



Prologue

*26th of Fabril, 428 A.A.
Terafin Manse, Averalan Aramarelas*

SILVER, GOLD, DIAMOND.
Three trees, in a silent dawn forest.

Shadows cut falling light; the movement of branches in brisk, morning breeze softened the edges of their darkness on the ground. Nothing softened the edges of the woman who stepped across them. Only the chime of metallic leaves broke the silence.

“I saw it *frrsssssst*.” That, and the voice of bored cats. In this particular case, it was Night, but Snow’s hissing growl of a rejoinder was almost instantaneous.

“It’s not *my* fault you are *so slow*.”

There were no servants in the forest; there was no furniture, no carpets that would be instantly rent when the claws came out; there were no statues, no standing vases, no carefully displayed suits of centuries-old armor. Jewel, therefore, let them fight. Their squabbling was almost a comfort, she heard it so often.

It was one of the few things she would take with her when she left. She looked up; the manse in the distance could not be seen beyond the trunks of the many, many trees. She had said her good-byes. Her den, in kind, had said theirs. It had been beyond awkward; only Jester had dared to whisper, “Find him. Find him. Bring him home.”

She had been surprised; had pulled back from a very, very rare hug to catch

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his expression. What she saw in it burned; she looked away—but not before Jester did. Jester of the many masks. Jester, master of hiding in plain sight.

She had no answer. He expected none. Jewel did not make promises she couldn't keep. She made wishes—they all did that. But she didn't know where she was going; didn't know what was expected of her when she arrived there, if she ever did. She knew that Carver was no part of the Oracle's test.

No. That wasn't true.

She prayed that he was no part of that test.

If she could not take her den with her—and for the sake of the House, she could take only one, and even so she was willing to do so because he would not be left behind—she sought to carry things that would remind her of home, and so, she had come to the forest that stood on the edge of the hidden and wild world. Here, silver, gold, and diamond grew as if each were a living thing. The trees themselves shed no leaves.

She gathered the leaves of the *Ellariannatte* first, because they did fall. They were the bridge between her life in the hundred holdings and her life as The Terafin. Even her Oma had approved of the ancient trees that girded the Common, and Jewel had gathered those leaves, as if they were flowers, to lay in the old woman's lap.

She took three; three perfect leaves, each larger than her hand, each edged in ivory.

She rose slowly and made her way to the trees of silver; she was not surprised when a low branch descended until she could comfortably touch it without climbing. Three leaves fell into her hands before that branch rose; they were far heavier than they looked. And smooth. And cold.

Gold was no different, except in weight. The tree offered her three leaves, and she took them, and she found them as heavy, as cold to the touch, although the color was warmer to the eye.

Diamond was different. Harder and sharper, it seemed untouched by something as trivial as morning cold. It was not untouched by sunlight, and when she lifted one leaf to catch the rays of a spoke of light, she winced at the brilliance it produced.

Shadow hissed.

"I told you not to stand behind me," she said, without much sympathy. She lowered the leaf and set it beside the others in a large leather pouch that hung at her waist. That pouch had been a gift from Haval in her early years, and it showed its age.

"We're *bored*. Are we leaving *yet?*?"

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“Soon,” Jewel replied.

“That’s what you said *hours* ago.”

“It was less than fifteen minutes ago, Shadow.”

Cats—at least these ones—weren’t particularly fussy about the accuracy of their grievances. Jewel left the great gray one to mutter as she approached what she thought of as the heart of her forest: the tree of fire. It burned, of course. Since it had grown, its flames had never guttered. It was, in all ways, an impossible creation: a tree that was not consumed by the flames it generated. Warmth emanated from fire, as it did in the world Jewel thought of as real. She stood beneath its bowers, lifting her face as heat banished the morning chill.

And when this tree lowered a branch, she raised a hand far more hesitantly. She had not intended to take its leaves; she had some experience with fire and its aftermath. Instinct argued with experience, and because Jewel was seer-born, instinct won. She accepted the leaves that fell into her upturned palm.

They were warm. The fire that lapped at their edges burned nothing, and as Jewel watched, the flames died; the leaves they had fringed—just as ivory fringed the green of the *Ellariannatte*—were a deep, bright red. The color of new blood.

The cats were not fond of this tree, and only Shadow approached it. “Are you *finished?*” he asked, still aggrieved, still bored.

She exhaled.

“Adam is *waiting.*”

“Yes. Yes, I’m finished.” She slid these leaves into her pouch, praying that they did not consume anything else she carried within it.

