will know no other while I live," she said quietly, stating the obvious because Jewel ATerafin needed to hear it. "Isn't that what this is about? In you, tonight, I see my death. I *hate* it." The vehemence of the word surprised her. She swallowed. Looked away. Looked back; she owed Jewel that much. "But I also see life, of a sort. The life of my House. You are not who I am. But we value the same things. You will never destroy what I have built."

The younger woman was weeping now, silent and open-eyed. It was painful to watch. She watched, however; those tears were both for her and cried in her stead.

"Jewel Markess ATerafin, I name you my heir. You will serve the House and you will serve the Sword, and if the gods will it, they will serve you."

The tears were slow to stop, but they stopped.

"I will make no announcement. The House is already divided; the war is already in motion. But my death will deliver the news to the four least likely to accept it."

"To the five," Jewel said faintly, attempting to smile. The humour did

not fall flat; Amarais accepted it for what it was. "Avandar will be so pleased."

"Yes."

"Morretz?"

She looked away. "He is not what you require. He will not, I think, serve another. Not for years, if at all. The option is open to teach, and many men who choose a life of service, rather than the contracts that are more common, often retire to teach others when the life of their chosen master is abruptly ended.

"Jewel."

The moment stretched out until it was so thin something had to break.

Jewel ATerafin slid, by painful inches, to one knee. "I give you my word," she said softly. "The House will be Terafin, and I --" silence.

Amarais waited.

The tears stopped completely, although their tracks lit her face in wide lines.

"And I will rule it."

#

Avandar was waiting for. The doors to the hall outside of this library had never seemed so heavy, and flight from them so necessary, in all of her years of service. From the first day, struggling for the perfect control that would give her the key to the House if she impressed the cold, forbidding woman on the other side of the table, to the weekly meeting called among the quiet walls of books, this had been the private recess of The Terafin, the place of judgement, the citadel of strength.

Gone, of course.

She wished, desperately wished, that the Terafin had chosen any other room in which to give her orders. In which to make her pleas.

"Jewel."

She'd been avoiding his gaze.

His gaze, she could. He served her, after all. She shook her head, looking at the floor as it passed beneath her moving feet.

But dammit, she was angry, and there was no one else to take it out on. She wheeled on him, disappointed for once that he'd kept his distance. "You wanted to serve a person of power," she said, surprised she could force the words from between her teeth, "so you'd better bloody well be up to it."

His gaze was cool. Condescending, in fact.

Just in case she missed this -- and to give him his due, she often did -- he said, "Are you finished yet?"

She almost slapped him.

"If I am to serve a person of power, Jewel, you had better be prepared to become one. This...display...is unbecoming, even in a person of the rank you have now."

She was silent because he was right. She'd even forgive him for it someday, although the aggregate of his offences had piled up enough over the years it didn't have to be any time soon.

"Let's go," she snapped, turning on heel. "If we're leaving tomorrow, we've got a lot to do before we go."

"We do." He was quiet a moment. "I must speak with Morretz before we leave."

"Morretz?"

"I believe that's what I said."

"Why?"

Avandar didn't answer. He wasn't going to. He never answered questions about his past. But the futility of asking seemed comfortably familiar. She asked.

His silence, stony and completely impenetrable, made his annoyance plain. She shrugged. "Fine. Go talk with Morretz. I'm going back to the den."

To tell them what? She froze a moment, hovering between choices that all seemed bad. And because she froze, she was close enough to hear him.

"Jewel," he said softly, "I am sorry."

#

Torvan ATeratin came to her.

She had requested his company because she hadn't the right to command. Not yet.

But he came as if the request was command, damn him.

"Jewel?" He said, as he came to a stop in the narrow doorway of her kitchen. Lamp was burning, even though the day was bright through the windows.

"Don't tell me. I look awful."

"Awful wasn't the word I was going to use."

"Oh?"

"It's politer." He frowned. At the lamp. Gods, he didn't miss a damn thing.

