

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Averalaan, 21st Scaral, 410 AA - 25th Holding**

The single door to the apartment opened silently into a darkened room. A small figure slid round the edge of the frame and across the threshold before swinging the door quickly, and quietly, shut. He stepped over the bedrolls that lay in a more-or-less orderly row between the hallway and the kitchen, and was only cursed once when he stepped on an outstretched hand.

"Sorry," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. The apology was taken about as well as it was given, and he heard another sleepy curse at his back. He didn't really care. A lamp burned low in the kitchen, and he knew that Jay would still be at her work, whatever it was.

"Jay?" He whispered.

She sat at a long, wide table that had been crammed beneath the window between two blackened walls. Her hair was shoved up and pinned in a messy, hasty brown bunch, and her shoulders were hunched. The lamplight played around her sitting form like a halo.

"Jay?"

"What is it?" The light caught her profile as she turned, sharpening an already slender, almost patrician nose, and a slightly pointed chin. "What is it?" She said again, the voice matching the profile.

As his eyes got better accustomed to the light, he could see the dark rings under her eyes. In front of the lamp, just over her shoulder, he could see a slate, and beneath it, parchment. Inks were to the left, chalk to the right. She was practicing her reading and writing.

Jewel was the smartest person Carver had ever met. That was why he followed her and let her tell him what to do -- there wasn't any problem that she couldn't solve.

Until now.

#

Jewel -- called Jay by anyone who wanted to live out the week -- was tired. The season had been uncommonly cold, and the living to be made off the pockets of the more wealthy -- the truly wealthy never made it this far into the city -- had been bad. She'd had to rescue Angel not once, but twice when his fingers had been slowed by the cold and his legs hadn't carried him

away from the resulting trouble as fast as they should've, and she'd narrowly managed to avoid losing Jester to Carmenta's gang in the next holding. Which, of course, had cost her a lot of money.

Added to that was the worry of clothing -- Arann's didn't fit him again, and Angel had lost halves of two sleeves, to name two -- food and shelter. She had been taught numbers and rudimentary reading and writing by her father before his death and by Old Rath after it, and she struggled with both in the poor light, trying to figure out the best way to make ends meet. A sense of responsibility had been driven into her so sharply, lean years living off the streets couldn't shake it.

Which was why she was the leader of her hand-chosen crew, but wasn't why she felt twice her fifteen years. *Don't do it, Carver*, she thought as she set the chalk aside and sat back an inch or two -- just enough to give the lamplight play across Carver's face. His skin was ruddy with the chill air, and his hair, cut on an angle that leapt from his right cheek to his forehead, hung over his right eye like a black patch. He was thin and scraggly, as most of her boys were -- only Arann stood out as the exception -- but his cheekbones were high and fine; he looked like the urchin bastard of one of the patriciate's lords. When he was older -- if he survived to be older -- he was going to be damned dangerous.

*Don't do this to me.*

He couldn't hear her of course, and had he been able to, he wouldn't have listened. It wasn't his way.

"You were out in the tunnels again, weren't you?" It wasn't really a question -- more an accusation.

Carver's head dropped until his chin hit his chest. He swallowed. None of the bravado or the spit-and-fight of his usual expression was anywhere to be seen. He mumbled an apology -- a sincere one.

When she heard it, Jay Markess became quite still in the darkened room. She was bright, all right, and it didn't take much to put two and two together. "Where's Lander?" Her voice was much sharper than she'd intended it to be. Worry did that.

Carver shook his dark head from side to side without raising his face.

Jewel was one year Carver's senior, and three inches shorter, but for sheer speed, no one in the den but Duster matched her. Carver didn't see her move, and didn't have a chance to get out of her way, not that he'd've been stupid enough to take it.

She caught him by the collar and the mane, and yanked his head up.

"What the hells were you doing in the maze?"

"I --"

"Didn't I give you orders?"

"Yes!"

"Were they too hard to understand?" She shook him, hard. "Kalliaris' Curse! Why did I ever think you had a brain?" Tears started at the corners of his eyes, and his lip sunk slightly in -- enough to tell her that he was biting it. The anger left her in a rush, and she felt the chill in the air as if there were no fire in the grate. There wasn't much of one.

"Blood of the Mother, Carver," she said, as she released him and turned away. "Was this his idea or yours?" She knew the answer without having to ask the question, but she wanted to hear what he had to say.

There was a long pause before he answered, but he answered. "Mine."