Jewel had never been a gardener. She couldn’t name any tree but the *Ellariannatte*. It was ironic, then, that these were the contents: Three leaves from each of her trees. And a lone leaf, something that looked like it should have grown on a tree of iron—and felt it, too. One small vial of fountain water. One dagger, as old as the satchel itself, and just as significant. One small, unadorned wooden box.

In that box lay the hope of a race.

And in that box, beside the lone surviving sapling upon which Summer in the ancient, wild world depended, was a large, fragile book which contained the hope of Jewel’s den.

“Yes,” she said again, when Shadow nudged her with the top of his head. “Let’s go meet Adam.”

The Terafin was unapologetically dressed for the road, not the court. So, too, her companions. Angel and Adam wore Terafin colors—shades of blue, light

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and dark—in layers; the jackets favored by the patriciate were absent; the heavier coats and sweaters favored by laborers, were not. The boots, as well, had been made to endure mud and snow, even if Averalan saw snow seldom. They shouldered packs, Adam's lighter than Angel's by necessity; Adam was slender and light of build.

Terrick carried twice the weight Adam did. He had come in his own clothing, and seemed prepared for Rendish winter. He also wore an ax that the Kings' Swords were only *barely* willing to let him keep.

Kallandras' weapons were daggers—but as a Master Bard of Senniel College, he was considered almost above suspicion. Had the bard carried the ax, there would have been less difficulty.

Avandar was recognized as The Terafin's domicis. He carried no weapons; he shouldered a pack that was equal in weight and bulk to Terrick's. His silence, while cold, was almost deferential, and the Swords were accustomed to making no obvious public note of servants.

Inspections were cursory. The Kings' Swords, while tense, had clearly been given specific instructions. Jewel was surprised—and pleased—to see the way they reacted to her great, winged cats: they acknowledged them as members of the Terafin party. That meant any destructive or unfortunate behavior would be laid at the feet of Terafin, of course. The cats knew it. Jewel knew it. They managed to behave.

They didn't manage to do it silently, but if there were to be miracles today, Jewel didn't want to waste them on the cats.

Only when inspections were complete did the Seneschal appear to guide them to their destination. The halls that the Seneschal led them through were less familiar—and far less grand—than the halls to which Jewel had become accustomed in her tenure in Terafin, but this was not, in the end, a public, a *political* meeting.

Even the pages, so ubiquitous in the palace, were notable by their absence. Were it not for the cats, the procession would have been funereal in its silence, but as it approached the stairs that led into basement, Jewel saw two men, surrounded by the Exalted.

As she approached them, she stumbled. Avandar caught her before the stumble became anything as awkward as a fall. The slight smile King Cormalyn offered made it clear that he understood what had caused it: he—and King Reymalyn—were not dressed as monarchs. They were, of course, well dressed—but no more so than the average successful merchant of Jewel's acquaintance.

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But their eyes were golden. “You yourself are not attired for royalty,” the King said. He offered her his arm, and she almost stumbled again—but that would have been too much embarrassment, even for Jewel. She took the arm, and only realized after how very awkward it would be to offer the Exalted the full obeisance she normally offered them.

She wondered if that was the reason the arm had been extended, and performed the half-bow that her current position allowed with as much grace as she could muster.

The stairs were now well-lit; magestones adorned brass holders meant, at one point, for more economical torches. The arch that led to the basement rooms was likewise well-lit; it looked far more majestic—and forbidding—when seen so clearly. At the base of those stairs was another surprise: Sigurne Melifas. Sigurne offered Jewel the bow that Jewel had been unable to fully offer the Exalted, which furthered her discomfort.

“So,” the mage said as she rose. “You are here.”

Jewel nodded. Her mouth was unexpectedly dry; the informality of the meeting somehow made it seem more—and not less—profound. It was a gesture of trust, an exposure of—of humanity. The Kings had never seemed so normal, so human, before. They were an office. They were a law.

And so, she thought, was she. Yet she was here, and the House over which she had claimed rulership was not. She had stripped herself of almost all of the things that defined her as Terafin.

She struggled to find words to express herself, and failed.

“Will you enter, Terafin?” Sigurne said. If the Kings had chosen informality, the mage had not; she wore lined robes, and the medallion of the guildmaster was on full display. The question seemed ritualistic. She stood between two arches, neither of which contained a door.

“There are two rooms,” Jewel said softly.

“Yes. You have seen only one. Did you wish to see the other?”

“Should I?”

“I cannot answer that. You are seer-born.” At Jewel’s slight wince, she added, “I have seen the room. It is not architecturally as impressive as the one you have already visited.”

“Does it also contain statues?”

