



Prologue

*27th of Corvil, 427 A.A.
The Common, Averalan Aramarelas*

HANNERLE LOVED WINDOWS. She loved, especially, the long, low bay or bow windows that were so expensive to have built. She didn't like full panes of flat glass; those, she had said, with decided lines etched a moment in both corners of her lips, reminded her too much of the storefront. It wasn't that she disliked the store; the store had been built, and its custom grown, by the dint of her organization and will. If Haval was, in his own modest opinion, the genius who created the dresses by which they earned a comfortable living, Hannerle was the foundation that allowed that genius to flourish. The store had been her idea. But the windows that girded either side of the doors were meant to display and to sell; to offer a pleasing and enticing view to the men and women on the outside.

So it was in their bedroom that the most glorious of the windows above the shop resided. The bed, which sat, headboard to the wall, in the center of the room, couldn't be seen from the street; nor could someone sitting or lying in that bed see those streets. They could see the sun; they could see the tops of buildings that sat opposite them; they could see the azure of sky on a clear day.

Hannerle was not a woman who understood what the word "relaxation" meant. She was up at dawn, in the kitchen or the store tidying, cleaning, cooking—and, if Haval were being honest, complaining; complaints

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were, in the opinion of his wife, the luxury one earned by doing the work. Although she professed to love windows and light, she seldom took the time to look at either.

Her husband entered the bedroom and walked directly to the windows. He paused to examine the curtains; they were older now, their color faded. They would have to be replaced. He opened them with fastidious care, anchored them by the tassels that hung concealed by their fall for just this purpose, and let the light in. The sky was an astonishing shade of blue, which wasn't unusual at this time of year. The air was cool, but the glass shut it out. Unlike his wife, who disliked the view of the streets, Haval looked down; the streets at this time of day were full. People in various shades of color and in differing cuts of cloth walked past the window heading toward their destinations, heads often bent slightly into the wind. They carried baskets or bags, most of which had yet to be filled judging by the easy way they moved.

He expected no custom today. A sign now hung in both windows and across the closed—and locked—doors of the store apologizing for his unexpected and unannounced absence. He bowed his head a moment. He had no need to school his expression; his reflection made clear that he had none. His face was a mask. His posture was neither slumped nor upright as he turned, at last, toward the room's other occupant: Hannerle.

She lay beneath sheet, blanket, and comforter; the counterpane had been neatly folded and lay across only her feet above the footboard. She slept.

She had done nothing but sleep for three days now. He had tried, several times, to rouse her; nothing worked: No sound, no movement, no amount of shaking or pleading. She could, with effort, be moved into an upright position, and she swallowed liquid if it was dribbled slowly and evenly into her mouth. But she did not wake.

Doctors—for Haval had money—had come and gone in slowly dwindling succession. Healers, however, had not; the healer-born were besieged at the moment and the Houses of Healing closed to all who did not come bearing a writ from *Avantari*, the Kings' Palace. It mattered little; the doctors had been clear. His beloved, curmudgeonly wife was suffering from the sleeping sickness. They had no official name for it, yet, not that the naming of things much concerned Haval; some in the streets called it the dreaming plague.

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“Is it contagious?” Haval had asked, in a very subdued voice appropriate to a man of his age.

“Clearly,” the oldest of the doctors had said. “But we aren’t certain how. Proximity to the affected doesn’t seem to matter.”

“And I am, therefore, unlikely to catch it from her?”

“You’re as likely to catch it from someone in the Port Authority,” was the crisp reply. “But it’s best, if you’ve sons or daughters, to have them check in on you every day, or at least every other day. You’re caring for your wife; if you fall prey to the illness . . .”

“Understood.” Haval had no sons or daughters. “When will she wake?” he had asked, although he knew the answer.

The doctor hesitated for just a moment, and then said, “I’m sorry. I don’t know if she will.”

“Have any of the others?” He knew the answer to this question as well. He wasn’t even certain why he’d asked.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor repeated.

Haval thanked him for his time. And paid him.

He took a seat beside the bed in silence, his wife’s right hand caught between both of his. Hers was limp, but warm; she slept. What he now knew about the disease was fragmented but reliably accurate. It had started perhaps three weeks ago, near the beginning of Corvil; it had gone undetected for the first week because its spread was not concentrated in one area, and because it was only in the second week that older children and otherwise healthy adults in their prime had been affected by it. The victims were spread across the economic spectrum; they were also spread across gender. There were *no* reliable symptoms to indicate that one had caught the disease. There was no accompanying fever, no rash, no coughing—nothing. Prior physical exhaustion wasn’t a requirement either.

No, people simply went to sleep . . . and failed to wake.

Just as Hannerle had failed to wake.

“Hannerle,” he said quietly, bending his head toward not her ears, but that hand, “I’ve heard word.” He wasn’t particular proud of this fact, because the information he imparted had required no finesse, no investigation, none of the subtle contacts which were his quiet pride to uncover. No, this word was impossible for any but the sleeping or the dead to miss;

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it had spread through the Common and the High Market like fire in the dry season.

“The Terafin is dead.”

It was not the first time Hannerle had been ill, of course. It *was* the first time she had been both ill and utterly silent. Like any man whose wife’s chief luxury was the volume of her complaints, he would have sworn that silent was the preferred state. But over the years, sharp and clever humor had worked its roots deep into the heart of her complaints; they amused him; the silence was bitter and cold.

He fed her water slowly and with painstaking care; he checked the fire burning in her grate; he changed her clothing. Although it was Hannerle’s job to fill the silence with her frequent chatter, he spoke. He couldn’t be certain that she wasn’t listening, that some part of her wasn’t somehow awake and trapped inside a body that couldn’t respond. He kept her company, and although he could have done so while he worked, she had once made him promise to leave his work behind when he crossed the threshold of what was nominally “their” bedroom. He left his work behind.

But in the late afternoon he rose, because some idiot had taken to ringing the bell on what was clearly the wrong side of locked doors which prominently told all visitors that he was *not here*. He was not, therefore, in the best of moods when he made his way down the stairs and into the storefront, where his cloth, his threads, and his various beads lay strewn across the counter. On the other hand, he was perfectly capable of feigning almost obsequious delight on the very slim chance that such delight be, by the social status of the idiot, required. The fact that said idiot clearly failed to heed what was written did not, in fact, imply that they couldn’t read; Haval often found the opposite to be true. But there was nothing that Haval was incapable of feigning, except perhaps youth.

He understood better why his signs had been ignored when he saw who waited at the door: a young man—young enough that the use of the word man dignified his age—who wore the livery of the Merchant Authority. He carried a letter with the air of the determined and faintly terrified, and it was clear—by his persistent worrying of the bell pull—that he was tasked with making *certain* that this official document was delivered to its intended victim. Only tax collectors and the very earnest were capable of this level of persistence.

He therefore opened the locked door.

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The young man bowed. He didn't introduce himself, but to be fair, Haval didn't ask; messengers served a function that required different manners.

"You are the proprietor of the store?" the visitor asked, his voice high enough that Haval privately downgraded "young man" to simply "young."

"I am," Haval replied, holding out one hand.

"This is for you," the young man said, although it was already obvious.

Haval glanced at the back of the envelope and frowned. "I'm not expecting any correspondence," he began. The slight rounding of the young man's eyes made him reconsider. "Are you to wait for a response?"

"No, sir. But I am to get a signature of receipt."

"I . . . see. Very well, come in. May I ask who sent the letter?"

The boy nodded vigorously. His answer explained his anxiety. "Lucille ATerafin."

In spite of the solemn silence of the preceding three days, the two words, huddled side by side and spoken in such a fashion, piqued Haval's curiosity. He signed a statement acknowledging receipt of the letter and let the boy hurry—at a brisk jog—away from his store before he returned to Hannerle's room. He only broke the seal once he was ensconced in the chair closest to the bedside.

At one time in his life, such a letter would have constituted the work he had faithfully promised to keep out of the bedroom, but it had been decades since that had been the case. He slid a letter opener into the top upper corner of the closed envelope and cut it cleanly. Then he removed the single piece of paper that had been folded and deposited within. He read it three times before he refolded it and placed it on the bedside table. His wife would have recognized the way he then sat, for fifteen minutes, in silence. She wouldn't have approved.

"Hannerle," he finally said. "I appear to have been granted an appointment with Jarven ATerafin."

Hannerle was, of course, silent. This silence, however, was not glacial.

"No, no, it's not like that. I realize I *am* getting on in years, but I honestly cannot recall *requesting* such an appointment. Even had I, I assure you I would have politely rescinded that request in the wake of the current Terafin tragedy."

He paused. Memory, and a deep understanding of his wife's temper, allowed him to silently fill in her part of the conversation.

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“The handwriting is definitely Lucille’s. I’d recognize it anywhere.” He would, on the other hand, recognize hundreds of handwriting samples with ease. “I would hazard a guess that this is entirely Lucille’s doing, and while it is safe enough—for a value of safe which I’m aware isn’t yours—to annoy Jarven, annoying Lucille is trickier.” He rose and headed toward the closets that girded the walls.

“The appointment, however, is for less than an hour from now.”

Haval disliked tardiness. He also disliked being rushed. Curiosity, however, had reared its head, and he fed it because it *could* be fed. He welcomed the distraction. He had chosen to dress as a merchant of middling means; a merchant of humble means was not appropriate for the Terafin offices within the Merchant Authority, and today he had no wish to stand out.

Two guards stood on either side of the double doors that led to the offices; they wore Terafin livery, which was to be expected. He handed them the letter that Lucille had penned, and they examined it in silence before nodding curtly and allowing him to pass.

Lucille waited on the other side of the doors, sitting behind her bastion of a desk. Paperwork was placed in deplorable piles across its visible surface, but she lifted her head the minute he stepped across the threshold and the doors closed at his back.

“Can I help you?” she asked, in exactly the tone of voice one would use if one wished to imply the opposite.

Haval was instantly on his guard. “Yes,” he replied, the single word clipped and cool. “I have an appointment to speak with Jarven ATerafin.”

She raised one brow. It was astonishingly similar to the movement of Hannerle’s brow, and were he another man, he would have lost heart. But he understood that she meant him to play a role here, and if Lucille was temperamental and extraordinarily territorial, she did little without cause.

“Haval Arwood.” He had lifted his chin, lowering his shoulders as he did; he stood at his full height and looked down at her.