She nodded as she stared at the table top, seeing Lander's face, and not the slate and chalk, parchment and quill. He was as pale as Carver, but his hair was the usual mousy brown of the street. It was also a good deal shorter, and usually tucked under a thick cap that rested just above the line of his brow. Made it hard to see his eyes.

She was certain that she never would see them again.

"Yours," she said quietly. Carver was telling the truth. It was the only rule she demanded of her den, that no one lie to her. He said nothing.

"How could you, after Fisher and Lefty?"

"We weren't even sure they got lost in the Labyrinth," Carver began, defensively. Then he saw her face as she spun on the spot. Her glare was enough to silence him. "We were being chased by Carmenta's gang."

"So what else is new?"

Carver shook his head, and this time there was a flash of real anger in his eyes. "This time was different -- they were waiting for us in our holding. We didn't have a choice. They had us boxed in at Fennel's old space.

"Honest, Jay -- we were just going to skim the edges of the maze -- we weren't going to go deeper into the tunnels."

She took a breath, and then forced her lungs to expand around it. Relax. Just relax. Carmenta. Paying him off for Jester's release had been a risk, and it was clear that this year, at least, that risk had been a bad one, if he now felt that he could just harvest the rest of her gang in their own territory. She forced her hands to be steady, but nothing could take the edge out of her voice. "What happened?"

"We got down into the tunnels and we hid close to surface -- but Carmenta's boys were really close on our heels. I told Lander to be cool -- that they couldn't find us if they didn't know the way in -- but they made a lot of noise, and he bolted."

Jewel nodded grimly. The streets hadn't been kind to any of her den -- but they'd been damned cruel to Lander. He was an easy one to panic. "He ran in."

Carver swallowed. "I tried to follow him."

"And?"

"Nothing. He couldn't have been more than twenty feet ahead of me."

"Did you hear anything?"

Carver's hair swirled across the front of his face as he shook his head.

Jay exhaled.

"What is it, Jay? What's going on in the tunnels?"

"I don't know." She folded her arms tightly across her chest. "But it may be time to find out."

"What?"

"We've lost the maze as an advantage, because we don't dare use it."

Carver nodded slowly.

"But I'll be damned if something that's preying on my den is going to get any use out of it either." She rolled her lower lip between her teeth and her brows gathered loosely above the bridge of her nose. Carver was familiar with the expression; he saw it often. "But I promise you this. It's time to get rid of Carmenta."

#

Morning. Sun across the table, through the glass of a lamp long guttered. In the growing light, the tired lines of a young woman's face, shadowed by fallen strands of hair and little sleep. Jay Markess was weary, but too worried to sleep. It happened.

The labyrinths beneath the city of Averalaan were not very complicated once you'd travelled them for a month or two. But for that month or two, you wanted a guide, and a damned good one. There were places where the tunnels were patchy and badly worn -- holes suddenly gaped up out of the shadows, and it was easy to break an arm or a leg, or do worse, if you ran into one.

The labyrinth was a dark place, set feet or yards beneath the surface of

Averalaan's busiest -- and oldest -- streets. Parts of it were carved, smooth stone, and parts of it worm-ridden wood; like a giant web, it sprawled in shadow -- and not even Jewel had a clear idea of where its heart lay, or what was in it. Neither in nightmare or reality had she ventured that far in.

But she'd been brave enough to dare more than its edges, and she'd discovered that the passages opened up into all sorts of places -- abandoned warehouses, yes, but also into the forgotten sub-basements of buildings that merchants still used. They opened up into the debris of old alleys and the glittering streets of the merchant's market; they entered into the darkness beneath the silent crypts of all but the highest of Churches. The church crypts were the safest place to hide, because the thought of all the dead didn't bother Jewel -- it was the living she had to worry about.

No -- that wasn't always true. Sometimes the dead came to haunt her. Fisher. She grimaced. Her den still clung to the faint hope that Fisher and Lefty were alive, but Jewel had none. She *knew* they were dead, with the same certainty that she knew that Lander was gone for good. There were times it struck her like that -- so deep in the gut it went beyond mere instinct, so strong that it couldn't be ignored. She wasn't a fool; any time in the past that she'd tried to ignore the 'feeling', it had gone the worse for her. She'd learned to listen to it.

Which was why she wouldn't let any of her den go off to the labyrinth to search for their lost brothers. There was death there. Maybe there had always been death there.