“No. Your statuary looks, to the untrained eye, like the work of an Artisan at the peak of his powers. Sadly,” she continued, although her lips creased in a wry smile, “it also looks that way to the trained eye. Master Gilafas was slightly put out when we could not answer his many, *many* questions.”

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“Did he examine the other room?”

“He did.”

“What did he say of it?”

“Almost nothing, Terafin. We are not certain if the unanswered questions posed in the first room displaced Guildmaster Gilafas’ careful consideration of the second; the opinions of the Exalted and the Kings vary.”

“Your opinion?”

“The room is not, in any way the magi could discern, magical in nature. It is, however, obviously magical in nature, given its interior dimensions and the exterior dimensions of the room which houses it,” she added. “It appears to be a seamless, round room, but there are one or two deviations from that description within the interior.” She hesitated again.

The Mother’s Daughter was watching in a neutral silence. “Terafin?”

“Yes,” she finally said, wondering, as she did, if her desire to remain in the city that had been her home for all of her life was now guiding her decision; she could delay her departure by a few minutes. “If the Stone Deepings disgorged the statuary, and the statuary is significant, the other room must be significant as well.”

To her left, facing the arch, was the statuary.

To her right, the unknown. But no, she thought, as she exhaled and forced her shoulders to rest as far down her back as they could, it was *all* unknown. Here, even the familiar was a lie.

If she had intended to inspect this unseen room on her own, her companions quickly disabused her of the notion. Lord Celleriant’s glance was cool and autocratic; he offered the Exalted and the Kings no respect as he moved past The Terafin toward the arch that led away from the statuary. He offered no obvious disrespect, and that was probably the most she could hope for.

Kallandras offered the Exalted a very fluid bow, and rose. His grin, as he met Celleriant’s rather cool glance, was both wry and amused. He intended to enter the cavern at the side of the Arianni Lord.

Avandar, content to walk behind the august body of rulers, now closed the gap; Shadow hissed. But Angel joined Jewel as well, his fingers dancing in brief, curt sign.

She nodded, and he said something to Terrick in a language that was only vaguely familiar to her; Rendish, unlike Torra, was not a common street tongue.

To Jewel’s surprise, the cats were silent. Silent, still, devoid of the usual near-violence that accompanied their territorial squabbles. They looked at the

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arch, and the shadows that lay beyond it, as if they were momentarily sharing one mind.

Then, more disturbing, they turned that same stare on her. Waiting. Judging.

Celleriant said, "I prefer them this way," as if she'd given voice to the sharp, sudden discomfort they caused.

"Why?" She walked toward the arch.

"It is when they forget themselves, Lady—when they forget you—that they stand revealed."

"As what? Predators? Threats?"

"Both."

She grimaced. "They're *cats*, Celleriant."

"No, Lady, they are not."

Shadow hissed.

She glanced down at him. "I won't order you to accompany me," she told him. "But I swear to all gods living and dead that you will suffer if you cause any injuries while I'm in the room."

He glanced pointedly at Night and Snow.

"They count. I mean it."

Snow sniffed and turned his head to look at anything else.

Night, however, said, "*How* will we suffer?"

"I'm not sure yet," she replied, without pause for anything but breath. "I'll need time to come up with something appropriate."

He hissed.

"I could plant you," she offered.

His eyes rounded and his ears flattened. Celleriant—damn it—drew sword, and the resultant blue light scattered across the flat, smooth surface of stone in its various shapes as if it were water.

"Celleriant," she said, her voice far colder than it had been when she had admonished the cats. "They are never going to try to kill *me*."

His silver eyes narrowed. "Will they not?"

"No." They had already tried once, and Celleriant knew it; the Kings and the Exalted did not.

Arianni lips thinned into a shape that resembled a smile. "A pity."

"They're not *Kialli*."

"No, Terafin, they are not—but you have seen them kill my kin."

And she had.

"They are a challenge. They are a test. They ride the storms with an ease only the adepts can achieve."

"They have wings," she pointed out.

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“Wings are not required.” He did not sheathe his sword. “Viandaran.”

Avandar nodded and preceded Jewel through the arch. Celleriant followed as Angel came to stand by her side. “You don’t trust the room,” he said quietly.

She really didn’t. She had walked once through the arch opposite this one, but on that day, she’d been terrified of the Kings, the Exalted, and the Lord of the Compact; the contents of the room—right up until a statue began to move—had been of lesser concern.

The Kings did not wait in this one. As she stepped beneath the arch, the shadows deepened; her eyes did not adjust quickly to the lack of the harsher magelights that now adorned the outer halls.

Avandar.