She pulled a book that had, until that moment, been standing on end on her desk. She even read it with care, and took a pen to mark something beside what was presumably his name. “Please take a seat,” she said, rising. “I’ll inform Jarven that you’ve arrived.”

Curious, Haval thought, as he took one of a handful of chairs positioned

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in front of the desk—and therefore in front of the watchful eyes of the resident dragon. Curious, indeed.

She took five minutes to return, during which time Haval sat. He observed the office itself; it was not, as one would expect, quiet. Paperwork flowed from one desk to another, often accompanied by curt instructions; there were at least eight men and women visible, all of whom looked harried. He recognized four—two women and two men; the others were new to him, although it was true that he seldom attempted to visit the Terafin Merchant Authority offices.

He merited no more than a glance or two from the office workers, which was troubling, as he had adopted a posture that should have been worthy of none. Clearly, Lucille expected his presence to be noticed; she also expected it to be marked. For that reason, she was chilly upon her return, and her instructions, as she led him to the closed door of Jarven's office, were loud and clear: Jarven was a busy man, and he didn't have time to waste. Lucille was not, strictly speaking, incapable of being friendly, but it was not the trait for which she was known; she was known, instead, as a veritable dragon, and the Merchant Authority was her hoard. Her clipped, curt orders made of Haval Arwood a man among the multitudes of grasping—and useless—would-be entrepreneurs.

She was, in her way, a consummate actress—a fact that Haval had never fully appreciated before today; she even closed the door a little bit too loudly at his back. She didn't *slam* it; that would have been unprofessional. But no one in the exterior office could mistake it for the dismissal it was.

He set that thought aside as he turned toward the room's single desk. It was wider and longer than the desk Lucille occupied, and it looked as if it were a display piece; not a single paper was out of order. There was an inkstand, a quill, and a small stack of untouched paper in a tray; there were a few books that had been neatly organized and wedged between two large, marbled bookends.

Haval glanced from the desk to the man who occupied the chair behind it. The years, until this moment, had been kind to Jarven ATerafin. Jarven watched his visitor in silence. After a moment, he gestured to the two chairs that faced the desk, and Haval nodded. He slid into the rightmost one; it was the farthest, by only a foot or two, from the desk itself.

"ATerafin," Haval said, lifting his chin.

"Haval." Jarven rose. The movement wasn't graceful; the weight of age

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had descended at last. The man who theoretically ruled the Terafin offices in the Merchant Authority sought the refuge of the window, and the street-side view it offered, just as Haval might have done. “You’ve no doubt heard word?”

“I am neither dead nor sleeping. Yes, I’ve heard.”

“And what, exactly, have you heard? I admit that I haven’t the stomach for rumormongering, at the moment. Or rather, I haven’t the stomach to listen.”

“I have heard only that The Terafin is dead,” was Haval’s cautious reply.

“Truly?”

“I speak of credible rumors.”

“And those that lack credibility?”

“I feel they are beneath notice, Jarven, and it pains me to repeat them.”

“I will trouble you to take those pains.” He pushed the curtains aside and held them open while he watched the streets below the window.

“Some have said she was assassinated.”

Jarven said nothing.

“Some have said she was executed by the Kings themselves.”

More nothing. Since Haval was the master of silence, he bore up under it well, although it chafed him. Jarven had always had that effect. “Some have said she was murdered by demons.”

At that, Jarven lifted a hand, and Haval was suddenly grateful for the chair.

“Have you heard any other rumors?”

“There *are* no other rumors at the moment, Jarven.”

The older man winced. “To be expected, I suppose.” He let the curtains drop, and turned to face his visitor. “You are perhaps wondering why I called you here.”

“I am, indeed, although I believe it was Lucille who instigated this meeting.”

Jarven smiled, and if it was a faint smile, it was genuine. “And how much do you truly think my dragon instigates?”

“Rumor,” Haval replied gravely, “implies that she owns the entirety of the Terafin Merchant arm that is not connected with the Royal Trade Commission.”

“She has her hands full, at the moment.”

“I noticed; the training of new employees is always trying; it is why I have none.”

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“Would you care for tea?” Jarven asked quietly.

“Tea?”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps. It’s been chilly these past few days. I wouldn’t find something stronger unacceptable.”

“Ah. I might.”

“Shall I fetch Lucille?”

“No. I believe that I would like to walk, Haval. I’m in want only of company.”

“If you consider a humble—”

“Humble? You?”

“—A *humble* dressmaker worthy company, I would be honored. I think Lucille’s approval will be withheld, however.”

“Oh, probably. But it will give her something to fuss about.”

Haval was politic enough not to point out that Lucille seldom lacked something to fuss about.

Jarven’s version of a walk lasted until a carriage could be called. His simple tea didn’t take place in the Common; nor did it take place in any of the establishments located nearby. It required crossing the bridge to the Isle. Haval was surprised enough to allow Jarven to absorb the tax incurred by the bridge crossing. The carriage stopped outside of the Placid Sea.

It was not an establishment with which Haval was intimately familiar, although it wouldn’t be the first time he’d crossed its threshold; it would, however, be the first time he had done so as a merchant.

“My apologies,” Jarven said, when they were seated. “But the bustle of the Authority and the Common at the moment is something I wish to avoid.”

“I can understand that,” Haval replied, “but I cannot stay for long.” He hesitated, and then said, “Hannerle has fallen to the sleeping sickness.”

Jarven said nothing, although his expression softened. Haval wanted no sympathy, and where it was unwanted, it was impossible to offer. In its place, Jarven did something vaguely more disturbing; he set a small stone down on the center of the table, to one side of the bread basket. He tapped it three times.

“Jarven, I want no difficulty,” Haval said, his voice softening, his expression hardening. “At this time, at my age, I cannot afford it. Do you understand?”

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“Is there a man anywhere who desires difficulty?”

Haval said nothing. Wine arrived, handled by a silent man who immediately withdrew.

“In the perfect world,” Jarven continued, as the waiter receded, “we would sit in our diminished, familiar domains; we would drink our tea and conduct our business—trade deals or dresses, it matters little—and we would think, and hope, for safety. We are neither of us young men.”

“And in our imperfect world?”

“We might—or perhaps you might—do the same.”

“And you?”

“The Terafin is dead,” Jarven replied, as if that were an answer.

For Jarven, ATerafin for the majority of his life, it was. Almost against his will, Haval said, “Did she announce no heir?”

“Not after the death of Alea, no. Even had she known that her life was in danger, it is unlikely in my opinion that she would make an open declaration.”

Haval didn’t ask why. He had some suspicion, and he desired no confirmation.

“Alowan is also dead.”

“I . . . had heard rumors.” Almost against his will, and certainly against his better judgment, Haval added “You think there will be a struggle for the seat.”

“You think otherwise?”

Haval grimaced. “ATerafin, have I mentioned this is not a discussion I wish to have?”

“Yes. But misery enjoys company.” Jarven lifted his glass by its stem and looked at Haval through the red transparency of wine.

“Very well. I will keep you company in your misery, but not for much longer; I must return to Hannerle.” He hesitated, and then lifted his own glass, as if it were a shield.

“There is one other piece of news that might not have reached your ears, given the remarkable din of current information.”

Haval was now weary of the game—of all games; mention of Hannerle’s name had robbed them of their glitter. It was his wont to control the flow of conversation; to guide it, as if he were stone and words were a small stream he could part. With Jarven, however, it was always a contest, because Jarven desired to exert the same control. There was no such thing as small talk between the two men. Even if one of the two made the at-

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tempt, it would never be trusted; every word, every nuance, and every silence would be weighed, examined, tested. It was the nature of the game.

“The presence of the Twin Kings at the manse on the purported day of The Terafin’s assassination?”

“Ah, no. You do have decent sources; I will grant you that point. It is true.”

“The current near-war between the Houses of Healing and *Avantari*?”

“Between Healer Levec and *Avantari*. No, but again, I will grant you the point.”

“The presence of demons in Terafin? I grant you that the last point is given very little credence in more intellectual circles—which is possibly why it’s been spread at all.”

Jarven was silent again.

“What news?” Haval finally asked, as if the words had been dragged out of him.

Jarven reached out and tapped the stone again; he did not remove it from the table. His expression as he met Haval’s gaze was as smooth and neutral as Jarven’s many lines and wrinkles allowed. “Jewel ATerafin has returned from the South.”

There were sounds in the room, but they were the sounds that any room contained: breath, stifled movements, breeze through curtains. For a moment, two men for whom words were both weapon and art were in want of words. But when one discussed matters of import, words had to be handled with care.

“When?” Haval finally asked. He expected Jarven to hesitate.

“On the day The Terafin was murdered.” Each word was blunt and guileless. Jarven was capable of honesty, as was Haval; capable did not, however, imply probable.

“Some word would have reached—”

“Word will,” Jarven continued. “But she did not arrive by road or vessel.”

“How, then?”

“Magic,” was Jarven’s soft reply.

Haval knew enough about magic to know that such arrival—if indeed the claim was true—would be costly in many, many ways. “And how certain are you of your sources?”

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“Haval, that is almost beneath you.”

“It is, I admit, lacking in subtlety.”

“I am entirely certain of my source in this case; it was an eyewitness to the events.” He did not warn Haval that this must not travel farther than this room; the stone which he’d placed upon the table had already made that clear. Nor did the dressmaker ask who the eyewitness was. For one, Jarven wouldn’t answer and might actually be offended, and more important, Haval now knew.

Haval weighed words, weighed questions, and watched his only audience. “You know who the contenders for the title are.”

Jarven nodded; they did not exchange names.

“Tell me, Jarven, is Jewel among them?”

“If she were?”

“Pardon?”

Jarven winced. “Sloppy. That was sloppy, but you are under some stress at the moment, and I will allow myself to forget it.”

Haval drank the wine. He seldom drank. It was a passable vintage. “What are you asking of me? In the event that she could be considered a contender—and given her background, that claim would be both tenuous and more readily contested—I would remain a dressmaker. What, exactly, do you feel my relevance would be?”

“A question you must, at this moment, be asking yourself. Come, Haval, it would not be the first time you have offered advice to Jewel ATerafin.”

“The advice offered her was advice about *clothing*, Jarven.”

“Ah.”

“Clothing and appearance.”

“I see.”

