

CHAPTER ONE

Terafin Manse, Averalaaan Aramarelas, 24th day of Corvil, 427 A.A.

The Terafin was ill.

In the quiet rise of sweeping halls, beneath the two storey height that gave even the most jaded of visitors pause, servants toiled in silence, spreading rumours behind the backs of carefully positioned hands.

In a manse such as House Terafin upon the Isle, those servants were as educated in their way as new merchants -- but they were expected to be great deal more publicly restrained. The head of the Household Staff had been forced to remind them of decorum on more than one occasion, and her perfect demeanour was beginning to fray.

Still, rumour travelled between the boys and girls that ran from the great, open halls to the hidden, secret ones, exchanging the width and breadth of wealth and power for the cramped turns and small windows of narrow stoneways in which servants were meant to move, unseen and unrecognized.

In those stone halls, words were louder, and whispers could easily be heard at a remove. But in those stone halls, none of the ATerafin proper journeyed, save those who had earned their name by literal service to the Manse itself. They were not few in number.

And they were worried.

The boys and the girls, as they were often called, did their best to both avoid that worry and mine it; they were curious, and if that curiosity was a morbid one, it was still theirs.

They were too young to have lived through the last House War. But not too young to need to make a living; not too young to understand that a House War -- if there was one -- would leave many of the powerful and notable dead.

"Merry, why don't you ask Carver if it's true?" One such girl said to another, her hair peeking between the fringes of the starched cap they all wore.

Merry blushed, looking decidedly unsuited to her name. "What makes you think he'd tell me?"

The girl laughed. "He tells you other things," she said, with a broad wink. "And I know he's come down the servants hall at all hours when

you're off duty."

"Well, he shouldn't be here. Not now. He's advisor to a member of the *House Council*." She spoke in a quiet voice that was one part awkward pride and two parts fear. Because he was important now, and important people didn't come here.

"He's always done as he pleases," her companion shot back. "And he's not here for the scenery. Well, not *this* scenery anyway. I don't think being The Terafin herself could stop him; Jewel ATerafin couldn't even do that."

Merry looked down at her hands; they'd balled into fists. She wasn't a plain girl, but she wasn't a raving beauty; she had very few illusions. But like many people who had few, she held dear the ones that she did have. Lila touched her arm gently. "Don't you worry," she said, relenting a little. "He's not much one for fancy ladies."

"I don't want to get him in trouble." It was both true and untrue. A little more of her fear showed, changing the round and generous lines of her face. She pushed strands of dark hair up and into her cap, turning to look over her shoulder. The grand and expensive clocks that needed so much care and cleaning weren't wasted on the servants; time was a matter of instinct, and hers, here, was drawing to a close.

"It's not like he cares about trouble," Lila added, and this time she frowned at the other two girls. "He's going to keep coming here. He's more at home in these halls than he is the grand ones."

"He should," Merry said at last. "He should care."

"Just ask him, 'kay? We're all dying to know!" The youngest of the girls said, dipping her face forward until her nose was almost touching Merry's.

One of the boys slid between them in the narrow hall; Merry shrieked as he pinched her backside. He laughed; they all did.

And if it was nervous laughter, they were giddy enough not to recognize it.

#

Finch ATerafin stared at hands that were shaking with exhaustion; they lay against the kitchen table, pale palms hidden from the sun's light. She had thrown the windows wide to let the sea air in; a faint tang of salt dusted lips that were a little too dry.

Morretz had taken the seat opposite her, and it creaked with the full force of his weight. His sleeves spread across the table like her hands, but they were turned out like flightless wings. Gone was the grace and effortless elegance that marked him; he was exhausted.

No, he was more than exhausted, but he had always been such a private, such a distant, man that his expression denied her any open display of concern.

And concern was there. He looked older.

"When did this happen?" Finch asked at last.

He looked up.

Before he could answer -- if he intended to -- the door slid open with a creak. Ellerson rose in an instant, moving with careful grace to catch the handle before it flew wide.

Teller slipped into the room as Ellerson closed the door. His eyes were dark, and beneath them, pale as bruises, the semi-circles that told of sleep's lack. He glanced at Morretz and then took a seat beside Finch. They huddled at one end of the table as if they were still children.

Ellerson cleared his throat, reminding them tactfully that they were not, in fact, any such thing.

Council members, Finch thought bitterly, did *not* huddle. She drew herself up to her full height.

But she didn't let go of Teller's hand.

"Three days ago," Morretz said quietly. "She was ... difficult to wake. Pale. Her pupils were distended."

"Poison?"

Morretz smiled wearily. "If it were poison," he said quietly, "we would know. She would not now be confined to her quarters. Understand, ATerafin, that she is *not* ill to the rest of the House."

Finch decided, wisely, to let that one pass. She had heard rumours, of course; Carver brought them. But she'd listened carefully to these, because they were shorn of his usual cocky glee. She didn't want to get the serving girls in trouble, and she also didn't want to destroy one of the best sources of information the den had. "What does the rest of the House think?" She asked, buying time.

"They believe she has retreated to her library to better study the intricacies of sea law."

"Sea law?"

Teller heaved a sigh that was altogether too much of a criticism. "Finch, have you been sleeping?"

"Not much," she shot back, and then, looking at his face, added meekly, "but probably more than you have. You look awful."

His annoyance lapsed into a sheepish half-smile. "Sorry. You've been studying the Menoran trade. *I've* been studying the sea trade. We do some business with the South via the Omaran, and there are -- apparently -- whole islands to the oceans in the east that have actual cities on them. We take things from the Empire and they give us ... stuff."