Light flared in the darkness directly ahead of her as Avandar responded to her request. A spark of pale gold appeared in his cupped palms, lending an orange-red glow to his hands. He whispered a word and it rose, gaining brightness as it did. The floor beneath his feet—beneath all of their feet—took on visible texture.

Jewel stiffened. Beneath her feet, the floor was stone—but it was not the impressive, worked stone of the palace. It was worn and rough, as if rivers had carved their way, slowly, through dense earth, long before she chose to tread here. It reminded her of the narrow pathways carved through the Stone Deepings.

“Yes,” Avandar said, although she hadn’t spoken. “They quarried the Deepings, when they built these foundations.”

“The palace isn’t old enough—” She caught the words and held them. She felt his smile as she approached his back. “The undercity.”

“Yes, Jewel. Except in your dreams, I have never seen the ruins of that ancient place—but I know what it looked like at the height of its power.”

“It didn’t look like this.”

“No.” He let his arms fall to his sides; the light continued to shine, as if it were a trapped star.

“I don’t understand the purpose of this room.”

“No. No more do I, or the god-born. Do you understand the purpose of the room you call a statuary?”

She started to say yes, and paused. “I understand the purpose it serves for *me*.”

“Yes. But it is not in the Terafin manse; it is housed in its entirety within *Avantari*.”

“It’s not.”

He smiled, and this time, turned to face her. “No, Terafin, it is not. It

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touches wild and hidden places; it does not travel *to* them, but it is of them. As is this.”

“It looks exactly like the Stone Deepings in the mountains.”

He glanced, briefly, around the shadowed cavern of a room. “It does not,” was his soft reply. “Not to me. But you are seer-born. Lord Celleriant?”

Celleriant’s blade shed as much light as Avandar’s spell, although it was a colder, harsher illumination. He said nothing.

Jewel turned to Angel. She gestured in the dim light. *What do you see?* The question had once been meant for those rare situations in which Duster or Carver played point while the others remained hidden, but Angel understood what she asked.

“I see a room,” he told her. “The ceilings are as tall as the Terafin foyer. The floors are smooth, slab stone—not marble—and they look well traveled.” He hesitated. Gestured. *You?*

“I see a cavern. The only light in the room is the one Avandar cast. I can’t see the cavern’s height; it’s too far up. I can’t see the walls, either. The floor is rough, rough stone; a groove runs down the middle, like a rock riverbed, and we’re in it. I don’t see anything up ahead besides shadows and rock formation.”

“That’s . . . not what I see.”

“Celleriant?” she asked the same question that Avandar had asked, and in the same way. The Arianni Lord glanced down at her, as if from a great remove. “I do not see what you see,” he finally said. “Nor do I see what your liege does.”

She frowned. “When you rode with the Wild Hunt through the Deepings, did they not look like this to you?”

“No. But these were not the roads we traveled, Lady.”

“Would you recognize every road you traveled?”

His brows rose. After a long pause, he said, “Yes.”

“What do you see?”

He did not answer. Her hands curled into fists.

Do not ask again, Jewel, Avandar told her. This room is wilder—and therefore more dangerous—than the room you call the statuary. We define, in some ways, what we see.

She had been walking, and stopped, lifting a hand in swift den-sign to make certain Angel did the same. “It’s not safe to walk here.”

“Can you not hold the road?” Celleriant asked her softly.

“Hold it how? We don’t even see the same thing.”

“We did not see the same thing when we first met.”

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It was true. But she felt the hair on the back of her neck begin to stand on end, and in the darkness, she heard the slow, heavy sound of breathing. “Angel, can you hear that?”

He was silent. She turned to look at his hands; they were still.

“What do you hear?” Celleriant asked, his voice sharper and colder.

“Breathing,” she whispered. “Very loud, very deep breathing.”

Celleriant turned to Kallandras, who had fallen silent. Bards were, in general, far more talkative than Kallandras, a fact Jewel seldom noticed. She noted it now. He watched her for a long moment. “I cannot hear what you hear.”

He was bard-born. The bard-born heard everything that lay beneath the surface of words, if they were skilled enough. And powerful.

Celleriant exhaled. “Viandaran.”

“I do not hear what she hears,” Avandar replied. “But she hears it. It is not mortal fear of the darkness or the unknown.”

“Do you recognize it?” Celleriant asked, acknowledging the bond that Jewel herself did not, on most days.

“I am mortal,” was Avandar’s evasive reply. “Time is a current that wears the edges off memory.”

“You have your suspicions.”

“I have some.”

Avandar.

Silence. Silence interrupted by breath, by breathing that she felt beneath her feet as the rumbling of earth.