Haval snorted. In the endless minutes since Jarven had made his announcement, facts had begun to mesh and combine; he could no more stop this process than he could resist falling should he happen to jump off a cliff. Names, unspoken, came to him in a list: Rymark. Haerrad. Elonne. Marrick. Of the four, Rymark had one singular advantage: he was the son of Gabriel ATerafin, the former Terafin’s right-kin, and therefore the most trusted man on the House Council. Haerrad had strong merchant concerns, and access to the most obvious money. Elonne was a quiet, elegant woman; she had poise and a ready wit, and she, too, had her own base of power within the House. Marrick, Haval knew less well; Marrick was

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genial, slightly underdressed, and charismatic in a very avuncular way. Nothing about Marrick implied either power or danger.

And a man who held a great deal of power without implying either was a threat.

He thought back to Lucille's abrupt and chilly greeting, and to her four unknown new employees. The fact that those four were already in place, and in such short order, made clear that the House Council had not expected The Terafin to survive for long. They were prepared for a struggle for the seat; they'd had the time to prepare.

If they were clever, if they were ruthless, and above all, if they could move with speed, it would be short.

"Gabriel serves as regent?" he asked softly.

"Gabriel, at the moment, is the titular head of the House Council, yes."

"Will he serve as regent until the succession is decided?"

"If he survives," was Jarven's soft—and surprising—reply.

Haval glanced at the stone in the table's center, and he drank again, the silence harsh. "How bitter will this struggle be? How far will it go?"

"In truth, I cannot answer. If the situation were different, I would say it would be decided swiftly—if messily. But the Kings are now involved, and it is not clear that they have a mind to step back. Nor is it clear to the House Council how they came to be present almost at the moment of The Terafin's death; there is some rumor that she herself summoned them. She certainly summoned," he added, "Sigurne Mellifas."

"And demons came, in the presence of the magi?"

"And demons came."

So many variables, so many combinations, now played like invisible notes between these two momentarily silent men. They had survived demons before, but they had no wish to repeat the experience; the shadows history cast were long.

"Let me answer your previous question with a different question," Jarven finally said.

"And that?"

"Tell me, Haval, in *your* opinion, is Jewel among those who will vie for the House Seat?"

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28th of Corvil, 427 A.A.

Order of Knowledge, Averalan Aramarelas

Sigurne Mellifas lit a candle.

Its soft, flickering glow cast more shadow than light in the darkened interior of her office. The moon cast more, but she had curtained the windows.

One candle, she thought. *One candle's length*.

Beyond—and beneath—the Tower heights, the magi were gathering in ones and twos. They would move with either purpose, reluctance, or great curiosity, toward the grand chambers in which the First Circle magi convened in times of emergency, pulled toward it the way rivers are pulled down mountains. Matteos would be fretting, because she had sent him ahead, divesting herself of the protection he was certain she required.

But there were some conversations she could not have within his hearing, and some conversations that perhaps would be best not had at all. She watched as the wax beneath the wick began to melt. The Tower was silent. She watched her wards with the gathered patience of decades, waiting. They were nascent. No one—no man, no demon—approached as the wax continued to melt.

The Terafin was dead. The creature that had killed the most powerful woman in the Empire was ash. Ash answered no questions. And questions? They abounded in this confined space. The Kings' questions. The questions of the House Council. The questions of the magi themselves, although those at least would be dealt with before the night—the long, long night—had passed.

Meralonne, she thought, *where are you?*

The runes continued to sleep. The candle flickered as she at last gave in to her unease; she rose, pulling her robes more tightly about her. She could feign age; could feign forgetfulness, could even feign frailty. No scruple prevented it. But she could no longer feign youth; it had passed, and with it, so much of her hopes. Had she not seen the demon with her own eyes, hope would be easier to grasp, and it would be far less painful. But summoned, she had.

Meralonne.

The stairs remained empty; the door remained untouched. The candle, however, continued to burn.

Meralonne APhaniel was not, had never been, docile. His temper was

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uneven, and he disliked—intensely—the papers by which so much information among members was shared. He was not fond of explanations—either given or received—and his pipe irritated at least half the members of the Order, regardless of their standing. He could be cajoled, when it suited him. He could be nudged; his ego could be pricked. All of these, Sigurne had done in her time.

But he could also be commanded, and that, she did so rarely it might never be noticed. Complaints about her tolerance of his habits, his temper, and his flagrant use of technically illegal magic littered her desk. Demands about the same did likewise. She had learned how to deflect most of them over the years. Even Matteos enjoined her to rein Meralonne in from time to time.

She had never explained to Matteos why she did not. One day he would know, and she dreaded the coming of that day. Her silence was not something that Meralonne himself demanded; if she had never offered explanation to Matteos, it was in part because the subtle negotiations that existed between Member APhaniel and the Guildmaster of the Order went unspoken. Meralonne had never threatened, and Sigurne had, likewise, refrained. They walked a knife's edge, balancing between the careful fabrication of ignorance and uncertain knowledge.

Always, always.

Something tugged at her wards; she saw their brief, dull glow—orange, all—but it was subtle and slight; it was wrong. Perhaps a child walking those stairs might have made that faint an impression; a child or one who used magic to approach with stealth. She suspected neither, but tested her wards, touching them without even a gesture to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond her closed door.

Darkness and magelights, nothing more.

But the wards continued their faint glow, tightening like a web, and she froze for just a moment, breath forgotten until the ache in her chest reminded her that it was a necessity. She turned from the wards and the door toward the closed curtains that blocked moonlight and starlight both. Placing one hand on the surface of her ancient desk—for comfort, not for support—she gestured. The curtains flew to the left and the right of the window, exposing the glass of the Tower's height. From where she stood she couldn't see the street.

Nor had she need. A foot beyond the glass, maybe more, stood the most difficult of her mages.

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At the very height of the Tower, one might walk the roof undisturbed. Sigurne now closed the curtains and repaired to that roof, although the night was cold and the winds ungentle. Meralonne did not join her immediately; he stood, suspended in air, a weapon—a sword—in one hand. His eyes were the color of polished silver and his hair curled and billowed in the wind's folds, almost touching his ankles. He wore no other cape.

"It is not yet time," she told him, speaking softly.

His frown was slight and sharp, his brow momentarily furrowed as if her words were spoken in a language he didn't understand. As there wasn't, to her knowledge, such a language, she waited for a minute before she repeated the words. He closed his eyes, and even in the darkness she could see the pale sweep of platinum as lashes brushed flawless cheek.

Only then did he leave the whispering voice of the air to step, once again, upon something more substantial. "Can you not feel it, Sigurne?" he asked. She thought that he had not abandoned the wild wind; he had merely swallowed it.

"No," she whispered. "I cannot. I cannot feel it, I cannot see it."

"Surely that is your choice?"

She smiled and shook her head. "How many years have passed since we first met, Member APhaniel?"

He frowned.

She had not expected an answer. "Many," she told him. His sword still graced his hand, the edge a bright, crisp blue—a glimpse of azure, as if the blade had cracked the facade of night and allowed a sliver of day to leak through before its time. "What do you feel, Meralonne? What do you see?"

"Do you remember the snow, Sigurne?" He lifted his sword. "Do you remember the sky?"

"You already know the answer." She lifted a hand as if to touch him. Here, now, she couldn't. Not without calling upon reserves of a power best used in other ways.

"Do I?"

Ah, his eyes when he turned; they were wild, fey. Gray gave way to silver, the lie to the truth. He was never so dangerous as when he was like this; nor was he ever as beautiful. She wondered if it was always this way: those who had touched the edges of true, abiding power must define beauty ever after as inseparable from deadliness.

"No," was his soft reply. Had she asked the question aloud? "Had you,

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Sigurne, you would have lived your life in a tower in the ice and the azure of the far North. I know who trained you, and I know who taught you; they were not the same.

“There are, of course, those who kill to gain power—or to hold it. You, Sigurne, are not among that number; you have taken power here, and you hold it the way a Matriarch might. But the death of the Northern Mage availed you nothing. You were too weak to take what he had built and make it your own, and you did not have that desire.” He lowered his sword, although its edge still gleamed. “There are those who kill simply to gain their own freedom. Had you been that, you would have fled long before I arrived.”

“I was that,” she said, voice rough. “I wanted my freedom.”

“Freedom? From life? You were not yet old enough to consider life a burden.”

She didn’t argue, although mere decades past, she would have.

“You watched. You waited. You bore witness. You were willing to pay for that privilege with your life.”

“Until I saw it with my own eyes, I could not be certain he would die.” She forced the brief, rough edges from her voice. “You saved my life, then. Why?”

“Because you did watch, Sigurne. And I knew, the moment I saw you, that you had both seen *and* understood. I was not certain how long you would live, and yet, here you are: the Guildmaster of the Order of Knowledge. Conversant with the customs and the powers of the *Kialli*, but respected and trusted by the Kings and their divine parents regardless.

“You have seen my hand in the training of the warrior-magi, Sigurne, and you have seen their power take an . . . unexpected turn. This sword?” he lifted it once again. “You have now seen its like in the hands of your own. Not all are capable of forming such a weapon with will and power alone, but half, now. Half of my students.”

“Meralonne—”

He lifted a hand. “Give me but a few moments more, Sigurne. A few. Can you not feel it?”

“I have already said—”

“Yes. You have. Let me ask you a different question, one closer to your own heart. You have misgivings about my work with your mages. You have always had those misgivings.”

She stiffened.

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“When you saw the weapons—and I admit the bow surprised me; I think it unique, in all of mortal history—you were afraid.”

She did not trouble herself to deny it. With Meralonne, there was no point. He understood her well enough to know how fear drove her; it was not a weakness he—or any man—could exploit.

“Why, then, did you not withdraw those mages from my service? Why did you allow me to expand their number?”

It was Sigurne who looked away. She had no candle to mark time, although she had the moons, and she watched them, their distant silver faces so much like his eyes.

“What did he tell of you the ancient days?”

“Only that men had fallen far from the height of their power.”

He did not believe her, which was fair; she was lying. But she could. “The Terafin is dead.”

His gaze sharpened.

“You had not heard?”

“I am in service to the Kings’ armies in the South, as you well know.”

“Yet you are here.”

“Your summons was urgent. How did she die?”

“*Kialli*.”

“*Kialli* here, as well?”

It was the answer that she had dreaded, although it was also the one she’d expected. “How large are their forces in the Dominion?”

“They have already moved openly within the Terrean of Mancorvo; they have shed the pretense of humanity at least there.”

“They own those lands?”

“Ah, no. But it was closely run, from what I was told. The kin failed there, and I believe that we will see the whole of their forces gathered, at last, in Averda. There are events that are troubling, even to me. I would not have said that they could coordinate an attack within Averalaan while they concentrated upon the Southern War.”