Ellerson cleared his throat again.

"Pearls," Teller said grudgingly. "And herbs of some sort. Birds. Really odd things. Not many of our ships go there; there's apparently some difficulty if you land on the wrong beach."

Finch frowned.

"What kind of difficulty?"

"Losing whole ships without any explanation kind of difficulty." He shrugged. "We're not the only House to send expeditions to the east. We're one of three that have been successful. Where successful means, someone has come back."

Something about the sentence jogged her sluggish memory. "Wasn't there some sort of piracy accusations levelled against the House?"

He nodded grimly. "We're still not sure what that's all about. But we've certainly had our difficulties. If it were up to me --"

Morretz raised a hand; light played quirkily along the closed line of his lips, lending his expression the patina of a smile.

"Uh, right. Sorry, Morretz." He exhaled. "Besides the accusations -- House Fennesar, I think, but it also involved Morriset -- there have been really strange weather patterns fifty miles from the sea wall. Maybe a hundred."

"Odd?"

"Storms, unseasonal storms. One of the Darias merchants said his ship -- and it's one of the great merchant boats that shouldn't even be able to float by all accounts -- was *beached* eight miles from our port."

"Beached?"

He nodded.

"I don't understand."

"No one does. But he claims to have hit a sand bar. A great, wide, sand bar."

"But..."

"Yes," Teller said. "It's in the middle of the ocean. There's nothing there. No reefs, no *nothing*. Well, except for sand."

She frowned.

"And that's another thing: There were no dolphins. No whales. Almost no fish. Just the sand." He shrugged. "It's gone now. It lasted long enough to get Magi there and back, so we know the captain wasn't heavily into his cups."

Morretz nodded. "There is some lively argument in the Council of The Ten in Avantari; it appears that the cost of the Magi's efforts, in this case, is not one that the Council wishes to underwrite."

Finch snorted. "Is there *any* situation in which The Ten won't chip away at Terafin?"

Ellerson raised a white brow.

"I guess not."

"Terafin has long enjoyed the position of first among the Houses," the domicis said stiffly. "And if the Kings are not subject to the whim of ambition and greed, the same cannot be said of those that rise to rule the Ten. Not even The Terafin herself is above using such ruses in order to maintain the prominence of her House."

"Indeed," Morretz added, unruffled by the rough manners of the two youngest members of the House Council. "And it is therefore entirely believable that she be unavailable at this time."

"Has Alowan been to see her?"

A bronze brow rose. Finch flushed. "Sorry," she muttered.

"He has been three times, Finch. It is difficult; to bring him to the library without the notice of the rest of the House requires much subtlety and the use of magic."

Yours, she thought, but didn't say it.

"And he hasn't healed her?"

"Yes," Morretz said quietly. "He *has*. Each of the three days. But he deals, he says, with the physical damage caused."

"And the disease?"

"There is no disease."

Silence again, uncomfortable now. Sharp.

"Ellerson," Finch said, without looking up. "Go and get Daine."

Ellerson bowed. "ATerafin," he said quietly. She listened as he left her. But he left her in Morretz' care, and Morretz was a man she trusted almost as much.

"How can there be *no* disease if she's ill?"

"We don't know."

"But you ruled out poison. And anyway Alowan would know poison."

"Over a hundred of them," Morretz agreed genially. His eyes were black. She wondered at that; they were normally a much paler colour.

Is this it? She thought, and something tight pinched her stomach. *Is this how she dies? Is this how she deserts us?* And she hated herself for the pettiness, the fear, of that thought.

"Is it magic?" She asked quietly.

"You must ask Sigurne Mellifas that question," he said quietly.

"But you --"

"I am trained, and I have some small gift, but magic was not my calling. It was simply my talent." The words were bitter. She heard the 'if only' in them, and she reached out across the table to touch his hand.

He did not withdraw.

Teller said, "There is a plague that has taken hold of some ten of the hundred holdings."

Morretz nodded.

"Is it -- is it like this?"

"We are waiting upon that information now." Calm reply. Finch didn't ask who 'we' was.

Instead she rose, almost blindly. Fear was thickening her tongue. "I'll go," she told him quietly.

Morretz raised a brow. "Go?"

"Out," she said, waving a hand toward the open window. "I have ... duties in The Common."

"You have duties at the Merchant Authority?"

She nodded grimly. "A desk's worth of duties, and about ten pounds worth of red and blue wax. I'll go."

He nodded. "Thank you, ATerafin." He knew, as well as she, that the visit to the Merchant Authority would hide many a destination. All roads in Averalaan, even those that led from the isle, met in The Commons.

#

It took some time to get ready. In the old days -- pre-House Council -- it had taken scant minutes, and most of those hovering in indecision about whether or not to take an umbrella or a hat. But as a member of the House Council, Finch was entitled to an escort. And when Ellerson used the word entitled in that particular tone of voice, it robbed the word of any sense of

volition.

Today, however, it suited her just fine.

"Teller?"

"I'll stay," he told her quietly. "I have a meeting with The Terafin."

She didn't ask him how that had been arranged; she'd left the kitchen before Morretz had, and she could guess.

"Won't that raise a few brows?"

"More than a few. Do you care?"

"Yes," she said, but not convincingly. It was hard to care about a misstep when The Terafin was in trouble. And it was trouble: they both knew it. Morretz would have said nothing, otherwise.

Daine flew into the hall, and stopped, skidding across the carpet. Months in House Terafin had added weight and heft to the line of his shoulder, and it surprised her to realize that he was not a small man.