The maze was a secret that had been lost for centuries -- if anyone had ever known about it -- or so she'd been told; not even the oh-so-smart scholars in their white and gold towers had any clue that it existed. Jewel Markess had been taught about the labyrinths by Old Rath, self-professed gentleman thief, and one of the few people in the streets who'd managed to survive to be called old. How Rath had discovered the maze, he would never say, and there were areas of the labyrinth that he had never shown her. Of course, he denied this strenuously, and of course he knew she knew he was lying, but there were whole branches of tunnels that he refused to explore.

*There was a reason these tunnels were buried*, he would tell her, his face a set study of deeply etched lines.

*Oh? What was that?*

*If I knew, I wouldn't tell you, you little thief. You never listen to anything I say, anyway.*

It wasn't true. She listened to everything he said -- she just didn't follow the parts of it that were obviously the products of superstition or age.

But she discovered that it wasn't all just age. She should have known better, then. That's when she should've given the tunnels up for good.

There were crypts that weren't only Church crypts; there were tunnels, fine and grand, that led into dark places, old places. She shivered, remembering; she and Duster had wandered right into a crypt -- but the statues atop the great stone coffins were no normal statues; the makerborn -- maybe even an Artisan -- had crafted their lifeless flesh. She should've known it, seeing them firsthand; they were of white stone, except where lines of silver and gold had been laid against their pale, chiselled hair; they were fine-featured and beautiful in a way that nothing in Jewel's life had ever been.

What lay beneath them? No commoner, and no common noble, either. Maybe Kings, although the faces of the ones that adorned the coin of the realm certainly weren't as lovely -- as real -- as these. It was hard to pull her eyes away; hard to remember how she'd come this way, and what, on the surface above, hid this crypt from sight. She'd known better, suddenly, than to try to touch 'em, but Duster -- Duster's hand still bore the scar.

*Here lie the Oathbreakers in no restful sleep, until they might wake to fulfill their oath and restore honour to the lineage of the Firstborn Houses. Wake them not, you who venture here to bear witness.*

She hadn't understood most of what was said until months later, because she hadn't dared ask Old Rath what the words meant, except in ones and twos. He'd've known that she'd disobeyed him, then -- and knowing it, he'd've had to refuse to help her. But that had been a bad place. And she should have known that where there was one, there were many.

Dented tin plates and knives that had to be straightened every time they were used made an awkward pattern across the thick table as she pushed them too and fro, wanting their noise to distract her. Was it her fault that Fisher and Lefty were gone?

She pushed her chair back from the table and perched it precariously against the wall. Didn't matter whose fault it was, after all. Only mattered that it didn't happen again.

Lander. She closed her eyes and, in the darkness behind her lids, listened to the thrum of the pulse at her throat. The labyrinth had been their advantage, and she was now willing to give it up. Problem was that she didn't know who to give it up to. Not another den, and not another holding -

- that much was clear. Short of Carmenta, and maybe Hannes, there wasn't anyone that she wanted dead enough to give to the maze. Because she *knew* that the death was a terrible one. She just didn't know what caused it. That was the problem with 'feeling'. It gave you the truth without giving you anything you could show your friends -- like, say, facts.

*Don't ever tell anyone about your 'feelings', Jay, Old Rath had told her, years ago, when she'd first managed to convince him that they were real. She remembered thinking that it would make him happy; it made him strange and intense instead. Don't tell them. If you're lucky, you'll just be ridiculed as a young child with an overactive imagination. If you're unlucky, they'll know what it means, and you'll be pressed into service, or forced into it.* He'd caught her by the arms, and his grip was as tight as it had ever been. Frightened her, too -- but back then, she was easier to spook.

*Why? Why can't I tell them? What does it mean?*

*Just don't do it. You promise me, girl, or I won't teach you anything else. Don't tell anyone.* She'd promised. Aside from her telling her denmates -- who had a right to know the truth about who they were following -- she'd kept that promise.

She could leave the holdings and try to sneak into the High City, maybe hook up with a member of the Order of Knowledge. She tossed her head in derision. That would be a great idea. Either she'd find an old, addled man who couldn't be pulled out of his books, or she'd find a power-crazed mage who'd be worse, in the long run, than the maze itself.

Her hair flew free as she shook her head. They wouldn't take her seriously if they listened at all. The same could be said of the Magisterium's sentries. Each of the hundred holdings was policed by three pairs of these guards; the merchants called them the magisterians, although it wasn't really an official title, and that had become their rank in the streets of Averalaaan.