“And what does it mean? What do you fear?”

“The Shining Court,” he said softly.

She raised a hand, and he fell silent. “What of her new companions, APhaniel?”

“You speak of Jewel ATerafin?”

She nodded.

What he said next surprised her. “She has now walked roads that you

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will never walk; she has seen things that have not been seen since the gods themselves ruled the world. Three at least of her companions have seen what she has seen; you must draw your own conclusions from that. You could speak with her,” he added.

“You know why I cannot. At best, I could speak with Gabriel ATerafin; should I request an audience with Jewel, it would merely accentuate her power in a House divided. She will no doubt already be in danger; she will no doubt be heavily observed. She is seer-born; she has value. Are her companions a danger to us?”

“Only inasmuch as Jewel is. While she lives, I think they will not be of concern to you—but I cannot guarantee it.”

“And you are now so well acquainted with Jewel Markess ATerafin that she has taken to confiding in you?”

At that, he chuckled, and she exhaled slowly in relief. “Ah, no. But you can feel the winds of Winter when she speaks; you can almost touch the turning of the seasons when she glances at you. You can see shadows of the Winter Court in its glory when she walks, Sigurne.”

“Faded glory, then. She seems mortal, to my eye.”

“She is, and you are now being deliberately provocative. I have traveled all this way at some personal expenditure of power.”

“And you weather it . . . well, APhaniel.”

“You did not answer my question.”

“No, nor you, mine.”

He bowed. “Then let me show kindness, in my own fashion. The end of days is coming, Sigurne, inexorable as dawn, dusk, or nightfall. The winds change, the Cities of Man rise. Soon, you will see the ancient waken from its slumber; I do not know what form it will take.”

She caught his elbow in one hand; he had settled enough that it was almost safe to do so. “How long?” she whispered. “Decades? Years? Months?”

He reached out and gently lifted her chin by the tips of his fingers; her eyes widened. He had not touched her in this fashion for many, many years. “Perhaps a decade, Sigurne. But I feel it will be less—much less.”

“You do not fear it.”

“No. Never.” He smiled, but the smile was no longer sharp and cold. It was worse; it was tinged with pity. “I would hurry it, if I could, Sigurne; you have few years left, and if you die, you will never see what unfolds.”

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“I would never see it at all, if it were within my power.”

“Yes. That is the strange and confounding truth about you; you comprehend beauty; you understand those things that are truly terrible; you have even raised hand against them. But you deny your own desire.”

She shook her head and lifted her chin further, breaking the contact. “I have many, many desires, Meralonne. I do not deny that power is compelling; I never have. But it is simply one desire, one reaction.” She made her way to the edge of the Tower and looked down, to the web of light that the streets below were gradually becoming. “There is beauty in birth, and beauty in life, even mortal life, which passes so quickly. Perhaps especially in mortal life; one has to stop, to witness, or the moment is gone; it cannot be captured or lengthened for eternity.

“There is beauty in peace, Meralonne, and you will never know it. But I know it.”

“That beauty, if I grant you its existence, is exceptionally fragile.”

“Yes. But the desire to protect the fragile is strong.”

“I admit that I have never fully understood why you would work so hard, and so thanklessly, to give to others what you yourself will never have.”

She nodded. “I desire power, Meralonne, because it gives me the illusion that I have the ability to protect others.”

“It is not entirely illusion.”

“No, perhaps not. But it is not absolute; even were I a god, I would face failure, at least from time to time.”

“And yet you continue.”

She lifted her chin and gazed for a moment at the moons. It was easier, sometimes, to speak to him when she could not see his face. “Yes. I am not what I was. Nor am I *Kialli*. My memory is not perfect. My rage is not eternal. Even pain that I swore I would never forget has dimmed with time. One failure is not enough—although I admit it comes close when the days are dark—to become all that I see or know.

“It is what the young forget: one failure does not render all past success—or future success—meaningless. It is only if we surrender to despair that we fail in perpetuity, because we cease to try at all.”

“And is all of your life to be that struggle?”

“Has not all of yours been?”

He was utterly silent for a full minute; she could not even hear the sound of his breath. The wind was gone.

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She waited, as she had waited a handful of times before, and was rewarded by the sound of a brief, dry chuckle. Her own expression did not change as she turned to face him.

There he stood: his familiar robes dusty with travel, his hair once again a straight fall down his back, his sword absent. “Sigurne, you are a marvel. It is a growing wonder to me that men can look at you and see only your age.”

“And not a young girl’s heart, APhaniel? Not my inner beauty?” She winced.

“You have never had a young girl’s heart; it is the lack that makes you so luminescent.” He bowed. “I will tell you this, for I must return to the generals and the army; they will harry me if I am absent for too long, and I am less inclined to be either patient or subservient these days. Guard Jewel Markess. Guard her well. She has a role to play in this that I cannot clearly see, and if the situation in the South were not so dire, I would take leave of the Order to watch over her myself.”

“You will not stay for the Council meeting?”

He grimaced. “I see little point. Among other things, I seem to have left my pipe in the encampment in the distant South, and I could not endure such a trivial meeting without it.”

She let him go. She wanted him at her side, but knew what the possible cost of that decision would be. “Meralonne.”

He nodded.

“Win this war. I do not, at this distance, care what decisions you undertake to guarantee that victory.”

“Do not labor under the illusion that this battle is the whole of the war.”

“If we lose, I fear it will be.”



Chapter One

*26th of Corvil, 427 A.A.
Terafin Manse, Averalan Aramarelas*

WHEN THE KINGS RETREATED from the Council Hall, noise and movement returned to the men and woman granted the rings of governance. Arann, injured, leaned against the closest wall; Finch clutched Teller's arms, her face as white as her knuckles. Celleriant sheathed his sword; the demon dissolved, the menace and size of his form sinking into a soft, gray ash that could not maintain a shape. Rymark clutched the document he had declared the legal will and intent of The Terafin; Haerrad, bleeding in the doorway, had barely moved when the Kings left the room, so intent was he on Rymark.

Gabriel was the color of demon ash; the silence was profound.

No. The silence of the woman who had ruled and guided this house for years was profound. The color of her blood. The vacant, unblinking stare of eyes that sought ceiling only because of the way she had collapsed.

Gabriel spoke. The Chosen moved. Everything was strained, everything was wrong.

This is what Jewel remembered as she strode down the gallery—and against the tide of people running without purpose, although they didn't know that yet—toward home: the West Wing. She had longed for home for months—at times she had been certain she wouldn't survive to return to its comfort—and now that she was here, she could barely see it at all, although it surrounded her as she moved.

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* * *

Jewel did not immediately head to the kitchen, although she had called the meeting there. Instead, she went to the room in which Morretz now lay. His eyes were closed, his face ashen; his chest neither rose, nor fell. His body was stiff with death.

Ellerson entered the room in silence. He tendered Jewel a perfect, silent bow; as she now knelt by the side of Morretz, she had nothing but silence to offer in return. There were questions, of course. There would always be questions. The den had answered most of the urgent ones. They had answered them, and then they had let her go without answering any of theirs in return—because Morretz was here, Morretz was dead.

Gabriel had the Chosen to guard and tend the body of The Terafin. Alowan had not been called; Jewel thought it an understandable oversight, given demons, Kings, and mages. She had therefore walked in haste to the wall upon which lay the simple magic that would alert the healerie—and Alowan—of the need for his presence.

Finch had stopped her. Finch had caught her hand. Finch had told her that Alowan was no longer in the healerie.

And why? Gods.

Alowan was also dead. Dead days ago. The flowers that lined the halls, the small portraits, the keepsakes and mementos offered as a sign of affection, respect, and loss were still in evidence in every corner of the galleries and the courtyard; they lined the walls of the great hall, and no servant had sought to remove them. They had tidied the more egregious of the wilted petals; that was all.

But they would be removed now. They would be replaced. Alowan had been loved, yes. But The Terafin had been the heart of the House; word of her death had spread. Word, weeping, the silence that comes when no words can convey horror, loss, shock. Jewel knew; she had been there to witness the death of Amarais Handernesse Terafin, and she had experienced all of them.

“ATerafin.” Ellerson walked past Jewel, to the head of the bed in which Morretz now lay in his false repose.

She looked up at him in bitter silence.

“Allow me to tend to Morretz.”

“He’s dead,” was her flat reply.

“Yes. And he has no family within Averalan. Nor does he have any living relatives that we are aware of in the Empire. His contract has been carried out with honor; his Lord is dead.” When she failed to reply, he

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gentled the stiff perfection from his voice. “He is a domicis of the guildhall, and it is to us he returns. We will see to his funeral and his burial.”

She still stared. At Morretz. At his silent face, at his hair, now gray and lank. She had heard him speak only a handful of times in all of the years she had known him. But in silence, he had been Amaraïs Handernesse Terafin’s living shadow. He had become as necessary to The Terafin’s life as it was possible for any other person to be. He had lived to serve her.

He had died to serve her.

“ATerafin,” Ellerson said quietly. “He cannot be buried with her.”

“Why not?” The words escaped her before she could catch them and bind them. They were too raw, too choked, and even speaking them, her eyes teared.

“You know well why. She is—she was—The Terafin, and in the eyes of the patriciate, Morretz was a servant. He was not even a servant granted the House Name.”

“He couldn’t *take* it. He was—”

“Yes. Domicis, and proud to be so. To take the name she offered—and if it eases you at all, she did offer it—he would have had to compromise the principles of the guildhall. To be ATerafin is to have an interest in affairs of the House.”

“She was his life, and the House was hers—of course he had an interest in the House!”

“There is a subtle difference. He devoted his life to her life. He was not beholden in any way to anyone but The Terafin. Being ATerafin, however, implies a connection, a responsibility, to the House.”

She shook her head. “She was the House, Ellerson. *She* was the House.”

“No, Jewel—although it might anger you to hear it, she was not. House Terafin still stands. Its merchant concerns, its responsibilities to the Crowns, still exist, as does its seat in the Hall of The Ten. She shaped, guided, and ruled the House—but the House, like a kingdom, continues beyond her. That has always been the case, and she knew it well.

“There is only one hope for continuity,” he added quietly. “And Morretz gave his life to achieve it.”

She was silent. Numb. But she would not move from Morretz’ side.

Ellerson did not leave. When he spoke, it was not to reiterate his request, not immediately.