"It's okay," she said, lifting both hands, palms out, before his face.

"Everyone's okay. No one's hurt."

He drew breath. Rather a lot of them, actually. His eyes were narrowed with accusation; no one liked to worry.

"I'm sorry," she added quietly, "but I want your company."

"My company?" He frowned. His eyes, she thought, had been touched by the same shadows that clung to Teller's. Was no one in this House getting sleep?

"Is the healerie that bad?" She asked him softly.

He forced his muscles to prop up his smile. All in all, it was about as convincing as a merchant's first offering price.

"Never mind," she told him. Not even she could stand to look at something so patently false. "We're going to the Merchant Authority."

"Us?"

"We're taking a guard."

"Three guards," Angel said.

She snorted. "Three, then. I still don't count the two of you as House guards. Do you think that *either* of you could stop the nocturnal visits to the kitchen maids?"

His smile was sharp and pleasant, as genuine a smile as she'd seen all day. She almost forgave him his indiscretion right there.

"I can't," Carver said, peering around. "Merry will have my, uh, head."

His smile was broader than Angel's. His hair had flopped back into its careless position over one eye; only when he was on official House Council watch was it pulled back, and she was certain that the first thing he did when he came off that particular shift was to douse it with water and soap until it became the usual unruly black she so loved.

"If Merry hasn't killed you yet, she's probably not about to start any time soon. Have you ever thought about just *marrying* her?"

His one exposed brow disappeared up his hair line.

"Never mind. Don't even try to answer." She glanced at the fall of sunlight in the only window the den's hall boasted; it was too slender to grant easy access to thieves. As if thieves were something she had to fear, here.

"We waiting for Arran?"

"No," she said quietly.

"Then who?"

"Gregori."

Carver and Angel glanced at each other, and the joviality of their exploits fell away from their faces. Gregori wasn't one of them. He was Devon's gift: a member of the Astari, a man who served the Kings. But he had been given the House name, as Devon had; he balanced on the edge of the same loyalties.

Gregori ATerafin knew how to make an entrance; she often wondered if he listened for the sound of his name before he walked into a room. If he did, he took pains to conceal the eavesdropping.

He bowed to Finch. "ATerafin."

"ATerafin," she replied, struggling for formality. It wasn't as much of a struggle as it had been when he'd first arrived. Proof that a person could get used to *anything*. Even living in the manse. Perhaps especially that. "You are to form part of my escort; I have business at the Merchant Authority that will not wait."

He brought his fist to his chest in a sharp salute, and after a moment, Angel and Carver did the same. She wished they hadn't; the difference between the nature of their gestures was the difference between a puddle and the ocean.

"Ellerson," she said quietly, "we'll return when we've concluded our business."

"Will you take late dinner, then?"

She nodded, twisting the heavy gold ring that bound her finger.

#

Averalan Aramarelas had become her home. She had never expected it to happen, even when she had been given the House name. The buildings and the gates that girded the manse were so fine, so sparse, and so damn *clean*, it had taken her years to get used to their forbidding appearance. They had a character that the cramped tenements of the twenty-fifth holding could never even aspire to; they spoke of money, of power, of the certainty of both.

And the streets were wide enough that it had taken some time to become accustomed to the feeling of exposure they gave her; no four storey shadows here, no garbage, no beggars hiding their crippled limbs -- or worse, their whole ones -- beneath tattered cloth and blankets. No drunks, no would-be bards singing off-key on battered instruments, no merchants on the side roads, avoiding the taxes that came with respectability.

And no thieves, no obvious ones at least, dogging their every step. Most of the thieves of her acquaintance couldn't afford the tolls across the bridges that led to the isle.

She stopped, examining the bridge from the wrong side. Or rather, from the right one.

"ATerafin?" Gregori said sharply.

Started again. "Sorry," she murmured. "Sometimes it's hard to remember where I am."

His dark brow rose, but he did not speak. Which was just as well. Since Devon had introduced them, she had called upon his services for every meeting of import in the House, and those were without number: Elonne invited her for dinner -- early dinner -- at least twice a week; she lunched with Rymark on Selday; she took drinks -- carefully -- with Haerrad; she visited Marrick at whatever time she could.

The last was a bit of a danger. He was charming in a way that appealed to Finch, and she struggled to remember that he was a threat every time she crossed his threshold. Had to struggle; he was so friendly, his speech so common, that she could almost treat him as an equal.

And he wasn't; he was far and above her. He had been born to Tremblant, a noble House that was just shy of the Ten in wealth, and although he had disavowed his kin -- as all members of Terafin must who chose to take her name -- he met with them frequently. The only glance he might have given her, had he met her in any other circumstance, would have

one of justifiably cold suspicion.

She shook her head to clear it.

"Come on," she said quietly.

#

The guards along the bridge were Kings men. They bore the rod and the swords across a grey background, and they numbered four. Although their shifts were long, they somehow managed to avoid the look of boredom she was certain made up the whole of their day. She did not pay them their toll; she lifted the signet ring and they nodded her through, pausing a moment to note the number of her party. Terafin would receive a bill for it sometime, and someone else would have the trouble of accounting for it.

The bridge itself was wide, and like the isle, clean and empty. She paused a moment, steadying herself upon stone rails. The wind blew sea salt across her lips, her cheeks, her hair; she felt its sting and smiled. The sun was high; the day itself was bright. She took a deep, deep breath, held it, and then shook herself.

Gregori A Terafin said nothing; Carver pretended to snore. She really *really* had to do something about him, one of these days.