"Yes," she said, because she knew he wouldn't ask. "It's magicked. Avandar's little gift. What I have to say to you I can't afford to have anyone else hear."

"Where is Avandar?"

She was silent.

He matched her silence with a frown. "I heard that you went to speak to the Terafin."

"I did."

"I heard that you'd argued."

"Good."

"She hasn't revoked your name."

"No."

"Or your crest."

"No."

"Jewel?"

"Yes?"

"You didn't argue."

"We did, but it wasn't much of one. She has all the cards. I don't even have enough left over to make a bet."

"Why did you want to speak with me?"

"Because," she said, rising, "I'm leaving. Tomorrow."

His brows furrowed in confusion; she might have been speaking Torra. She could.

"We'll save the fond farewells," she said, after five minutes had lapsed and the oil had noticeably diminished. "I was going to go South with the armies."

"I'd heard that. I hadn't heard they were moving."

"Well, now I'm going as...advance scout."

"There's a reason most scouts are well-paid and highly pensioned."

She laughed bitterly. "I'll be highly paid, all right."

"Jewel --"

"You're Captain."

"Pardon?"

"You're Captain. You're my Captain. When the Chosen lose their leader, make them follow you."

She saw his eyes narrow. Blade's edge now; all frivolity, all humour, gone. "You're speaking about the death of the Terafin."

Gods, the words were cold. She wanted to cry again, standing here, in front of the man who had opened the House to her. Instead, she drew her shoulders back, achieving her full height. That brought her up to his shoulder. Almost.

"What," she said softly, "do you think we were arguing about? You knew what she wanted from me." It was an accusation, and it was the truth. It was also a surprise; a touch of gift that she hadn't even been reaching for.

He was very, very stiff.

"I haven't slept for nine days. I am *so tired* of this. If I had known what I know now when I first came to your gates -- "

"You would have let Arann die?"

She looked at him, hating him for just that moment. "Gods, are you all sons of bitches?"

He surprised her. "Yes." There was something in his expression that she couldn't quite define to her satisfaction, but it replaced the cold anger that had framed the words that included Terafin and death. That had to be an improvement. "Answer the question."

She started to answer, to say something flippant, but the words got mangled by the emotion she was so bad at suppressing. "Isn't that what I'm risking anyway?"

"Is it?"

"I'm leaving them behind." She looked at light's unnecessary reflection against the surface of the table. Easier than meeting his eyes.

He wasn't one of hers; he didn't touch her. He waited more or less patiently until she looked up again. "I'm leaving you behind."

Waited. Grim now.

"I'm deserting her."

"She can take care of herself."

His turn to flinch. She shook her head. She said, "You're the Captain." Past caring now. "You're the only one who'll have prior knowledge. Start preparing." Her hands were fists. She didn't notice until she lifted them and forced them to unfurl; her fingers were literally shaking.

"Torvan --"

"Yes?"

"Protect my den." She stood, ending the interview.

He said, formally, "ATerafin."

"What?"

"Who will she leave this information with?"

"Damned if I know. That's one of the few things that isn't my problem."

"You've never been involved in a House War," he replied softly. "If it's not secure information, it will be far more your problem than any other worry you have now."

"Me."

"As interested party, your word will count for less than nothing."

"Torvan," she said, her voice as quiet as it had been all morning, "don't take this personally, but get out."

He shut up. He left.

And one of the few good things she was certain about as she watched his back disappear was that he wouldn't take it personally.

One more. Only one more to go.

#

Avantari, Averalan Aramarelas, 16th day of Maran, 427 AA.

"Wait outside."

Avandar frowned. "Jewel --"

"This won't take long. I won't be in danger. And as far as I can tell -- for the usual reasons -- the *Astari* hate you."

"The usual reasons being no reason at all, I assume."

"Right the first time." Although to be fair -- which she wasn't going to be -- they seemed to hate everyone who had displayed even a trace of magic, and Avandar had certainly done that.