“ATerafin, do you know how I came to serve in this manse sixteen years ago?”

She shook her head. She knew—very, very well—how he had come to

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leave that service. Was surprised at how it still stung, given how much she had lost today.

“Morretz came to me in the guildhall. I had taken leave of active service and intended to spend the rest of my productive years teaching. I taught Morretz,” he added. “Before he came to serve The Terafin, he was my student. It was I who judged him capable of that service. When Morretz first arrived at the guildhall, he was angry, confused, and in search of a cause to which he could devote his life. If the cause were a worthy one, he could then forget that he had ever had a life of his own.

“I will not trouble you with all of the reasons this is a poorly conceived desire; it is a common desire, and it leads many to our doors. Almost all of those who do arrive to petition the guildhall for entrance for this reason do not, in fact, remain.”

In spite of herself, Jewel looked up. “Why?”

“Because they are looking for some form of service that will allow them to avoid making any decisions of their own. They are looking for service as justification for their existence. They come to us empty, and they ask us to fill that emptiness.”

She nodded.

“You have seen the Chosen. You are held in esteem by the captains, and I believe you hold them in high esteem in return. Is this not the case?”

“It is.”

“They have devoted their lives to the life of The Terafin.”

She nodded again.

“Could they have done so if they were unformed and desperate young men? The willingness to lay down a life is not enough if they themselves consider that life to be almost without value. The Chosen are tasked with making choices and decisions in the absence of their Lord. She trusts them implicitly and explicitly. She trusted her domicis in the same fashion.”

No, Jewel thought, glancing at Morretz’s lifeless face. She had trusted him more.

“He offered advice and counsel. That advice and counsel did not come from an empty place. I was proud of him. As a student, he was one of my most challenging—and one of my most successful.” Ellerson smiled; it was a bitter smile. “I have no children. Perhaps, in the end, this was not a wise decision on my part, but to have a family, I would have had to leave the service entirely. Morretz, inasmuch as a man can be whose life was devoted to another, was as close to kin as my chosen vocation permitted.

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“I watched him grow. I watched him flourish. I watched him gain the knowledge required to serve a lord of power. I watched him slowly surrender his despair and his pain until it no longer defined him. Did it shape him? Of course it did. But it did not define him, in the end.

“Give him back to me, and I will take him home.”

Jewel rose then. “He’s yours,” she said, voice too thick, too heavy, for more words. She turned and left the room.

The kitchen had never seemed so far away as she trudged toward it, head down.

The sounds in the wing were wrong. The ceiling was thick and flat; there was no tenting, no wagon cover; there was no sand and no sound of leaves in night wind. There were no stars. There was no sun. The voices she heard—at a distance—spoke Weston, not Torra.

This was home, yes.

But The Terafin was dead. Morretz, dead. Alowan—gentle, wise healer—dead as well. She had always considered home to be the place the den lived—but tonight, it felt empty, it felt hollow. She walked the halls and before she reached the dining room that led to the kitchen, she passed Celleriant. He stepped in behind her and began to follow.

Not now, she thought. She’d grown accustomed to his presence. Accustomed to armor that the Chosen would never wear; accustomed to the sword that no longer occupied his hand. The sight of his platinum hair seemed almost natural. When had that happened? How?

She had seen the way Finch and Teller watched him. She had answered their brief, signed questions.

This was home. It would never be the same as the home she had left. Had she stayed—had she stayed, it *might* have been. Had she been here—but no. No. She swallowed, squared her shoulders, continued to walk.

Celleriant had not chosen to serve her. He had failed his Queen, and Jewel was his punishment. She could probably order him to leave—but she wouldn’t, and they both knew it. Nor would she now abandon the Winter King, although he had vanished somehow, as he often did.

“These people are my kin,” she told Celleriant as she faced familiar swinging doors. “I would die before I see them come to any harm.” She didn’t wait for his reaction; instead, she pushed the doors open and walked into the kitchen.

* * *

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There was no joy to be had at this homecoming. Not for Jewel. Not for her den. The enormity of two deaths—three—lay between them, around them. The woman who had given them the names that defined all but one of their number was gone.

Jewel's den was silent as she walked to her chair; silent as it scraped in its familiar way along the floor. She sat heavily, folding her arms across the table in front of her. By dint of will she didn't allow her head to sink into them. But her throat felt swollen and thick and she sat there in silence for far too long. Her hands were sun-dark; she knew her sojourn in the South had reddened her hair. She felt as if she had stepped out of the wrong season—the wrong world—and the passage had taken the hope of homecoming from her.

She glanced at Arann. They had all taken wounds today, but most of those were figurative. Arann's, as part of the House Guard, were more. *No*, she thought, numb now. He was not just a House Guard. She recognized the subtle change in insignia; he was Chosen. Somehow, in her absence, he had made his personal vow to The Terafin. What would happen to him now? What would happen to *any* of the Chosen? They had failed in the only charge they valued; she was dead.

Arann's wounds had been tightly bandaged, but blood had seeped through those bandages; in the dim light of the kitchen it seemed a much darker red.

Celleriant did not take a seat at the table; nor had she expected it. He walked to the wall behind her chair, and stood there in perfect, forbidding silence. She was more aware of his presence in the kitchen than she had been for weeks. She swallowed. She could see brief hand and finger gestures, and realized with a pang that they weren't meant for her.

And she was not the only one who had brought newcomers, although newcomers had always come to the den through her. Quietly seated, his shoulders curling toward the ground in almost exquisite embarrassment, was a boy she—to her shock—recognized. Adam. Adam of the Arkosa Voyani. He glanced at her, but when her eyes met his, he looked away instantly, paling. That stung.

"Adam," she said, falling into the Torra that now came so effortlessly.

He looked up instantly. She smiled at him, hoping her smile had no edges; it was a genuine smile. He was alive. He was alive, he seemed healthy, and he was—against all odds and hope—with her den. She wanted to ask him how, or why, but he seemed so nervous she was afraid it would sound as if it were an interrogation.

"He was at the Houses of Healing," Finch said quietly—in Weston.

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“Levec had him there. It was Adam who told us you were still alive. Levec cares about him,” she added, “but Adam wasn’t comfortable there.” She swallowed and then continued. “He’s staying with us at the moment. It’s been a bit awkward.”

“Awkward? Why? Is Levec causing trouble?”

Finch shook her head. “In the last couple of weeks, there’s been a new plague that’s spread through the city.”

“It’s the wrong season for the Summer sickness.”

Finch nodded. “It’s not—I don’t think the healers believe it’s entirely natural.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Adam is healer-born. Levec said—” She shook her head. “Adam’s healer-born.”

“And he let him stay *here*?”

Finch smiled ruefully, her face relaxing into the familiar expression at the octave change in Jewel’s voice. “I don’t think he was happy with the decision—and it’s been difficult. Adam is new to the city. He’s new to the Empire. His Weston is only barely passable.”

“How barely?”

“He can buy a few rudimentary things and ask very simple directions. His Torra’s not street Torra, either—but he understands most of it. Levec’s lost younger healers before. He *bates* to let them out of his sight.” Jewel didn’t blame him. “It’s not that Levec wanted him here—but Levec let him choose.”

“And Levec’s been checking up on him ever since?”

Finch shook her head.

“Tell me.”

“This sickness—they call it the sleeping sickness, the dreaming sickness. People fall asleep and they just don’t wake up.”

“At all?”

She nodded; Jewel caught the hesitation in the gesture. She waited. Finch finally said, “Adam can wake them. They don’t stay awake,” she added in a rush. “But . . . Adam can wake them for a while. He’s the only one who’s been able to even do that much. So he’s necessary, in the eyes of the Kings and the Houses of Healing.”

“I’m surprised Levec doesn’t have a room here as well.”

Finch and Teller exchanged a glance. It was Teller who said, “He has a guest room.”

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“... So what you’re saying is I might accidentally wander across Levec—not the world’s friendliest man on the best of days if you didn’t happen to be born a healer—at any time?”

“He doesn’t use it often.”

Jewel almost laughed. It would have been wild and raw—but better by far than tears. Adam was alive. So many people weren’t—but Adam was, and he was here, and that was an unlooked for gift. She looked across the table at where he was trying to look smaller.

“Adam.”

He looked up instantly. Glancing around the table, he then said, “Matriarch.”

It took Jewel a few seconds to realize he was applying that title to *her*. “Adam, I’m not—”

“I didn’t know,” he continued, in uneasy Torra. “I didn’t know what you were when we met. I apologize if I gave any offense.”

“Adam, I’m *not* a Matriarch.”

“These people are your kin,” he replied gravely. There was the tail end of a question in the words.

“Yes. But not in a way that your sister, Margret, would understand. We weren’t born to the same parents. We weren’t born to related parents, either.”

“But you are all ATerafin.”

She glanced at Angel, who couldn’t understand what they were saying. “Almost all, yes.”

He digested this in silence. After a long pause, he said, “My sister?”

“She is well. Adam—the Arkosa Voyani have left the Voyanne. They now dwell in the City of Arkosa, in the Sea of Sorrows. She’s alive.”

“My cousin?”

“Alive as well.” More than that, she did not offer.

“And the Serra Diora?”

Jewel couldn’t help but smile at that. He was fourteen years of age, and the Serra Diora was possibly the most beautiful woman Jewel had ever seen. The most beautiful mortal woman. “I left her in the camp of the Kai Leonne. She is alive, she is well.”

The door swung open; Avandar entered the kitchen. After a moment, so did Ellerson. They stood on either side of the doors, watching; neither domicis had ever joined them at the table. Jewel looked at Ellerson and then looked away.

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“Avandar, how is Ariel?”

“She is sleeping.”

“Naturally?”

He raised a brow. “She was both frightened and exhausted. Ellerson has seen to a room for the child; I am not certain that she is best left on her own.”

Jewel nodded. She almost rose to go see the girl herself. But she couldn’t decide if leaving to check would be an act of concern and affection or an act of rank cowardice, and she suspected it was the latter. She stayed in her chair.

Everyone was watching her now. She was acutely aware that the first person she had spoken to was Adam. But it was hard to face her den, because The Terafin was dead. She was dead and Jewel’s return had not saved her.

Teller said quietly, “Jay.”

She swiveled to look at him.

“She knew. She knew you had to leave. I think she understood why.”

Jewel nodded.

“You don’t believe you had to be—wherever it was you went.” It wasn’t a question. Teller knew her so well. “But *she* did.”