But not this one; she kicked him as she passed by and he laughed. The guards on the other side of the bridge bowed as she lifted her ring again. One of them smiled broadly; she recognized his face because he'd held his post for years. She'd never asked his name, although she knew the name of his wife and his four children. She would have asked after them on another day, and his smile dimmed slightly as she closed her lips on the words.

But the look that he offered was one of concern, and she shook her head, to put him at ease. Was aware that she hadn't by the darkening of his expression. Yes, she thought, I'm at home here.

And at home, as well, in the streets of the upper holdings -- the ones lucky enough to border the bridge that led to *Averalaan Armarelas*. At home on the stone roads, and at home on the cobbled ones; at home in the wide streets that began, with crowds and older buildings, to narrow as they moved towards The Common at the heart of the old city.

She paused a moment beneath the great trees that could be seen at almost any distance -- by land or sea; they were the pride of Averalaan, and if their roots caused difficulty to those who lived near them, the complaints they made were couched in grudging respect. Even Gregori looked up toward their heights and offered a rare smile.

It was the only time he took his eyes off her back.

Wagons and horses now joined them in the causeways; the languages of the old city grew louder and more varied. People gestured over the din that had grown with every step taken, and some of those gestures would have curdled Ellerson's blood. They made her smile.

If she felt at home on the isle, she could take comfort from the fact that she felt at home on the mainland; she was part of both worlds.

But she could not fail to notice the respect given her clothing -- it was her clothing; neither height nor presence demanded much -- and her guards. *Terafin*, she heard, to either side. She looked ahead.

#

She led them through the crowded streets of The Common until they came at last to the imposing stone structure known as the Merchant Authority, and when she placed foot upon the first of its broad steps she turned to glance at Gregori. His smile was thin, devoid of warmth. But he nodded.

"Yes," he told her quietly. "We've been followed."

"How many?"

"Two."

"Whose?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Haerrad's," he said, after a pause. "Or Rymark's."

She cursed, her smile sweet and demure around the shocking words. His brows did not so much as rise.

"Can we lose them here?"

"There are many ways into the Merchant Authority at this time of day," he replied. "If they choose to speak with the guards who watch those routes, they'll know that you've left by an alternate one; your position, sadly, has been noted."

"Don't worry about it," she said, with unfeigned confidence. As reward, she saw his open curiosity. She shouldn't have been pleased, but she was; Gregori, like Devon, was almost unflappable. Still, it had been a lot easier to lose pursuit in the old days. Neither she nor her pursuers were forced to be subtle, and dignity did have its cost.

She took the steps one at a time; Angel and Carver flanked her, and Daine preceded her. A man met them at the door, as he always did; Gregori's words were true.

"ATerafin!" He said, in his oily voice.

"Jelnick," she replied, in her sweetest.

"You've been absent from the floor for far too long." His laugh was loud and annoying. He ran a hand through hair that was flat with scented oil, and then extended it; she tried not to look at it as if it were a dead fish.

Ellerson would have been proud.

Especially as she prevented herself from flinching when he lifted her hands to lip and kissed it. Southern customs, she thought, in annoyance. She waited only as long as politeness decreed before she retrieved her hand.

"Forgive me, Lady," he said, grin broadening over perfect teeth -- the only part of him that *was* perfect. "We so seldom have people of note who are not fat, fifty and dour."

She could not understand how he could speak so loudly and still have a job. But her smile was now firmly fixed on her face. He offered to escort her, and Gregori at last chose to rescue her, interposing his slender body between hers and the merchant warden's girth.

Beyond his bulk, the Merchant Authority crawled with people, each going about their business. Some were voluble; their raised voices could be heard over the gaudy din and jangle of money and jewellery. She was familiar with only two of the languages, but as was so often the case, she had learned all the curse words first; she grimaced, shook her head, and began to move, drifting between the shoulders of men and women who were inches taller.

They made their way across the floor, and her hands dropped to her purse defensively. Not that there were thieves here, but crowds of this nature always made her nervous. Angel and Carver were no better; Daine, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice.

So it was Daine who led them to the offices that were permanently occupied by Terafin representatives. They were not large, these offices; space in the Merchant Authority was costly, and permanent space afforded to the few who could comfortably hold it.

And among those, of course, was House Terafin.

Finch was grateful when she saw the woman seated behind the broad desk in the outer room; Lucille ATerafin. This place was much like a gatehouse, Finch thought, although it looked nothing like one. The carpets on the floor were a dark, deep burgundy, and the walls were of rose and gold; there were paintings in gilded frames which bore signatures that she almost recognized, and given her ignorance of fine art, this said much; there were chairs that were wide and inviting, tables that habitually bore more silver

than she could comfortably carry; crystal vases and crystal goblets beside stoppered decanters that were clearly not meant for decoration. It was a stately, perfect room.

But only those with legitimate business -- and Lucille could be very, *very* picky about what was considered legitimate -- were allowed to bypass this room. Many were the members of House Terafin who were made to cool their heels at her pleasure -- or displeasure -- because many, many of said members came from the Terafin Manse.

And having quarters in the Terafin Manse was considered by many members of the House -- all of them born to the patriciate -- to be the thing that separated them from those who merely had the *name*. Terafin owned many Houses throughout the Empire, after all, and only men and women of *value* were given rooms upon the Isle.

Lucille could not stand *attitude*, as she called it. Funny, that she could then exude so much of it.