“Matriarch,” a soft voice said. She turned so quickly she would have tripped had she been wearing skirts.

Adam was standing beside Terrick; the Northerner carried his ax. He was grim and silent, but his presence suited this vast, stone space.

Jewel swallowed words as she struggled for composure. If there was any person in the palace she did not want in this room, it was Adam—but she was taking him someplace no safer, no better known, in the end. After a significant pause, she said, “Yes,” in Torra.

“I see a cave.”

This caught Celleriant’s attention. Avandar, more accustomed to the random outbursts of the merely mortal controlled any outward expression of the surprise Jewel nonetheless knew he felt.

“And I hear breathing. It is loud and rolling, like distant thunder.”

“You see what I see.”

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“I think so, yes.” His voice was very grave. He knelt and placed one palm above the ground, then hesitated, watching her.

She shook her head, deciding. “Not yet,” she told him softly. “We have to confront what we see at some point, but not yet.”

“Soon?” he asked, withdrawing his hand.

“Soon. Come. You haven’t seen the statuary yet.” As Jewel turned to leave the room, the almost hypnotic breathing shifted; the rumbling became, for a moment, a voice. Syllables cut the silence like lightning, absent illumination. Jewel froze. Her own breath stopped; she held it, waiting for the foreign words to pass.

All eyes were upon her. What she had heard, her companions had not. All save Adam, whose eyes widened, and whose breath momentarily ceased as well. She realized then that something slept in this chamber, something vast, immortal, ancient. Her steps, her presence, were an intrusion, and if she did not leave, that unknown creature would wake.

She did not expect that waking to be gentle or joyful; she certainly wouldn’t be if mice crept into her bedroom and skittered across the surface of her counterpane. She felt very like she suspected the mice would, if they could speak. Without another word, she turned and headed toward the open arch.

Unlike the arch that led from her personal chambers in the Terafin manse, this one seemed to stay put.

The Kings were waiting in the statuary, as were the Exalted. Sigurne Mellifas stood to one side of the Mother’s Daughter. The Astari, if they were present at all, were dressed as Swords, and the Lord of the Compact failed to appear. It was the one bright spot in an otherwise grim and early morning.

The cats were pacing back and forth in the stretch of hall that contained the arches, but their ears twitched the moment Jewel stepped across the threshold that divided cavern from architectural stone. Shadow immediately shouldered Avandar out of the way; Snow cast a speculative glance at Celle-riant.

“The Kings are waiting,” Jewel told him.

He sniffed. Night hissed. But they fell in behind Shadow and did not, as far as Jewel could see—or hear, really—attempt to step on his tail. Angel and Terrick, Adam between them, pulled up the rear. Angel was not in a particular hurry to see more of the Kings, but Terrick did not appear to find their presence discomfoting. He was not, on the other hand, required to speak.

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Had he been in House colors, he might have been one of the Chosen; he had the same peculiar ability to be aware of every element of his surroundings while simultaneously appearing to notice none of them.

The statues appeared as they had the first time Jewel had seen them.

This time, she thought she understood what they signified, and turned to the Mother's Daughter, whose slight nod implied that she had expected some questions.

"I recognize at least five of the figures carved here," she said softly.

"We noticed," the Exalted replied.

"I met them in the South, in the Stone Deepings. I don't know all of their history. This," she said, approaching the first, a figure only partially emerged from the wall, "is Calliastra." She glanced at the Mother's Daughter, and was not surprised when the older woman nodded.

"The child of the god we do not name and the god we have oft called Love."

Jewel continued to walk. The rest of her party, except for the cats, remained just beside the Kings; only her dromedaries shadowed her steps. "This," she said, "Is Corallonne."

"She is the Mother's Daughter."

"And her father?"

"I have never been bold enough to ask," was the wry reply. "The information was never offered me. But Corallonne is sister to all who bear the Mother's blood. You did not fear to touch her likeness, here."

"No," was the soft reply. Jewel did not, however, touch her again.

She walked instead to Ariane. Of the statues here, only Ariane's was not trapped in the wall; she stood—as the statues of the gods in the palace proper—as if the red-brown stone beneath her feet was a pedestal. Jewel swallowed, reached up, and touched the hand of the Queen of the Wild Hunt.

Beneath her fingers, the stone was cool and hard. It did not respond at all.

"Winter Queen," she whispered.

Wind swept into the room, curling around strands of her hair. But the statue itself was silent and still.

"She will not hear you," Celleriant said softly.

She moved on, pausing once to examine the only figure contained in this room that did not take mortal likeness. Frowning, she glanced at Avandar. "The last time we were here, this figure was different."