“Teller—I was there. I was there, and I’m not even certain if I was necessary. The war in the South isn’t over. We need to *win* it.”

“How bad will it be if we don’t?”

“Henden bad. Dark Days bad. But if we lose and the Dark Days come again, there won’t be a Veral. There will never be a spring.” Her hands became fists on the table. “And I’m not *there* for that. The army’s almost in place, but I won’t see the battle; I won’t be able to help there. And the Commanders are going to be furious. With me. With the House.

“I’ll miss the battle. I arrived too late for The Terafin.” She pushed herself out of her chair.

“Jay,” Finch said, also rising, but with less force. She glanced toward the door, at Ellerson. Jewel’s gaze was dragged there as well.

“Why is he here?” She spoke softly, as if there was any hope that Ellerson would fail to hear the words.

“We needed him,” Finch replied.

“I needed him sixteen years ago, but he still left.” Gods, the words. The words just fell out of her mouth. She wanted to grab them and swallow them whole. And she wanted to scream or shout or rage—not at Ellerson,

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although he was part of it. At the world. At death. At the demons and the Lord of Night and The Terafin, whose order had killed Morretz for *no reason*. He had come South, using a magic that he did not have—and had never had—the power to survive.

For what purpose?

Rymark had, in front of the *Twin Kings*, claimed legitimate right to the Terafin Seat in the Hall of The Ten. He had implicated Gabriel, his father, in his lie; he had produced a forgery of a document that he claimed was signed by The Terafin *and* the right-kin. Gabriel had not spoken a word. Jewel wasn't even certain what he would have said—he was rescued by Haerrad. Haerrad, clearly injured, had survived what was an obvious attempt on his life to contest Rymark's claim.

Jewel could no more declare herself the legitimate heir—the only one—than she could bring the dead back to life, not unless she wanted to join them. At this very moment, that didn't seem like such a bad idea.

The *only* reason she had been summoned back was to fulfill her promise to the woman she had served for all her adult life—and she couldn't do it. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

It was Angel who rose next. The movement was slow and deliberate; he abandoned his chair and then took the time to tuck it neatly under the table, a signal that for him, Kitchen council was over.

“Jay,” he said quietly as he approached her, his hair in its familiar spire, his expression oddly gentle. “We don't have to do this tonight.” He lifted his hands in clear den-sign, asking for a vote. One by one, her den nodded. Jester, utterly subdued and silent, Carver, grim and pale, Teller and Finch in silent concern. Only Arann hesitated; Arann, injured in the battle in the Council Hall. Daine's consent was given quickly, perfunctorily; he rose—they all did—and headed *straight* for Arann, who was trying very, very hard to put him off without drawing Jewel's attention.

She didn't speak—not aloud—but she gestured a short, curt command. Arann's shoulders slumped as Daine took both of his hands and held them tightly. “Come to the healerie,” he said.

“The healerie?” Jewel said sharply.

Daine glanced at her. “I was in training with Alowan,” he said. “And I'm all there is for a successor.”

She blanched. “Alowan—”

“I'm not Alowan, Jay. Most of the House isn't aware of what I can—and cannot—do. But the healerie was important to Alowan Rowanson. It's the

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only thing he left behind. I want to keep it running. I want to keep it going. The House needs a healer. And it's the only thing I can do for him, now."

"Levec will have my head."

"Probably. He wasn't happy when I told him."

"Daine—"

But Daine smiled almost bitterly and shook his head. "It's my risk to take."

She opened her mouth again, but this time no words came out.

Daine didn't have that problem. "Do you understand why Alowan served The Terafin?"

She swallowed. Nodded.

"I serve you in the same way, for the same reason. You can't forbid it, if you're smart. You need me here." Pursing his lips in a way that was at odds with his age, he frowned at the much larger Arann. "So do the rest of you. You're not dying, Arann. It won't hurt." He led Arann away, and Arann followed.

Angel approached Jewel while the doors were still swinging behind their vanishing backs. "We can do this in the morning," he told her.

"But there's so much—"

"It'll still be here in the morning." He smiled; it was a brief, pained grin. "And gods help you, Jay, *you'd* better be here as well."

She heard what lay behind both the words and the smile, and flinched. "Angel, I didn't mean to leave that way. I didn't mean to—"

"It doesn't matter. It's done. But, Jay—never do it again. Don't go where I can't follow."

"Can I promise to try my best?"

"No."

Avandar was already gathering the lamps. Around her, in silence, the den drifted through the doors, allowing Angel to speak for them. It was Angel who led her to her room, Angel who opened the door, and Angel who threatened to sleep on the floor in case she suddenly vanished again. It was Angel who drew the curtains, Angel who approached the magelight that sat cradled in its burnished stand. No lamps now. He whispered the stone to a warm glow; it made his hair look gold. Like a very odd crown, she thought.

"They'll call a Council meeting in the morning," she told him, as if this had only just occurred to her.

He shook his head. "Let them. At the moment, there's no one in charge."

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“They’ll have to call Council meeting, Angel. The Kings *were there*. They wouldn’t interfere if The Terafin had been poisoned or stabbed or shot—but she was killed by a very large, very deadly demon. House Terafin can’t claim this as an entirely internal affair anymore. Not after that Henden. We’ll need to come up with a plan to deflect Imperial control, or the House will be crippled.”

“Not more than it already has been.”

She couldn’t find words to answer him.

Avandar waited by the door in silence. Only when Angel left did he move. His robes were familiar Terafin robes, and he lifted a familiar chair, dragging it across the thick, dark carpets until it rested within plain sight of the illuminated bed.

“No,” she told him softly. “You’re exhausted. You need sleep more than I do.”

He sat. That was all. It was his most effective way of disobeying an order that she only barely wanted to give.

27th of Corvil, 427 A. A.

Terafin Manse, Averalaaan Aramarelas

The night, not unexpectedly, was bad. Jewel woke several times, jerking upright and staring, in wild-eyed silence, into the pale glow of her room. Avandar did not sleep. His hands tensed around the armrests of a chair that couldn’t be comfortable for long hours at a stretch, no matter how careful its craftsman had been.

“Jewel?”

She rose. He remained in the chair, although she was aware of his gaze as she gathered up the very few things she had brought with her from the South.

“What are you doing with those?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she dressed. The clothing she had worn for most of her sojourn in the South had been Voyani in make and style; practical, loose, comfortable. She therefore faced the contents of her closet as if they were a sentence for a particularly odious crime. She set her dusty boots aside in favor of shoes that were far cleaner and far more polished; she found a dress, drew it out of the closet, and paused. It was blue, yes—but today, blue was not the right color.

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Heading farther back, she found the dress that she had worn at Alea's funeral. It was serviceable, and even if it wasn't, it was the only official mourning dress she had.

"I think that is not required for breakfast," Avandar rose now. "Dress simply. You will not be allowed to hide in your wing for most of this day; take what freedom and ease you can."

Setting her jaw, she shook her head. "This is what I want."

Once dressed, with Avandar's help—her hair did need work, but if she was allowed a little ease, this is where she chose to take it—she left her room. She hesitated to one side of the door—the wrong side. "Avandar, where is Ariel?"

He led her further down the hall, pausing at the door that was next-to-last.

Jewel knocked at it once. Then, shaking her head, she entered the room. The curtains were open. Moonlight silvered the window.

Ariel was sleeping on the floor beside the bed. She had a pillow; she'd removed the counterpane. She was a slender child; she was almost lost in the folds of cloth and the darkness. But she sat up a little too quickly when Jewel entered the room. Jewel, in her strange Northern dress, approached with care, holding both of her hands palm out, to make clear they were empty.

"I'm sorry," she said, in soft, soft Torra. "This room must be confusing." She knelt at Ariel's side.

Ariel said nothing. Her eyes were wide; in the darkness, Jewel couldn't distinguish pupil from iris.

"This is my home. The people here are my family. It's colder in the North than it was in the South, so we wear different clothing. I'm sorry," she said again. "You're safe here. I—I'll be busy, so you might not see as much of me, but I'll come to see you when I can."

Ariel still said nothing, and after a long pause, Jewel rose and left the room. She shouldn't have brought the child here, and knew it—but leaving her in the middle of an army hadn't seemed like the better option. She stood outside of the closed door, head bowed against it for a full minute.

The den habitually used the breakfast nook—and nook was a misused word for a room that size, in Jewel's opinion—in part because their schedules differed so much, and they seldom ate together. The dining room

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seemed cavernous and empty when its long table was occupied by only two.

On this morning, however, they drifted into the dining room by some sort of silent consensus. They didn't go to the kitchen; neither Jewel nor Teller had called it.

The Terafin offices in the Merchant Authority had understandably been closed; Finch was therefore at home. The office of the right-kin, however, was being besieged; Teller should have been absent. But Teller, dressed for work, and at odds with the more casual morning clothing of Carver, Jester, and Angel, came to the table anyway. Daine came to breakfast in the pale robes of the healerie, as well. Adam, however, did not. Nor did Celleriant. Arann was not yet on duty; he was seated at the foot of the table, as far from Daine as it was possible to sit, and still be in the same room.

Jewel sat at the head of the table, watching as the den gathered. They noticed what she was wearing—how could they not? White, mourning white, edged in black and gold. She hated it now as much as she'd hated it the first time she'd worn it. It was a *dress*. A dress might indicate some small part of the loss she felt—but it offered none of the rage. She struggled to set it aside. If there was one small corner of the world that didn't deserve it, it was this one.

Instead, in silence, she pushed aside the breakfast dishes that had been laid in front of her. She wasn't hungry. She knew she needed food—but apparently that information would not impart itself to her stomach. Ellerson attended and directed the servants who had come bearing their multiple trays in somber silence. Jewel tried very hard not to meet his gaze, or draw it.

When she had cleared enough space, she set four things on the table in front of her hands: three leaves, and three strands of hair twined in a bracelet. The hair was fine enough that it should have been almost invisible; it wasn't. It was Winter white against the gleaming wood grain.

It was the leaves that drew all eyes first: one was silver, one was gold, and one was diamond.

They stared for a moment. It was, predictably, Finch who spoke first, but she spoke with her hands, asking permission to take—to touch—what Jewel had placed on the table. Jewel answered the same way. Finch rose and lifted the leaf of gold—the warm color, not the cool ones—and raised it to the light.

Heavy, Finch gestured.

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Yes. "It's gold."

"The others are silver and diamond?"

"Yes."

The leaves now drifted down the table, as if hands were wind; they settled for a moment and then passed on. No one, however, touched the hair that curled there in a very slender bracelet.