Lucille's snort made it clear she'd seen Angel and Carver. She rose at once, and circumnavigated the imposing desk behind which other doors -- all closed -- lay. She was not a small woman; Finch wondered if she had *ever* been small. And to be honest, she would not have been out of place behind the bar of a particularly boisterous tavern, club in hand a punctuation to her loud words.

But she wasn't in a bar; she was in the Merchant Authority, and if she was in theory subordinate to the men and women who laboured over contracts and royal commissions behind her broad back, it was a very tenuous theory.

"Finch!" She wrapped her arms around the younger woman, and then pushed her away and frowned. "You've *lost weight*," she said, as if the losing were an almost unspeakable crime.

"It's the paperwork," Finch said meekly.

"Paperwork?" Lucille's eyes were a deep blue green, an astonishing colour. "We've got all kinds of useless Terafin members here -- why don't you leave it to them?"

"Jay's not here to check their work," she offered.

Lucille's eyes narrowed. "And I'm not watchful enough, is that it?"

Lucille's bark, as the members of the Terafin merchant arm were wont to say, was worse than her bite. But Finch had seen her bite, and she wasn't so certain.

"I brought a few documents that have to be looked at and drawn up properly," she said, making her voice a shade meeker -- which shouldn't

have been possible.

"Well, let me see them." Taking her seat again, Lucille pointed at the surface of her gleaming desk.

I'm too good at following orders, Finch thought guiltily. She heaved the large, flat bag up onto the desk and opened its leather ties.

"You two!" Lucille barked.

Carver and Angel flinched.

"You're big, strong men -- what were you thinking, making her carry that all this way? It weighs as much as she does!"

"Aw, Lucille," Carver muttered. "We're supposed to be on duty."

"And there are now so many assassins in the streets that you had to hold on to those swords the entire way?" She snorted. "It's not as if you know how to *use* them."

Carver wisely chose to offer no other defense, and Angel had actually moved to stand *behind* him. Finch was suddenly very glad they'd left Ellerson behind.

Lucille began to look through the unsigned, unsealed contracts. She frowned, and the frown brought out the map of lines that made her face so interesting. Smiles, Finch thought, and the fiercest of frowns, resided in the crinkles around her eyes and mouth, and one never knew which you would find if you followed the creases to their natural end.

A grey brow -- iron grey, not the delicate white of real age -- rose. She set the papers down. "Is that Daine I see with you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Daine said, striving for the same meekness of tone that seemed to afford Finch so much protection.

"Don't mumble, boy. At your age, it's a discourtesy to the elderly."

No one pointed out that Lucille was not, and would *never* be, elderly.

"You've come all the way to the Authority for *these*?" Her voice had dropped; she wasn't exactly whispering, but the quiet in her tone was as close as a booming voice could get.

Finch swallowed. "Not exactly," she said at last.

"Are those jumped up nobles on the House Council giving you trouble, girl?"

"Not more than usual."

The frown deepened. Not for the first time, Finch was grateful for her size.

"I'm thinking that young Daine isn't here to keep you company."

Daine looked confused.

"You'll want to leave by the back, yes?"

Finch, on the other hand, looked grateful. She was.

"You'll want to leave by an exit the ATerafin don't normally use, either."

"Lucille, I don't want to be trouble --"

"Nonsense. You do want to be trouble, just not to me." Her grin was wide. "You leave these complicated things with me and I'll see that those layabouts do something with them. Cormaris knows they're slow as slugs; they'll take hours. Or should that be days?"

"Hours," Finch said promptly.

"Hours, then. Come with me, Finch." She paused. "And you two lackwits, you follow as well."

Angel rolled his eyes, but only when her back was entirely turned.

Unfortunately for him, she turned again, spinning so quickly it was hard to believe she was a big woman. She casually smacked him upside the head; it was loud, but it wasn't -- Finch hoped -- too painful. "I've had sons," she said grimly. "Don't you give me attitude."

"Yes ma'am."

She snorted, and then paused. "And who's this?"

Gregori ATerafin brought his hand to his chest.

"New here, I see," she said, giving him the thorough once over. "You must be a real House Guard."

"Lucille!" Carver squeaked.

"I have that honour, ATerafin," Gregori replied.

"Hmmp. Well, see that you mind her," Lucille said, nodding to Finch. "And see that no harm befalls her. I promised young Jay I'd keep an eye out. And I don't like to break my promises."

"ATerafin."

She snorted again. "You should have brought Arran," she told Finch.

"He's kind of busy at home."

"Well, maybe he is; you know best dear. Come on; I'll see you out."

She did. She also told the two guards at the base of the set of small stairs that she'd box their ears -- and worse -- if they wagged their tongues at the wrong people, and by that she clearly meant *anyone but me*. They smiled genially, used to her threats, and stepped aside to allow Finch and her companions to pass.

"They'll be coming back this way, mind," Lucille said. "In a few hours."

"But ma'am," one of the hapless guards said, "We'll be off duty by then."

"Or not," the other guard said, before she could speak.

#

Although it was hard to think of the Merchant Authority as a quiet place, the noise of the Commons assaulted the ears the moment the doors slid shut at their backs. They were upwind of the food stalls, and the pleasant scent of baking bread mingled with the far less pleasant reek of dead fish.

Neither seemed to bother the thousands of people that walked these roads.

"You know," Finch said, as they exited into the high market streets, "I have no idea why Lucille isn't living at The House."

Angel and Carver exchanged a broad glance. It was Angel who answered. "Because almost anyone *else* who lived there would be dead?"

Her laughter was brief and high, a bird-cry. Her name. "She's not so bad," she said, when it had trailed off. "And she likes *us*."