Well, in the common streets, it was.

And the magisterians weren't going to listen to a fifteen year old almost-woman tell them that three of her den-kin had disappeared into a mysterious maze beneath the city that they'd never heard of. They had more important crimes to worry about than runaways -- and all of her den-kin were already that.

Even if they did listen, they weren't likely to be able to help -- what real authority did a magisterian have? No. The maze needed someone bigger, or more able to deal with it. Why? She ground her teeth in frustration. She knew the answer, but not the question; it was always that way with the

'feeling'.

Sighing, she got out of her chair. She'd thought herself round in circles and still come up with no answers. It was time to admit that she needed a little help. And admitting that was harder than cutting off her right hand -- it just wasn't harder than the idea of losing another of her den -- or of letting the three that were dead go unavenged. She walked out of the kitchen into the big room; five pairs of eyes descended on her at once. Arann and Jester were out near the market edges bringing -- one hoped -- the evening's meal.

"Well?" Duster said, getting to her feet and squaring her shoulders.

"You and Carver come with me. The rest of you, stay put."

Duster rolled her dark eyes. "Look, Jay -- what by the long night are we going to do about Lander?"

"There's nothing we can do. He's gone. Don't even think it, Finch," she added, as she caught a restless movement to her right. "He's gone." She squared her own shoulders as she met Duster's steel-jawed glare. Duster had the most vicious temper of the den, and wasn't above letting a violent impulse get the better of her. Luckily, she was balanced by a fine sense of where her loyalties lay. It was only at times like this, with loyalties pulling in either direction, that she was hard to manage. "If he'd listened to me in the first place, we wouldn't have to worry. Now, it's too late for him." She took in the silence, ground her teeth a bit, and then pulled her hair out of her eyes and rearranged her scarf over it. "Look -- I've never given you bad advice about anything important. This is important. Don't go to the maze."

Angel raised his head; a shock of white-blond hair was bound by spiraled wire into a long, tall spire. Jewel thought it made him look like an idiot, but at least he looked like a striking idiot. It wasn't an uncommon style in the street, and given that he was her own age, she couldn't treat him like a younger. "Fine. He's gone. But what are we going to do about it?"

"*We* are not going to anything. *I* am going to see old Rath."

"Wait for Arann," Teller said, speaking for the first time. He was small and slight for his age -- thirteen, half-way to fourteen -- and he spoke very rarely, which is why they called him Teller.

"Duster and Carver will do fine. Arann's got his hands full with more important things."

Teller's gaze was measured; she met it firmly and then looked away as she realized that he had been testing her choice, and that he'd taken out of her answer the information he'd been looking for her. Of all of her den, only Duster or Carver had ever been forced into a position where they had to kill.

#

Old Rath lived in the thirty-fifth holding, a scant ten blocks from the holding that Jewel's den called home. But ten blocks in this part of the city could make a difference. Out of a hundred holdings, only three were considered dangerous to the wary passer-through -- and the thirty-fifth was one of those. Rath liked it that way; Jewel was never certain why. Today, she didn't care.

Usually, when she wanted to reach Rath, she ducked into the safety and anonymity of the maze. That wasn't an option anymore, and it made travel much more interesting. Jewel hated it when life was too interesting.

Duster and Carver kept their eyes to either side of the streets, where buildings that had seen better days gave way to the occasional burnt out husk. It was the duty of the various magistrates who governed the city to see to the levelling of such public hazards. Only in the thirty-fifth, thirty-second, and seventeenth holdings did the magistrates mysteriously turn a blind eye.

Not even the magisterians that were assigned here could be relied on; if they were good, they were transferred. Or at least that's what old Rath said. Jewel preferred not to meet magisterians face to face, so she didn't have any basis on which to judge 'good' or 'bad'.

Or she wouldn't have, had she not wandered the streets of the thirty-fifth. It told her all she needed to know about the magisterians in charge. The burnt out buildings and the dirty streets, combined with the chill of the day and the lack of heavy traffic, gave the holding an air of subtle menace that the twenty-fifth didn't have.

She turned to see Duster and Carver were just as spooked. They kept a close eye on the roads, and more particularly on the recessed doorways and long, flat steps that were peopled by men and women who fell silent as they approached.

"Great place old Rath lives in," Duster said, trying to be jaunty. She failed, and she rarely failed.