When the leaves returned to her, she bracketed them with the palms she placed flat on the table. "I don't know where to start. But those will give you some idea of just how strange the journey was."

"Did you save the Princess?" Carver asked.

Jewel did not pretend to misunderstand. It was a vision of a lone woman that had driven her to the South—but she had expected, however reluctantly, to travel with the armies under the three Commanders. "I don't know. The Princess—and that is not what she's called in the Dominion—is with the army. One of the armies. Given what those armies now face, I think salvation is going to be in short supply."

They were silent for a long moment, waiting.

"I didn't mean to leave Averalan the way I did."

"No kidding," Jester said. His arms were folded across his chest, and he balanced his chair on its hind legs. She half expected him to extend his own legs and cross them on the table—but he glanced at Ellerson before he did, and kept them where they were. The dining room was *not* the kitchen. "Is it always going to come down to demons?"

"No. There are gods and other people in the mix as well." Her smile was a brief, bitter twist of lips. "It probably won't make much difference to people like us, though. The mages will argue about their classifications, if any of them survive."

"Other people?"

"My long-haired friend." She hesitated again. "He was in the kitchen last night. His name's Celleriant, although his own people call him Lord Celleriant."

"He's not here."

". . . No."

"Is he den, or isn't he?"

That was, of course, the question, wasn't it? "He serves me."

Jester gestured, den-sign.

"No. And he won't learn to speak it, either. I'm surprised he condescends to speak Weston."

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“Do you trust him?”

“. . . No.” She grimaced. “And yes. I don’t *like* him. But . . . he’s one of mine.”

Teller said, “He killed the demon that killed The Terafin.”

Finch, at the same time, said, “He reminds me of Meralonne APhaniel.”

“Meralonne?”

“On the night the demons came to Terafin. The night the stranger died in the foyer.”

Jewel stared at Finch for a long, thoughtful moment. “Sigurne trusts Meralonne,” she finally said.

It was Angel who said, “We trust *you*. If you want him, that’s all that needs to be said. You’ve never been wrong before.”

Against her will, Jewel said, “I didn’t choose Celleriant.”

“Then how—”

“When we escaped from the demons in the Common, we ended up on a hidden, ancient road.” She swallowed. “And we met the Wild Hunt there.”

She could not bring herself to speak of everything she had seen while walking that road, but she spoke of the forest of trees, from which she’d taken the leaves. She spoke of the Winter King in his castle of glass and ice, and she spoke of the Winter Queen at the head of her host, riding the endless and hidden roads, searching for her King, that she might depose him at last. She spoke of the Winter King—her Winter King—the great, white stag who could find his footing in any terrain, even the air itself.

“He was a man, once.”

“When?”

“When the gods walked, I think. Long before the founding of the Empire. And before the Blood Barons. The Winter Queen gave him to me. She was riding him,” Jewel added, her voice falling. “She ordered Celleriant to serve me as well. It was punishment for his failure.” She stopped the sentence, but not in time.

“His failure to do what?” Angel asked sharply.

Avandar raised a brow; his lips settled into a sardonic half smile.

“His failure to kill me.”

The silence deepened Avandar’s amusement. It predictably did nothing to endear Celleriant to the rest of the den. “He won’t try it again,” she

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said, when no one dared to put the question into words. “He was ordered—by the Winter Queen—to serve me. He’ll serve. He doesn’t *have* to like it.”

“Do the rest of us?” Angel demanded.

“Not more than he does.”

She spoke of the Festival of the Moon in the Tor Leonne, of the Voyani Matriarchs, and of the masks. This was harder because if the story itself retained the same dreamlike quality of description, the events had occurred in what was theoretically the real world—if that had the same meaning, now. But she hesitated on the edge of the Sea of Sorrows. After the silence had grown awkward—beyond awkward, really—she took a deep breath and continued.

She spoke of the desert crossing; she spoke of the wagons that had taken flight, like small ships in the air. She spoke, at length, about the storm in the desert, about its end, explaining more fully how Adam had almost died, where almost meant could not be saved without a healer who could call him back from the bridge to the beyond, where Mandaros waited to offer judgment. Although the circumstances of that near death had not been entirely clear to the den when they had first met Adam, the reason he still lived was.

The den, in turn, explained in more detail Adam’s role in The Terafin’s continued—and tenuous—survival. It was a very muted breakfast, with more words than food passing lips.

When Jewel spoke of the rise of the City in the desert, she was once again in a land of dreams; the den couldn’t grasp it. It wasn’t that they didn’t believe her—they did, and would; it was that they couldn’t conceive of it. No more would Jewel have been able to do the same if she hadn’t witnessed it herself.

But when she again fell silent, Teller nudged her—with den-sign, almost flailing to get her attention—and she continued with the trek out of the desert, at the side of the Serra Diora. She couldn’t help but describe the Serra; she was a woman whose beauty could leave poets tongue-tied and at the same time desperately in search of words, as if by words they might capture and hold, in eternity, the flowering of a beauty that could not otherwise defy time.

She had found Ariel there, missing fingers, silent and terrified. After a long hesitation, she mentioned the demon who had brought—and aban-

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doned her—to Jewel’s care. “She’s not a demon,” she added quietly, into the various textures of den silence. “She’s a child whose family died. I think it happened during the Festival of the Moon. She’s not—she’s not den, not exactly. She’s too young to make that choice. But I couldn’t just leave her there.”

They accepted it without argument. Celleriant, no. Avandar had taken time. But Ariel was a child, and at that, an orphan—and that meant something here. Jewel was grateful

She spoke of Yollana of the Havalla Voyani and the passage into the Terrean of Mancorvo, and there she once again stalled. She did not speak of Avandar; nor did she speak of the ghosts who lingered in anger in the forests of the Terrean; nor did she speak, in the end, of the dead who waited, silent and accusing, for Avandar Gallais. But she found words to describe the Torrean of Clemente, its Tor’agar, Alessandro. She found words for the battle that occurred in one of the villages, when the waters rose and the demons revealed themselves among the ranks of the Southern clansmen. Yet even here, she faltered.

They knew, and they allowed it. There was just too much, there. Too much. Kallandras and Celleriant. Mareo kai di’Lamberto. The wild water. But no. It was more than that: it was Avandar. Warlord.

She turned to glance at the man she could not, for a moment, think of as domicis; his eyes were dark, his expression remote. Teller followed her gaze, and she shifted it, glancing at her arm, her sleeve, the brand hidden.

“We survived. We escorted the Serra Diora—with her sword—to the side of Valedan kai di’Leonne, the man she chose as her husband. And then—Morretz came.” She flinched, closed her eyes, fought for words and found them; they were rough. “Morretz found us, and we came home. We came home late.”

She closed her eyes and opened them again, quickly. The expression on Amarais’ dying face was carved into the darkness beneath her closed lids, a waking nightmare, an endless accusation. She swallowed. “The Terafin called me home. And I’m here. Haerrad is injured—it wouldn’t break my heart if he died. Rymark has claimed—in front of the Twin Kings—the legitimacy of rule.”

“They can’t believe—”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s never mattered. Legitimacy of rule, in the absence of The Terafin, is defined entirely by the ability to take, and hold, the House Council. She could have anointed him in public with her own

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blood and it wouldn't matter. Haerrad won't accept him. Neither will Elonne or Marrick.

"There was a demon in the manse," she added softly.

"There were at least two; one killed Alowan. It was hiding in his cat."

Jewel closed her eyes and opened them again, for the same reason. The den watched her, silent now. Avandar and Ellerson stood by the doors against the walls, their faces absent any expression. She barely glanced at Ellerson, and hated herself for it. He had been here for her den when she hadn't. He didn't deserve her anger or her pain, and she couldn't quite stop it. But she could stop herself from *acting* on it, and that would have to do.

She was ready when the knock at the outer doors interrupted her silence; she'd expected it. Ellerson left immediately, and in his absence, she glanced around the well-lit table, its perfect, polished surface nothing at all like the kitchen's. People's feet were not on the tabletop either; years of habit and some well-drilled lessons had made that almost unthinkable.

She knew what they wanted. She knew.

But The Terafin was dead. It had been less than a day.

She knew, Avandar said, as she clenched her teeth against the intrusion of his silent voice. It was another thing she did not want, and he was well aware of it. *She called you home because she knew. She held her post, Jewel; she held it for as long as she was capable of doing so—with the aid of your den. But she held it for a reason.*

Ellerson returned. He bowed, briefly, toward the table. "Jewel, Finch, Teller. Your presence has been requested by Gabriel ATerafin. The House Council is meeting within the half hour."

The Council Hall was packed. Jester and Angel accompanied them, as adjutants; it was allowed, but today, they were likely to be consigned to the galleries above. Avandar, as domicis, was allowed to stand behind Jewel's chair, and today, she felt his dour presence as a solid comfort; he was normal. Nothing else was.

Sigurne Mellifas stood by the door, her face unusually pale, her eyes ringed in dark circles. She looked older than she had the last time Jewel had seen her, although perhaps that was a kindness of memory. Older, she looked harsher. The almost grandmotherly frailty with which she usually cloaked her power had been discarded; she reminded Jewel of no one so much as Yollana, Matriarch of the Havalla Voyani. It was a strangely comforting thought.

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Every member of the House Council who entered those doors was required to stand a moment in front of Sigurne. Only Jewel could see the light that the mage wove in the air between them. Every member of the House Council was also required to accept a very plain, gold band from the hands of the mage. Jewel had seen their like only once before; she knew what purpose they served. They exposed the demonic, if it was hidden safely within human flesh.

Jewel took hers without comment and slid it over her finger. When it failed to melt, she said, “Member Mellifas. Guildmaster.”

“ATerafin.” The reply was cautious and remote.

“The ring is not necessary. I can see.”

“The rings were made fifteen—perhaps sixteen—years ago. They serve a purpose.”

“Yes. But it is not a purpose that this meeting requires. I am here.” When Sigurne failed to move, Jewel said, in a much lower tone of voice, “Ours cannot be the only House thus infiltrated; the rings might serve a better purpose offered to any other House Council.” She liked this woman; she always had. But as she stepped over the threshold into the Council Hall, she accepted that her affection changed nothing. She lifted her voice. The acoustics in the hall were very fine. “The House Council meeting is a matter of both urgency and privacy. There is much to be discussed here that is not the business of those who are not Terafin and not appointed to the House Council.