"Speak for yourself," Angel replied, rubbing the side of his head.

Gregori offered them all a rare smile. "You have heard the Northern saying, haven't you?"

"Which one? I've probably heard a dozen, and eleven of them can't be repeated in company."

The smile deepened. "Something about two heads and one crown. That woman rules her own domain; I can't imagine that she wouldn't take charge and clean up if she were allowed to live at the manse."

Finch wrinkled her nose, trying to imagine Lucille and The Terafin in the same room. Her imagination, usually quite vivid, was in no way up to the task. "You're probably right."

"Besides which, she seems a formidable ally where she is." The smile had gone from his face; what was left was an expression that was at once thoughtful and cautious. His usual expression.

Finch nodded. Her hair was flat with the humidity, but the day was otherwise cool. The storms that haunted the ocean failed to hover above the city itself. "Daine?"

He nodded, turning to glance over his shoulder as if looking for sight of Lucille.

"She's a dragon," Carver told him. "She doesn't leave her den unless some moron with a sword tries to make her."

"That happens often?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. She probably eats the corpses."

"Carver!"

He grinned and side-stepped Finch's half-hearted slap.

Angel turned right. "Houses of Healing?"

She nodded quietly. "We need to speak with Levec."

Daine's eyes widened as understanding *finally* dawned. "You don't just walk in and speak with Levec," he began. But something in her expression dampened the rest of the energetic warning.

"He'll see us," she said quietly.

"I hope so. We're going to feel like idiots if he has us thrown out."

She nodded in the direction of Carver and Angel. "We probably look like idiots anyway," she said cheerfully.

Was surprised to find that she *was* cheerful.

#

The city walls rose and fell to either side, fronted by gardens that could be glimpsed through the lattice of fancy gates. Men with horses rode by; carriages clattered against the dips in cobbled stone. Some stretch of Averalan had been given to flat, smooth road -- but those roads led to the Isle, and not to the House of Healing.

She knew them all, now. Knew them better than she knew the twenty-fifth holding. Had the circumstances been different, she would have found the walk peaceful.

But her mission was oppressive, and the further away she moved from the Merchant Authority, the more oppressive it became. She had spoken with confidence, but confidence was like the tide. It ebbed as time passed.

Gregori informed her that they were no longer being followed and she nodded quietly. Just as Jay might've, had she been here.

Better not to think about that. Better not to think that Jay would have told them what was making The Terafin ill. Jay had made her choice, and from the sound of her voice the last time they'd heard it, it hadn't been much of a choice.

Then again, neither was sitting on the House Council.

She twisted the ring on her hand, forcing the face of the heavy gold crest up toward the light. Most days, she kept it turned palm-in; she disliked the attention it garnered. Old habits, that; attention was something to be avoided at all costs.

But not today.

Not today, please *Kalliaris*. She thought she'd never needed the goddess of luck to smile more than she had today.

The gates of the House of Healing were better guarded than the storefronts of the most expensive of the Jewellers in the High Market. The House itself was not fenced in; it was *walled*. From the height of the wall, metal tines extruded, ending in barbed points. Someone had taken the time to polish them; they shone in sunlight as if they were golden.

But Levec would have died before he wasted money on gold.

Stopping at the gates, she held out her hand; her arm shook slightly, as if the weight of the ring was too great. But shaking or no, the Terafin House Council crest was recognized. The guards were no fools.

"Please wait in the gatehouse," the man in charge said. He barked other orders, and she noted them idly, turning to run her fingers along the carved words that adorned the gatehouse walls. They were not in a language she could read, although she recognized the stylized curves and runes: Old Weston.

Old Weston was better than Weston; if Levec had had any hand in the words, they would have been succinct and to the point: *Go away*.

As if Daine could hear her, he smiled. "He's really not that bad," he told her quietly.

"I know." She did. Sort of. But Levec's single thick brow seemed etched across his face like thundercloud in a storm without end; his voice was harsher than Lucille's at her worst, and his hands, thick and blunt, seemed as likely to strangle a man as to offer him succour.

Gregori ATerafin waited with the perfect ease and grace that made most people look clumsy and incompetent. She envied him his composure, although she wasn't certain she wanted to live the life that led to it. He had been with the House -- and with the den -- for weeks now, and she had no better idea of who he was, what he wanted, what he feared, than she had the first night she'd met him.

Devon hadn't been helpful either. *Ask, if you must*, he said, *but accept the answer he gives*.

Which, of course, was none at all.

Still, she'd come to understand the nuance of his external expression, the subtle shift in his posture, the almost unnoticeable narrowing -- or widening -- of eye.

And because of this, she turned as a man in robes, flanked on either side by two guards, approached the gatehouse.

She didn't recognize him, although she thought he was a foreigner; his skin was a shade too dark, his eyes a shade too wide, for Averalaan.

But Daine, apparently, did. "Andaru!"

The older man smiled. "Daine." He turned to the guards at his right. "Why wasn't I informed that Healer Daine was present?"

The guard brought his hand smartly to his chest and bowed his head, the universal apology that the dignified offered.

"Don't be too hard on them, Master Andaru," Daine said, apologetically.

"Master, is it?"

"I'm not wearing the medallion."

Grey brows drew down in a frown over a straight, narrow nose. "And why would that be?"

"It's my choice," he said, a little too quickly.

Great, Finch thought, as the iron gaze shifted and landed on her face. She squared her slender shoulders and lifted her chin. "Alowan thought it best." Her voice came out too thin, but at least she didn't stammer.