Jewel didn't answer. Everything on the street had taken on the heightened crispness of form and colour that danger always brought on. She saw the same doorways and stair wells that her den-kin did, but they were harsher, and somehow robbed of the shadows that usually pooled there. Standing out in this stark vision were men and women lounging beneath the magelights that lined the street in pairs. She could see their daggers and the bulges that signalled throwing knives; could see the scars across their faces or exposed

skin; could even see the slight narrowing of eye that indicated interest of a sort that she wanted to avoid.

She walked neither too slowly nor too quickly as she passed them by -- this was a trick that old Rath had taught her when she'd first met him years ago. *Too fast and you look frightened, too slow and you look suspicious.* You didn't want to stand out in the streets. *Of course, if you have to choose one of the two, choose suspicious. Frightened makes you a victim.*

Twice, when nearing a certain intersection or a certain alley, she was forced to make a detour, and it lengthened their journey by a good half-hour. But Duster and Carver were used to her strange commands, and knew better than to question them in a foreign holding. Well, Carver did -- and Duster wouldn't cause trouble in the thirty-fifth.

"Real nice holding," Duster said quietly, as they passed what must have once been a live cat. She grimaced as the smell hit her nostrils and stuck there.

"Shut up, Duster," Carver said, out of the corner of his mouth. Jewel had once again veered off the street, only this time with a look of intent purpose. Carver lengthened his stride and caught up with her. "This the place?" He asked softly, as they came to an easy stop in front of a building.

She nodded. "I know it doesn't look like much on the outside."

Carver raised a black brow. "You can say that again." He shook his head as he looked at the flat, rectangular two-storey building. It had once had windows, and those windows were -- from the looks of the rusted bolts -- barred from the outside. Maybe, before that, they'd had shutters; the paint around the windows didn't look the same as that around the rest of the ... hovel. The wooden supports -- they had to be wood from the way the building appeared to be dangerously tilted to the right -- had seen better days. He hoped.

"Come on. We've -- we've got to hurry." She could hear old Rath telling her to slow down -- but something a lot stronger than his memory and his teaching was tell her speed up.

"You okay, Jay?"

Her nod was curt and quick -- and it was as much a 'no' as she dared utter.

"What is it?" Duster whispered. "What's wrong?"

But of course she couldn't say -- she didn't know. She walked down the small flight of stairs to a grimy, but obviously functional, door. "Down here. Quick." It was a tribute to old Rath that the stairwell was empty.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Jewel said, as she bent down in front of the door and began to retrieve her limited equipment from her inner vest pocket.

"It looks," Carver replied smartly, "like you're going to try to pick old Rath's lock. Have you lost your mind?"

Jewel didn't answer. The lock was a fairly simple one, if you knew what you were doing. She knew it as well as Rath had taught her.

"Can't we knock?" Carver spoke again, nervously shifting from foot to foot. Old Rath was old, but he wasn't weak, addled, or -- more important -- particularly tolerant, and Carver had been on the wrong end of his temper a time or two. "Jay, can't -- ouch!"

"Shut up, Carver," Duster said, her words quiet and chilly. "And keep your damned voice down."

He muttered something under his breath about girls, and they both ignored him. Duster watched the road, looking as nonchalant as possible as she leaned casually back against the wall. After a few seconds, Carver joined her, but his nonchalance looked a shade petulant.

The lock clicked, cleanly and coldly.

"Come on," Jewel said tersely. "Get in." She took the precaution of locking the door behind them.

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"This another of your feelings?" Duster asked, the minute the door was shut.

Jewel nodded almost absently as she scanned the hall. It was a short, narrow passageway that opened out into the room that Rath used for Mother knew what. His bedroom was the first door to the right, a kitchen of dubious cleanliness was the second, and to the left was the great room that he used for limited training.

She knew her way around; she'd been here often enough. There was a basement -- a catch-trap beneath the training room -- that led to a sub-basement, and in that, there was an entrance to the maze. Wasn't easy to get to -- it was two crawl-spaces and a shaky platform away -- but that suited everyone just fine.

Until now. "Carver -- check out the kitchen for anything unusual. Duster, check the room to the left." She chose for herself old Rath's bedroom.

Although the rest of his home was uncluttered and almost stark in its simplicity, his bedroom was the repository of anything that he considered worth keeping. It wasn't, given his age, that much -- but it was cluttered enough that Jewel had to watch where she stepped as she made her way to the bed.