“We appreciate your concern,” she added, her voice loud enough to fill a hall that was becoming silent as people left off their smaller conversations to listen. “And we value it highly. It is seldom that the Guildmaster of the Order oversees such tasks. But I have returned from the armies in the South, and I can serve the same function as your spells and your rings. I am ATerafin,” she added. “This is my home.”

Sigurne studied Jewel’s face for a long, long moment, and then she nodded. She gathered the rings that Jewel had so pointedly—and publicly—refused. “ATerafin.”

“Guildmaster.”

Sigurne left. Jewel hoped that she retreated to a quiet, warm room that had both tea and a bed. Given Sigurne, and given Sigurne’s almost legendary hatred of demons, she highly doubted that was in the guildmaster’s immediate future.

* * *

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There was no blood on the floor. Jewel crossed it, looked at the marble beneath her feet; there was no sign at all that the woman who had ruled this House for decades had died here less than a day ago. The table had been repaired—in haste, and probably with magic—and the sundered chairs had been replaced; were it not for the chair that sat empty at the table's head, this might have been a normal day, a normal meeting.

But the chair did sit empty. Jewel glanced at it, hoping against hope that The Terafin would stride through those doors to occupy it once again. She was probably the only member of the House Council who watched the empty chair with that desire. It drew all eyes. Haerrad, injured, was nonetheless seated, and if there was one blessing today, it was the fact that the whole of his ire was focused on Rymark ATerafin. Elonne watched Rymark as well; hells, they all did. Rymark had produced a document—signed by The Terafin, and witnessed by the right-kin—that proclaimed Rymark ATerafin heir. They expected him to produce it again, at this meeting.

But for a man who held such a document in his keeping, he looked as grim and angry as Haerrad. Jewel frowned.

When the House Council had taken their seats, and the adjutants—the full complement—had been, as Jewel suspected they would, removed to the galleries, Gabriel ATerafin rose. He was not, technically right-kin, because there was no Terafin—but no one sought to silence him as he opened the meeting.

“We are here, today, to discuss two issues.” Save for only his voice, the room was silent. “The first, the matter of The Terafin's funeral.”

Cautious words returned. He let them. Jewel was silent, but Finch and Teller were not, although half of their muted conversation was in den-sign. She watched. They were not—quite—at home in this hall. Had The Terafin been at the head of the table, Jewel would have been. She had spent half her life as a member of this Council, and if the first four years had been rough—and they had—she had grown accustomed to the smooth, polite talk that served as barbed argument across this large room.

She had no words to offer. The single, public act of defiance that had marked her return to the Hall had momentarily robbed her of voice. She wanted to go to the Terafin shrine now, with The Terafin's corpse; she wanted to lay it upon the altar and wait. She wanted to pay her final respects in the privacy of that remote shrine—and she was certain it would never happen.

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“Three days,” Haerrad said. “If the funeral begins on the second of Henden—”

“It is not enough time,” Elonne countered, voice cool. “She was The Terafin, not the head of a lesser House. The Kings will, no doubt, be in attendance, and with them, the Astari. We may inform them that the funeral is three days hence, but we will be invited to reconsider that date.”

“The Kings are not Terafin,” Haerrad snapped.

“No. But if we hold the funeral in three days, they will not be here to pay their respects—and every other member of note in any of The Ten will mark their absence.”

Jewel almost found herself agreeing with Haerrad, and that was never a good sign; she chose silence. Teller, however, did not. He concurred with Elonne. And so it went, until Gabriel raised a hand.

“The Terafin deserves the respect of the Kings.” His voice was quiet. It was also resonant.

Haerrad opened his mouth, thought better of words, and closed it again.

The sixth day of Henden was set as the first day of the funeral rites.

The first *day*. As a concept, this was new to Jewel. Glancing at Teller and Finch, she saw signs of a similar lack of comprehension, but they, like she, kept their ignorance to themselves, alleviating it by inference as they listened. The funeral rites of monarchs and Exalted were, apparently, extended to the ruling head of each of The Ten, from the greatest to the least, and one day did not suffice to allow the correct respect—and presumed grief—of the populace to be shown.

Therefore the first day was given to grief and respect, and it was the first day rites that would almost certainly draw every man, woman, and child of power or notable rank in the City through the Terafin gates. The House Council agreed on a staggering sum of money to be devoted to the grounds and the manse itself in preparation for those three days; had they the luxury of time, the sum would, of course, be less.

Jewel, who hated the extravagance of excessive pomp and display, could find no voice to raise objection. This was for The Terafin, and it would be *seen*. It wouldn't be seen by Amaraïs, but it didn't matter. She wanted the world to know just how valued, how important, how beloved The Terafin had been, and if the world operated on money, she would live with that.

Of course, it wasn't about Amaraïs for much of the House Council.

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They were jackals, carrion creatures; they wanted the House. It was about the House itself. Respect paid to The Terafin accrued to the House they wanted to rule in the very near future. She *bated* the conflation of respect and grief with bolstering their own future identities—it made her want to scream in fury.

She didn't. She swallowed the rage, instead—because she knew that half of it was directed at herself. She came home *too late*. She *had known* what The Terafin faced—and she left her to face it alone. There had been demons and death in the South; things ancient and terrifying. But nothing she had seen in the South seemed to justify her absence from the House—and the death of The Terafin only confirmed its pointlessness.

“The second order of business.” Gabriel's crisp, clear voice broke her train of thought—and she wanted it broken. She dragged her gaze from the surface of the Council Hall table and fastened it onto the man who had been right-kin. But she glanced at Rymark on the way; he was silent, his expression angrier than it had been. He did not rise; he did not raise hand or voice; he did not call upon the House Council to once again witness his presentation of claim.

“In the absence of an acclaimed House Ruler, House Terafin will require a regent. I assume there *is* an absence of such acclaim.”

Silence.

Haerrad, grinning, said, “Clearly.”

“The House Council will now entertain the claims of those who feel they are worthy to rule House Terafin.”

Elonne rose first. She rose slowly, gracefully, deliberately. She gave the entire Council table one steady measured glance. “I am Elonne Derranoste ATerafin. I have been responsible for the merchant routes along the Southern Annagarian coast, and to the Western Kingdoms, and if the Council deems it wise, I will lead Terafin.”

Gabriel did not call for a vote. Gerridon ATerafin rose. He was a junior Council member, although he was no longer *the* Junior Council member; that was reserved for Finch. Or Teller. “I offer support to Elonne's claim.”

“Thank you, Councillor,” Gabriel said. Gerridon sat.

Haerrad rose next, but he waited until Elonne had fully resumed her seat to do so. “I am Haerrad Jorgan ATerafin. The more difficult landlocked routes in the Dominion have been mine; they have prospered, even during the war. In my hands, Terafin will likewise prosper, regardless of events that occur outside our domain.”

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Sabienne ATerafin rose from across the table. “I will support Haerrad’s claim,” she said quietly. “Given the manner of both Alowan and The Terafin’s deaths, a Lord who retains his power during martial difficulties is necessary.”

“Thank you, Councillor.”

Haerrad took longer to sit than Elonne had.

Marrick rose third. He was the only man to smile at the Council table, but it was a restrained smile, for Marrick. “I am Marrick Bennett ATerafin,” he said, bowing slightly. “I am not, it is true, martial—but during my tenure as Councillor, I have made gains within the Queens’ Court, on behalf of the House, and within the Makers’ Guild; Guildmaster ADELios has thrice in the past year accepted invitations to the House—when they have come from me. Such are the alliances I have built, and will continue to build, to strengthen Terafin when I rule.”

To Jewel’s slight surprise, Iain ATerafin rose. Of those who had taken a stand, he was the oldest. His hair was white. His clothing was neat, tidy, and entirely unremarkable; it was neither too fine nor too coarse. He was, according to Teller, very good at his job—which involved the internal financial workings of the manse itself. He rarely raised his voice, but no one doubted that he had a spine; the Master of the Household Staff reported to him when more staff was required, in her opinion. She did not always get that staff, and Iain was demonstrably still alive.

“I support Marrick in his claim,” Iain said quietly. Of the support offered, Iain’s was the most significant, and judging by the expression on Haerrad’s face, Jewel was not the only person to be surprised.

“Thank you, Councillor,” Gabriel said. He gazed across the table.

Rymark, his son, rose. “I am Rymark Garriston ATerafin. I claim the right of rule by designation.”

“By designation,” Haerrad said, pushing himself up from the table in obvious anger. “Now that the Kings do not crowd our shoulders, let us see your document.”

“It is in the keeping of Gabriel ATerafin.”

All eyes turned to Gabriel. Gabriel met his son’s angry gaze, and it seemed to Jewel that it was Gabriel who blinked first. But if he did, he did not then produce the offensive document Haerrad had demanded. He said, instead, “Who stands as Rymark Garriston ATerafin’s second?”

Verdian ATerafin stood. She was very much a younger version of Elonne, although her hair was paler, and her eyes gray; she was, and had

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always been, striking. She served as liaison with the Port Authority. “I support Rymark ATerafin’s claim.”

“Very well. It must now be asked: will three of you cede your claim to any other?”

Silence.

Gabriel nodded; the answer—or lack—was not a surprise to anyone who crowded this room. “Put forth your nominations for regent.”

Teller rose. “I nominate Gabriel Garriston ATerafin as regent. He has served as right-kin for decades, and he knows the political affiliates of the House, and its internal structure, well. If the office of right-kin becomes the office of Regent, there will be very little disruption in House Business, as seen from the outside.”

Haerrad drew breath, which usually served as a warning. But Haerrad’s supporter, Sabienne, rose. “I will second that nomination. Gabriel ATerafin has chosen to support no claim to the House Seat; he has made no claim himself. Both of these facts are necessary in any Regent the Council now chooses—and only those who are otherwise very Junior could claim to do neither. The strongest members of this Council cannot take the Regency cleanly—if at all. Gabriel has the experience necessary to guide the House while the Council considers all claimants, and their worth.”

She sat.

Haerrad did not speak further, although Jewel imagined there would be many words said after the meeting was at last over.

Gabriel said, “I will accept the nomination with a clear understanding that when The Terafin is chosen, I will retire.”

“And if you do not serve as Regent?” Teller asked.

“I will retire now. A man cannot be right-kin to more than one Lord in his life.”

It was Teller who now turned to the table, in much the same way. “Gabriel ATerafin as regent,” he said clearly and in a voice Jewel hardly recognized. “Vote.”