They were, or appeared to be, the right words; the frown eased slightly. "Politics and healers make poor bedfellows," he told Daine. "But this is not the place for a lecture. Follow me."

#

He led them to the House of Healing, but he did not choose to dismiss the guards. Angel and Carver struggled with dignity, and for the most part -- given who they were -- they won. Gregori, of course, fell into step with the House's guard; were it not for his crest, he might have been one of them.

It was a way of hiding, Finch realized. Belonging was a way of hiding. Master Andaru failed to notice. Or appeared to fail; she wasn't certain. She wondered if she should have sent Teller instead. He was far, far better at reading people than she had ever been, and while she'd improved over the years, so had he.

The guards left them at the doors.

Master Andaru turned to Carver, Angel and Gregori. "If you will not surrender your weapons," he said, "you will be required to remain here."

"Finch?"

"Leave them."

Angel was already unbuckling his sword. He had no intention of being left behind. Carver joined him. Gregori did likewise, divesting himself of the daggers he carried. After an awkward pause, Carver and Angel did the

same.

Finch surrendered hers with less reluctance; it had never been her job to fight. Daine carried no weapon.

"I should warn you, Daine, that Master Levec is not in the best of moods."

So what else is new? Finch was wise enough not to say the words out loud.

"The plague?" Daine asked.

"The same. Have you heard of it in Terafin?"

Daine nodded quietly. He started to speak, thought better of it, and fell silent.

This time, Healer Andaru did notice. "So," he said softly.

Daine reddened. He seemed to have shed years in the archway that defined inside from outside.

"Best of moods or no, he'll see you."

Daine nodded.

The older healer turned to leave, and then turned back. His expression was unreadable. "Do you understand Alowan's choice, Daine?"

"Better than I did when I was a student here," was the quiet reply.

"And when you see the cost, will you remember what you understand now?"

"I ... don't know. But I can't come back."

"No," the old man said quietly.

"I miss the House."

"The House misses you," Master Andaru replied gently. "And we will never cease to regret our failure. We are better protected now than we have been since the founding," he added. "Too little, for your sake."

"I'm not the only healer to be lost. I'm one of the few to be recovered." Daine straightened his shoulders. "Master Andaru, I'm not unhappy."

"They treat you well?"

"They hardly notice me at all," was the sheepish reply. He glanced at Finch. "But yes, the people who matter treat me well."

"They had better."

#

Finch held her breath as the doors to Levec's offices opened wide.

They were not like the Terafin offices. Instead of fine desks, finer chairs, tables that looked like they were made by the makerborn at the dawn of time, it boasted beds, long, narrow cots, and cupboards that would do a

kitchen proud on every conceivable inch of wall.

"A Terafin," Master Levec said, and she jumped.

A man that large should *not* be able to move so damn silently.

"Master Levec."

"Have you come to visit Adam?"

Her smile was rueful. "Yes," she told him, and then, when his frown deepened -- and it never left his face -- she added, "but not just for that."

"Did someone call me?"

Adam appeared from behind Levec's broad chest. He was almost spider thin; he seemed to have grown three inches, and his hair was a shocking disarray of loose curls. But his eyes were the same: haunted. Isolated.

She smiled at him. Up at him; he seemed so young that she often glanced down instinctively. "Adam," she said in Torra. "Healer Levec has said that you're almost ready to -- to leave the Houses of Healing."

The boy's eyes brightened; his smile was unfettered by suspicion, by wariness, by any of the things that had hemmed the den in when they were his age. "He says I'm to live with you."

She nodded, smiling in spite of herself. "We're not as grouchy as he is, that's for sure."

"May I remind you," the healer said, in rough and accented Torra, "that speaking about me as if I were not present is considered unwise, not to mention rude?"

"Yes sir," she said.

He rolled his eyes. But he grabbed Adam's shoulder and dragged him round. Finch noticed that he did not immediately release him. Adam had come that far.

Far enough that he didn't reach out to grab her hand or her arm. He wanted to; she could see that. But he held his ground.

Master Levec had claimed that this boy was powerful. Finch wondered what the word meant; she had had her fill of the powerful, and none of them had the life, the bright joy and the open vulnerability, of Adam.

"You didn't come to see me," he said, and his chest seemed to shrink by the three inches he'd grown. The word crestfallen did not do him justice.

"I didn't come *just* to see you." She reached out and offered him her hand; he took it. His grip was still tight enough to turn her fingers white. "But I knew you'd be here."

He nodded, content. She drew him almost unconsciously to her side,

away from Levec's broad shadow. Straightening her shoulders, she slid her free arm around him in a ferocious hug. When it relaxed, he still held her waist.

She didn't know why, but Adam seemed most comfortable around women.

"Master Levec." She slid into Weston. "I don't know if you've heard from Alowan --"

"I've heard," he replied grimly. He turned and shoved his hands into a clear, silver pail; they came up glistening with water. A towel absorbed it, and became tangled in his knuckles; he held it as he spoke. "You can speak freely here, ATerafin. In this room, and in the tower room, if you're ever invited back."

This was the Levec she was accustomed to.

"The Terafin," she said quietly.

"Yes. Alowan has described the symptoms as clearly as possible. He has not travelled to the Houses of Healing; I believe he is afraid to leave the Healerie."

"Not the Healerie," Finch replied quietly. "The House."

"To Alowan, they are one and the same."

"They were."

"Ah. And now?"

She shook her head. "Alowan wrote to you?"

"No."

"But you said --"

"I said he told me what he believed I needed to hear. And you, youngling, know better than to ask *me* how. I will not be questioned by children in the Healerie."