"Yes."

"Now it looks almost human." And it did. The feathers, the scales, the uneven mismatch of limbs, had receded. Its face no longer looked like a carv-

Oracle ♦ 13

ing of quilted flesh, each piece belonging to a different species. It looked almost like a man.

“You are certain?” the Mother’s Daughter asked.

Jewel nodded slowly. “I am.”

“And troubled.”

“Yes, Exalted.” She hesitated for a long moment, and then glanced at Shadow. Shadow was staring at the statue in challenge; the statue, being stone, failed to respond. “Do you know its name?”

“No, child. In any real sense, it has none.”

“Do you know its parentage?”

“No. But I know this: it claims no single parent, no duality; all of the gods were some part of its creation. It is not like Moorelas’ sword, but it is not like the others depicted here.”

Jewel nodded and continued past the figure. She glanced once at the Warden of Dreams; he was almost as discrete as Ariane in appearance. And then, because it could not be put off any longer, she approached the cloaked and hooded figure of the Oracle. Like all of the statues except Ariane, she was part of the wide, curved sweep of wall; like all of those statues, she was chiseled and polished and presented as a gray-white likeness of life.

She was, however, the only statue that moved, and when Jewel whispered “Oracle,” her hooded head turned. Her robes rustled—a grinding sound at odds with the visual ripple of cloth—as she stepped forward and out of the relief.

“Jewel.” She lifted her hands and cupped them in front of her chest, as Jewel’s throat tightened. But no crystal came to grace those palms; the Oracle did not offer a glimpse of the uncertain future.

“Yes,” Jewel replied, finding her voice. “We’ve come.”

“You will find the roads much changed,” the Oracle replied. Jewel frowned. The statue spoke not to her, but to Celleriant.

“No doubt,” was his cool reply. “But more to my liking than mortal streets.”

“You serve Jewel Markess ATerafin.”

“I do.”

“An odd choice of master, for one such as you.”

He stiffened, but did not reply; the Oracle’s lips turned up in a cold, hard smile—a smile whose texture had nothing to do with the stone of her lips. She turned her attention to the three cats. “And you, are you here at her behest?”

Snow hissed.

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“You understand the rules of entry, and your master is mortal; she does not have the time to waste in the games you might otherwise play. Do you serve her?”

The cats exchanged a glance and a few growls. They did not speak.

The Oracle, however, nodded and lifted her head to meet Jewel’s gaze. “You do not understand what they are, or how they came to be here.”

“Can you tell me?” Jewel asked. Night hissed. Shadow nudged her with the top of his head, and she reached down to place a hand on the back of his neck.

“No. It is one of the things you will either learn to see or never understand. When dealing with the ancient and the wild, Terafin, it is never wise to offer information they themselves guard and hide. Do so only if you are certain you will survive it.”

“They can’t kill you.”

“Can they not?” The smile the Oracle offered as she spoke was markedly different. “Perhaps you are correct. But they can try, and if they are not to be feared, they are oft to be dreaded. They have never been entirely predictable creatures. Not even the wise could have predicted the results of the Winter King’s careful planning; what he wrought, we do not fully understand.”

Shadow’s eyes were golden; they were almost the same hue as the eyes of the god-born. Almost, but not quite. “Tell her,” he said to Jewel, voice almost a growl, “that we serve you when we’re *with* you.”

Jewel, however, frowned. “The Winter King considered the cats his greatest work. Did he not create them?”

Snow howled in outrage. Night was too dumbfounded to find his voice. Shadow, however, hissed.

“They are your responsibility, Terafin. I do not think it would be wise to leave them here. They are not, in my opinion, in danger where you will walk—but you have seen the danger they can be, if I am not mistaken.”

Adam stiffened. Jewel lifted a hand in den-sign, and he held his peace. Adam, more than anyone present, understood the danger the cats represented; Shadow had almost killed her at the behest of the Warden of Dreams. Had it not been for Adam’s presence, she would have died.

She knew it. She knew that the cats were deadly; she had always understood that. But Duster had been deadly as well, and Duster had been part of her home. “I don’t want to leave them behind,” she said quietly.

“I judge their presence a risk. You do not know the ways in which that risk might present itself—but such ignorance, even to one seer-born—is part of life. Only the dead are predictable—and even then, they are oft misunderstood.

Oracle ♦ 15

“Do not seek this path if you seek certainty. A glimpse of the future—even a future of your choosing—will not quell doubt. Doubt exists where there is life and breath to draw it. Only the dead have no doubts.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jewel replied, thinking—for the first time in months—of the Terafin spirit.