Old Rath could read, write, and force a pleasant tune out of hand-pipes; he could sew after a fashion, cook, and wield a mean long knife. He also owned not one, but two, swords, although she'd never seen him carry either.

Rath was a friend -- probably the only one she had who wasn't also a responsibility. As such, he was highly valued, although she'd never have said as much to him. To anyone, really. Well, maybe on a good day she'd have told Teller. Didn't matter.

Rath understood her well enough. He was impressed that she knew how to read and write, and he'd done everything he could to encourage and foster that skill. He taught her how to manage her den-kin and their infighting; taught her how to handle the enemies that she'd made in the other holdings; even taught her how to use the long dagger she carried, given that she wasn't very large or very strong.

But he'd taught her a little bit more than that: He told her how the city ran -- or how it was supposed to run -- and, more important, who ran what. Because, he'd say, in that serious voice of his, you can't stay on the streets forever, Jay.

*You have*, was the first answer she offered.

She tried not to remember what he'd replied. *You think I'd stay here if things had worked out differently?* He laughed, and it was the bitterest laugh she'd ever heard. *This is all I've got, Jay. But I made it, and I'll hold it with everything I own. Still, there's no damned reason why you should. You've got potential, and you'll waste it or lose it here.*

The bed -- it was years since Jewel had slept in a bed, and it pained her to remember the last time -- was made; it was obvious he hadn't left in a rush. She smoothed a wrinkle out of the ice blue counterpane, and then very gingerly pulled the covers back.

*If you ever need to leave me a message, girl, leave it here.* He'd very carefully removed the knob at right side of the head-board of his bed, and retrieved a furled paper from the hollowed-out post. *It'll catch my attention, and I'll know it's important.*

She nodded, and he added, *I'll do the same for you. You can check it from time to time if you think it's necessary.* He trusted her intuition, although

he'd only ever asked about it once. *Better not to know too much. But you understand that.*

The knob came off the post; she lay it gently against the pillow, smoothing out the wrinkles left by its weight. Pausing to listen for signs of movement in the hall outside, she held her breath. When she was certain that Duster and Carver were still occupied, she reached in and pulled out a flattened, curled up set of papers. These she lay on the bed as if they were too heavy to hold; she brushed the rounded surface of the post-knob and then replaced it carefully. There was something here. He'd left her word. Her hands shook as she started to unwind the string that held them together.

"Jay?" Duster's voice nearly sent her through the roof; it was tense and strained. She shoved the papers up her loosely fitted sleeve, straightened her vest, and headed for the door. "What's the problem?" It was open.

"I was hoping you could answer that," Old Rath said, as he stepped lightly into the room, one hand on Duster's shoulder, the other on Carver's mid-arm. "What are you doing in my place?"

Jewel had never seen his eyes so dark or heard his voice so cold. She blinked, and his expression softened somewhat; the anger looked a little less icy.

"Came to talk to you," Jewel said, crossing her arms carefully.

"And it was so important that you had to pick the lock instead of waiting?"

She shrugged and then hung her head a bit. "Yeah."

His fingers were white against the dark cloth of either Duster or Carver's shoulder. "And these two?"

"Look -- you know the situation with the maze. I had to come here on foot. I don't do the thirty-fifth on my own. No one smart does." Their eyes locked; it was Jewel who was forced, in the end, to look away.

Having won the quiet contest, Rath relaxed. "What was so important?"

"Lander's gone as well."

Old Rath's lids were heavy as he narrowed his eyes. "When?"

"Yesterday. Early evening."

"And?"

"We -- we think he was followed into the maze. Carmenta's gang."

"I see." Pause. "Were you there?"

"No. Carver was."

Rath looked down at Carver, and then at his hands. With a shrug, and a none too gentle shove, he released both of his captives to the care of their leader. "Carmenta's den is?"

"Twenty-sixth. They nest above Melissa's place, near the Corkscrew."

"There's no maze-door near the Corkscrew."

"You'd know," Jewel replied. "But it doesn't matter. If they know about the maze, they'll be in it like a pack of rats. We'll lose our advantage. And you know Carmenta -- word of the maze'll hit the streets like rain in a sea storm."

"I see." Rath was silent for a long time.

"Rath?"