"Yes, Healer Levec."

He set the thoroughly wet towel down on the counterpane of the nearest bed, and followed it with his bulk. Even seated, he was a giant. She wondered idly what the beds were made of; they seemed far too slight to bear his weight.

"My Torra is ... not good," Levec said, after a long and thoughtful pause. "And for reasons that should be clear to a young woman in your position," he glared at the House ring before he continued, "you will understand why I have not sought the services of a native translator."

She nodded again, willing to wait until he was ready to speak his mind; it

usually didn't take all that long.

"Adam," he said. "Tell her."

"But you said --" Unlike Levec's Torra, Adam's Weston had improved considerably.

"I know what I said, boy. Tell her anyway."

It was clear to Finch that Adam's caution had nothing to do with her and everything to do with Levec. But he didn't smile when he turned to her; his face was awkward. Pale.

"In the hundred holdings," he said dropping his voice and sliding into his exotic Torra, "many have fallen ill." His glance flickered off Levec's impassive face. "I went there with Master Levec. And Healer Dantallon went as well."

Aie. Dantallon was one of the royal healers. He never left *Avantari*, the palace of Kings. Almost never.

"Just the three of you?"

"And about a hundred cerdan."

Her lips twitched.

"Also, the Princess Royale."

She closed her eyes. "Levec," she said quietly.

"Yes." He replied. Just that. "But it is subtle, this illness."

The way he said the last word made her hair rise. Gregori ATerafin came to stand beside her. Levec's frown grew edges. "Gregori," he said coolly.

"Master Levec."

"You two know each other?" Finch asked, curiosity bright and shining.

"In passing," Levec answered. "He's your guard, now, is he?"

She nodded quietly. "He's really observant."

"He's that." He clearly had more to say -- and just as clearly, wouldn't. But he didn't much care for Gregori ATerafin.

Finch glanced around the room to avoid the sudden chill. "Angel," she said, severely, "don't touch anything."

Angel shrugged, sliding his hands back to his side. Old habits.

Levec looked like he was about to say something worse, and Finch lifted a small hand. "It's not a normal illness."

"Very good, ATerafin. No, it's not."

"Not poison, not the water?"

"Not, as you must suspect, poison."

"Then... what is it?"

Again, Levec's glance turned to Adam. Adam shifted restlessly on his feet. After a moment, he said, "I think it has something to do with dreaming."

"Dreaming?"

"Adam," Levec said.

He cringed. "I don't know *why*," he told her softly. "But some of the ... ill ... are dreaming."

"They're asleep?"

"They're unconscious. They can swallow. They can't eat." He swallowed, his throat bobbing. "I --" Again his glance went to Levec. Levec nodded.

"I can see some of what they see."

"When you heal them, you mean?" She had heard of this.

He looked pained. "We *can't* heal them. Not really. We can ... fix the things that have gone wrong because they can't eat. But we can't... heal them."

"*Adam.*"

"I ... can wake them up."

Levec snorted. "What he won't say, ATerafin, is that he is the *only* one who can wake them."

"They don't stay awake," Adam added, defensive. "But I can wake them, for a little while." His frown deepened. "My mother --" he began, and then after a moment, corrected himself. "My sister might understand what's happening."

"Your sister?"

"She's -- the Matriarch of Arkosa."

This was supposed to mean something to Finch, but it was clear to Adam that it didn't; his brows bunched together in frustration.

"There are four ... families ... in the Dominion."

"There are a lot more than four."

"There are four that wander," Levec continued. "And Adam's sister appears to be the leader of one of them."

"And she would know something about this?"

Adam shrugged again. "If anyone would, a Matriarch would. Maybe Yollana. Of Havalla," he added, hopefully.

"I'm sorry," she told him, "but I don't recognize that one either." She

would have squeezed his hand, but her fingers had gone numb. "Levec, do you think this is the same thing that the Terafin suffers from?"

"Almost certainly," he replied grimly.

"But The Terafin isn't sleeping."

"No, ATerafin," Levec said quietly. "Not yet."

Not yet. "This is magic, isn't it?"

"We don't know." Levec's heavy hands slid behind his broad back. His eyes narrowed. "The Magi have been summoned, and as they can, they assist us. If magic is at work here, it is not a magic that most understand."

Jay, Finch thought. "Do any?"

"Some branches of magic are old," was his careful reply.

"And some," Gregori added, "are forbidden."

The day, she thought, couldn't be any darker. "You think this is forbidden magery?"

"We are not certain *what* it is, ATerafin. If we were, we would be more open. We don't need witch hunts; a plague brings its own demons in its wake."

She didn't like the use of the word demon. At all.

"Do they have anything in common?"

"The victims? Not that we can trace. And we have been working these three weeks on *nothing* else."

She asked the only question left to ask. "How many have died?"

"A dozen. But if we cannot work our way through this puzzle, many more will follow."

"No one has recovered?"

"None. But the people that Adam have treated seem to gain strength for a few days before they lapse into sleep again."

She turned her gaze upon the young healer. "You need him here," she said, testing the words.

"Yes. But not so much as you will, if our understanding of the illness is any indication. He is to go with you, ATerafin, when you leave."

"But --"

"The Kings may second him. We have made it clear that he owes service to the Healing Houses, and not to the Crowns, but our relationship with the Crowns has always been one of cooperation in the case of epidemics."

She swallowed; her throat was dry. "Adam?"

"I'd like to go with you," he said.

"Good."

But Gregori ATerafin seemed far less pleased, although he did not say a word.

#