“No, daughter, but I am. I will accept the presence of your cats if you will surrender to me some token as surety of their behavior.”

“Pardon?”

Terrick now cleared his throat. “Pretend that this is, for the moment, the Merchant Authority. You have asked for leave to route your caravans through passages that are not Imperial in origin. The men who own those passages do not know you; they do not trust you.

“You post a bond as a financial guarantee of your intent. If the merchants in your caravan contravene the accepted codes of behavior in the lands they traverse, the bond is forfeit. If I am not mistaken, this woman is asking you to post such a bond.”

Jewel nodded slowly and turned to look down at the cats. They met her gaze with the faux-innocence she found so exasperating—and, in the end, so endearing. “This,” she said—for the benefit of an entirely absent Teller, “is why I never wanted cats.” Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she exhaled. “Avandar, can you get the gem bag from my pack?”

Avandar nodded, but before he could carry out her request, the Oracle lifted a hand. “If the analogy Terrick has offered is apt, it is inexact.”

The Northerner stiffened slightly; in no other way did he betray the surprise his name on the Oracle’s tongue had caused.

“There is no monetary component to what you must now do; no exchange of gold awaits you at the end of your journey. If you benefit, it will not be in a way that mortals will easily understand—and if they did, Terafin, you might become the object of sympathy—or its darker cousin, pity.

“I therefore ask that you leave, as surety, an item of value to you. The item might be priceless among your kind; it might be worthless among your kind.”

“Everything I value with which I might part, I left at home,” Jewel replied. “All of the things I now carry with me, I carry because they might be of practical use.” She glanced at her wrist, where three strands of winter hair were twined in a near-invisible bracelet. “If I’m to have any hope of returning to a home that still stands, I can’t leave them with you. I brought gems as trade if the road leads us back to mortal lands. We’ve brought food of the type that is meant for long, sustained travels.

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“I have my companions, and I will not leave them behind; nor would I willingly leave them in your lands while I ventured into the wilderness. Even if I was willing to do so, they are not my possessions. I don’t own them, and I cannot simply give them away as a gesture of good faith.” If the Oracle had been willing to take the gems, Jewel would have left a greater part of their number in her hands; she’d made clear she was not.

What else did she now carry?

She could not part with Ariane’s gift. She considered the leaves she had taken from her forest, and even opened her pouch to remove them—but her hand froze before she’d unbuckled it. Not those, then. What else of value did she have? She had the dress Snow made. She had worn it once, and she was not in a hurry to don it again. The problem with the dress—aside from its obvious importance to Snow—was that she did not truly value it.

She wore one necklace. The links, as she drew it up from the confines of her traveling clothes, were warm where they’d lain so long against skin. It was the necklace Snow had given her to wear with the dress he had made. The pendant, in this room, seemed to pulse like an exposed heart; it was not a comforting sight.

“No,” the Oracle said, before she had pulled the pendant clear. “Not that. I will not question your effrontery in wearing it, and I will not refuse you passage in spite of its presence—but the danger is now entirely yours to bear. Cats will leave all manner of things in their wake, but in general, the wise do not wear them.” As she spoke, she glanced at Snow, who appeared to have lost a few inches of height.

He muttered.

“You are bold,” she told him. “But it is left to others to bear the weight of your momentary whims.” She fell silent as Snow continued to lose height and bearing.

Jewel glanced, last, at her empty palms. In the oddly muted light of the statuary, the gold of the two rings she wore made her hands look unaccountably white and colorless, as if they had never seen sunlight.

Rings. Two rings.

She turned her hands over, although examination wasn’t necessary. The ring on her right had been a gift from Amaraïs, an inheritance of a kind that could not be laid out in wills and signed testaments. Left in the center of the fount that was the justified pride of the Terafin terrace, it would have remained hidden in perpetuity to any eyes that weren’t Jewel’s.

Jewel had never completely understood why Amaraïs had chosen to hide one ring and one sword—a fine sword, but of the kind that the patriciate

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commonly owned—in the center of that fountain; to do so had required all of the magical skill and subtlety Morretz had accumulated over his life.

But she understood why Amarais had left the two items to her. They had belonged to Ararath. They had belonged to Rath. So proud, so angry, he had, in the end, loved them both as he could. And they had loved—and lost him. The ring itself was a signet ring of heavy gold; a stylized H contained rubies at the end points of the Weston letter's height. One was cracked—it had arrived that way.

Rath was dead. The dead had no need of rings. They had no need of memories, either. Only the living did—but Jewel was still alive. Her right hand closed in a fist as she looked, last, to the ring that adorned her left.