"Go home, Jewel." She saw the smooth surface of his lids as he grimaced and closed his eyes for the briefest of moments. "I've kept out of the maze for long enough now. I'll find Lander for you. If he's injured somewhere in the maze, he'll have left some sort of trail. If there's something there . . ."

He turned a dark eye on Carver. "Where did you say you entered the tunnels?"

"Fennel's old space. At the edge of the holding."

"The warehouse?"

"Whatever. It's not used for much right now."

"Good." Rath stepped into the hall, and very pointedly held the door to his room open. "Ladies, gentleman. If you'd care to depart?"

"What?" Duster said, but it was barely more than a whisper.

Rath still had keen ears. He turned his head slowly, pivoting it on a perfectly still neck. "Get lost."

They didn't have to be told twice, and if they didn't mob the door, it was only because there were three of them, and three made a poor mob.

"Where are you going?"

"You told us to get lost," Duster replied, hand on the knob of the closed door.

Rath sighed, and it was a weary, irritable sound. "Use the underground."

No one moved.

"Well?"

Duster and Carver cast surreptitious glances at Jewel. It was the only time they really looked their age. Jewel, on the other hand, who mentally squared her shoulders, seemed truly adult.

"We don't use the maze," Jewel said quietly. She couldn't have raised her voice if she'd wanted to.

"I'm not telling you to go very deeply into the maze. Jewel, don't let the events of the last two weeks turn you into a frightened child. The tunnels are the safest way through the holding. Use them."

"No." Very slowly, she let her arms unfold to hang loosely at her sides. "Carmenta's gang is probably wandering around all through it. I won't risk it. And I won't risk any more of my den-kin to it, either."

"Carmenta's gang doesn't know the maze."

"They don't have to to get lucky." Her voice was very, very bitter. "Seems like they already have."

He stared at her for a long time, and then nodded tersely. "I'll meet you back at your den, either with Lander, or with news of him. Don't get yourself killed on the way back."

"Thanks, Rath," she said softly.

Duster opened the door, and she and Carver walked into the street. Only when they had crossed the threshold did Jewel follow; old habit.

She stopped with her back to the closed door for a moment, and then started walking in a crisp, measured step. Her head bobbed slightly as she nodded Duster forward.

"What was that about?" Duster said quietly, pitching her voice low, but keeping the sibilance of whisper out of it. "Carmenta hasn't come anywhere near the maze."

Jewel nodded with a half-smile that wouldn't have fooled a madness-taken simpleton. "Carver -- are we being followed?"

He shrugged. They continued to walk out of the thirty-fifth holding, and three blocks from the east border, Carver's slanted hair bobbed up and down in time to his step.

"Who?"

The tone of voice that answered said, clearly, you-aren't-going-to-believe-this. "Old Rath."

"*Kalliaris*," Jewel murmured. "Smile. Smile on us, Lady." She continued to walk. "Duster, go home. Now. Take a route so twisted even your shadow couldn't follow you." Duster started to speak, and Jewel motioned with the flat of her hand. "Get everyone out."

"But --"

"Don't argue with me. Get everyone out! Take the iron box, and leave everything else. Find a place out of holding to hunker down, and then send a message to us. Send it. Don't come yourself." She met Duster's brown eyes with her own, and Duster suddenly saw that Jewel's face, so well-controlled in expression, was ashen. The den leader turned away and began to walk again. Duster followed, her step easy and confident, her expression pale as light on water.

"Where?"

"The trough. If we're not there, or you don't hear from us again, the den is yours -- and it's your responsibility to keep it safe. Stay out of the maze; never use it again."

"This have something to do with old Rath?"

Jewel swallowed and nodded. "Yeah." She bit her lip, as if biting it could hold back her words. Then she bowed her head and stared at the cobbled stone as it passed beneath her moving feet. "I don't know who it was back there, but I do know that it wasn't Rath."

"What?"

"Rath's dead." Her voice caught on the last word. If not for fear, she might have cried, but she had no time for sorrow. "Now go on, Duster -- or we'll all end up that way as well."

"This the Feeling?"

"Never stronger."

Duster veered to the right and was quickly lost to sight.

"Carver?"

Carver nodded again, his jaunty, cocky movements a stark contrast to his expression. Minutes passed; Jewel almost forgot how to breathe.

Then, "He's following us."

*Kalliaris, please, smile on us. Mother, protect your children. Reymaris, give me the strength to make them pay for the loss of my kin.* She smiled and began to walk in a direction that was almost, but not quite, in the opposite direction from home.

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