"Jewel --"

"It's only Devon," she said, before she had to hear the rest of the lecture.

"You don't seem to understand, all protestations and anger aside, that he serves another master."

"Oh I understand it, all right."

"Jewel --"

"But maybe he serves another master just as obediently as you serve me."

That shut him up for the ten seconds she needed. She slid past him and into the office of Patris Larkasir's adjutant.

He rose at once, his eyes widening ever so slightly. That was Devon's version of unguarded surprise.

"Jewel?"

"ATerafin," she replied, setting the tone of their meeting with the formality of his title. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"It depends on who you ask. Patris Larkasir would consider these important." His hand touched a large pile of officially sealed documents.

"I'd like to speak to you in private for a moment."

"George. Please leave us."

The young man who was the only obvious assistant Devon had bowed at once. Jewel privately thought he was one of the *Astari*, but she'd never asked. It didn't really matter. He left them alone, and that was all she wanted from him at the moment.

He waited until the door had closed, although from the way his eyes flickered over the frame, Avandar was practically standing in it.

"Why have you come?"

"To deliver a message."

"From the Terafin?"

"Sort of."

He waited. She was silent.

"Jewel, it's not like you to play waiting games."

"It's not a game."

"What is it?"

"Loss of words. I don't know what to say. No, not true. I don't know how to say it."

He waited.

She said, "I'm leaving."

"Pardon?"

"I'm leaving to go South."

"I'm aware of that. Unless," he added quietly, "you don't mean with the army."

"No, I don't mean with the army."

"What's happened?"

"It's not what has happened, it's what will happen. It's always what will

happen with me. Birth defect."

"What will happen?"

She laughed, looking away.

He didn't. "Jewel."

"End of the world. That sort of thing."

"You'll pardon me if the humour falls a little flat."

"Probably."

"Jewel, why did you come here?"

"Gods alone know. I want you to do me a favour."

"Have we had this discussion before?"

"Not exactly the same one, no."

"But this is House business."

Damn him. "What else?"

He leaned casually against the edge of his desk. Any other man would have hit the pile of Larkasir's documentation -- it was close enough to the edge -- but Devon knew exactly where to sit. She longed, just once, to see him clumsy. Gods knew he'd seen her trip over nothing more than her own two feet on several occasions.

"I'm going South. I'll join the army later."

His smile was thin and dangerous. "You aren't going South with permission of the Kings' armies."

Devon, you are such a bastard. She smiled. "It's confidential; I prefer not to discuss it."

"I'm sorry, ATerafin. That wasn't a question."

Of course not.

She trusted this man. She knew it not because of the safety she felt when she was with him -- it had been years since he'd offered her shelter that she could accept -- but because of the anger.

Her smile wasn't. She got it halfway up her mouth and let it drop.

"Don't play stupid games with me, Devon."

He said nothing.

"Does the Terafin know that you spy on the House? Does she know that you --"

"Of course she knows it," he said, the snap in his words as obvious a sign of either anger or weariness as he had ever showed. "She's not a child."

"And I am?"

Again, he retreated to the sting of silence.

When he took up his words again, they were measured. Careful. He was, of course, no less angry. "The Terafin knows I spy on the House. It's one of the ways in which she proves her loyalty to the Crowns. Make no mistake, ATerafin. This is my calling. I am *Astari*. She could have released me from her service and taken back my name; it would have damaged my ability to hold visible royal office, and it would have changed the role of my life outside of the *Astari*, but it would not have changed my decision."

She was shocked into silence of her own, which had happened just enough recently that she almost instantly resented it. She worked off the discomfort her anger produced by walking across the room and yanking the curtains shut. The light that filtered through them anyway was muted, reddened; the material in her hand was stubbled like raw silk. She pried her fingers loose.

"You've never said that to the Terafin." The words, like the light just beyond her hands, were muted.

"The Terafin," he replied coolly, "is far too politic to ask. What do you think I am, Jewel? I am her peace offering; I am her pledge of allegiance. I am her willingness -- in tangible form -- to cooperate with the man whose life is the protection of the Kings.

"And in return for this, she partakes in the information I receive as a member of the *Astari*."

"You tell her nothing."

"I tell her nothing, but she is not naïve enough to believe that the value of my service is dependent on open words. Can you separate your knowledge, your experience, from yourself in any meaningful way? Can you act upon things that you know as if you don't know them, and never have?"

The silence lasted a full thirty seconds before she realized it was a question he meant her to answer.

It lasted a little bit longer before he accepted the fact that she wouldn't.

"No," he replied. "You can't. No more can I. You can, if you desire, lie about your knowledge."

Her lips thinned.

"The Terafin was always wise enough not to put me in that position of having to lie; she understands the politics of what she does -- and doesn't -- choose to do." He turned. "And perhaps that's not true. She has forced the issue once or twice in my tenure as part of Terafin. And I've managed, each time, to balance. The House is of value to me. The Terafin is a woman I'd

admire, and she acts, in as much as any ranking member of the patriciate can, with conscience. Perhaps moreso than Duvvari." He shrugged. "Is this what you came for?"

Silent, she shook her head.

"So. You will go South without the army. But you will not go without the permission of the Terafin."

"No."

"And you will not take your den."

"No."

"Jewel -- I fail to see --"

"I came to tell you that what one woman accepts with ease, another might reject."

"Were we speaking of women?"

His smile slid off the mirthless ice of her expression. "Here's something you can give to that bastard."

He knew she meant Duvvari.

"You don't have to thank me. I imagine you'd find out anyway, in time. Does he have members of other Houses doing the same dance?"

"Of course. I am the only open member; the only ranking member. And to be honest, he does not put much of his effort into the Houses. They war amongst each other, but they have never had any pretensions to either of the thrones."

"True enough."

"Your information?"

"I know who the Terafin will make her heir."

"I hope she doesn't intend to announce that information prematurely; it certainly didn't extend the life of the previous heir."

Her laugh was an angry laugh, ugly with harshness, something that shouldn't have been able to go on as long as it did, it sounded so forced. She shoved her hair out of her eyes, catching strands of it in her House ring. Hurt, as she pulled them out. "The life of the heir is almost never at risk. Not this heir."

He was absolutely silent, then.

"That's right," she said softly. "It's just me, Jewel the powermonger. I guess I've gotten what I wanted."

"Jewel --"

"And what *I* want, what I want from *you*, patris of the fence-sitters, is commitment."

"Then ask," he said, and she thought he was paler although it was hard to tell, "when you take the title."

She hadn't thought she'd continue. Would have been smartest not to. But her words were tumbling faster than she could catch 'em; she couldn't shut up. "I won't be here to ask. I'll be in the South, searching among the slaughtered for gods only know what. And you know what? It'll make what we found in Cordufar look pretty. It'll be --"

He caught her. Shook her. She didn't fight.

But she didn't stop. Flow broken, the words took a moment to reassert themselves. "Gods, worse; I can hear it now, and I'm not even on the road. And while I'm not here -- while I'm not here, everyone will come this close to death -- but I can't see who will cross over. I can't see whose bodies are lying in the wake of the Terafin War. And I want -- I don't want -- I can't save --"

"*Jewel*."

"I'm sorry, Devon," she said, the voice breaking, growing quieter and smaller in the wake of the command he had made of her name. "But I don't want her to die. And I can't stop it."

He said, "She knows." It was a question; he so seldom asked them it took her a moment.

She nodded.

"She knows." He stood, his arms on her shoulders, his face perfectly still. And then he said, "I'll do what I can to protect them."

"And if it's not in the best interests of the *Astari*?"

"Let them know. Tell them that when I send word -- or bring it -- they're to follow that word to the letter."

"Devon --"

"Don't say it. Don't ask it." He turned to look out the window she had covered with fabric. Stopped. "We had better win this war," he said softly at last, "and it had better be worth the cost."

#