It was the Terafin House ring. Not the ring she had worn for most of her adult life as a Council member, but the House ring itself. There was one, only one, of its kind. She had worn its weight for a scant few months. No, she thought, counting, two months and nineteen days. It was not her possession; it was, in its entirety, the smallest symbol of the office she'd taken. When she died, it would be passed to the woman—or man—who succeeded her.

But she knew, as she studied its heavy gold face, sapphires glowing as if displayed in direct sunlight, that this was what the Oracle was waiting for. She had not removed the ring once since she had been acclaimed Terafin. Her hands shook as she removed it now.

No one spoke. Angel briefly touched her arm and gestured. She wanted to shove the ring back onto her finger. She told herself that she could afford to lose Rath's ring; she couldn't afford to lose the House signet. She could give away the damn leaves—she had an endless number of them. Even the dress, although she'd have a put-out or enraged white cat to deal with for the rest of their journey. Or the rest of her life.

But the ring rested in her open palm, and her hand was steady as she held it out to the Oracle.

The Oracle nodded. She passed a hand over Jewel's upturned palm—and the ring it contained—and the ring vanished. She had not touched it. "Yes," she said softly. "It is always difficult to decide what to leave behind, and often, there are no good choices. I will safeguard your ring to the full extent of my ability to do so. Only if you transgress will it be lost to you forever."

"What are your rules?" Jewel asked stiffly. "What laws am I to be bound by?"

Shadow snorted in obvious disgust.

Night said, "What did you *expect*? She's *stupid*."

Even Celleriant was smiling. It was a condescending, arrogant smile.

The Oracle, however, did not appear to notice any of this. "It has been

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many, many years since a daughter of the ancient cities has approached my realm. Not all who reach its heart choose to accept the challenge offered. But if it will comfort you, know this: none of the supplicants had the luxury of time. Many came alone.

“Isolation is safety, of a kind—but it is not, in the end, your safety.” She turned. The wall, curved and smooth in her absence, waited. She did not point or gesture; she did not speak. Instead, she placed her hands against her chest; Jewel stiffened as they sank beneath the surface of stone robes and stone flesh.

The air was still, the hush expectant; no one in the room, not even the distant Kings, appeared to breathe as the Oracle withdrew a crystal from the center of her chest. The resultant light from its heart flooded the room, washing out the color that remained.

“The more you see, the more there is to fear—but regardless, the future will come. It will shape you, Jewel, if you allow it. But if you are strong enough to pierce the veils of now, you will be allowed, in some small way, to shape it in turn. It is the only gift I offer, and acceptance is costly: it was not meant for mortals.”

“Why,” Jewel asked, breaking the hushed silence, “was it given to us at all?”

“That, I cannot answer.”

“Because you don’t know?”

“Because, daughter, I do not know.”

“You’re reputed to see everything.”

“And so I might, should I so choose—but what is seen is oft misunderstood, as you yourself must know. What is seen at a distance is a glance, no more. Such a glimpse might inspire dread or greed or rage. I see you here, before me, as I saw you when first we met. I understand, in some limited way, what motivates you. But I cannot see the whole of it. I cannot *be* you.

“And there are things about you, Jewel Markess ATerafin, that I do not think I could fully understand unless I lived the life you have lived in near blindness.”

The wall from which the Oracle had stepped began to shift, stone moving, slowly, as if it were the surface of melting ice.

“And Evayne?”

“Pardon?”

“Evayne. Evayne a’Nolan. Do you understand her?”

“Better, in many ways, than I understand you. She is not what you are, Jewel. She is god-born and bound by geas and bitter, bitter hope. You will speak with her again; perhaps before you have made your choice. I will say

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this much: she does not choose the roads she walks. What choice she has—and it is imperfect—is what she sees when she walks them.

“If she comes to you, she might be your age. She might be the age you were when you first crossed Terafin’s threshold. She might be your peer, and she might rival Sigurne Mellifas at the height of her many powers. I ask, if she arrives, that you allow her to speak, regardless of age. Where you walk, you take some part of your home with you.

“Where she walks, she is forced to walk in isolation.” She turned to Kallandras. “Be kind.”

He did not reply.

Nor had he need; the stone that had once housed the back half of the Oracle as she was currently constituted was now a whirlpool in miniature.

“I know what you seek, Kallandras. You will not find it where you travel, but if you survive, you will at last be upon the final leg of your long journey. So, too, Evayne.” She held the crystal in her hands aloft, and in its heart, there were roiling clouds and small flashes of light that made them appear a storm in miniature.

That lightning leaped beyond the confines of the crystal to the wall; it struck the heart of vortex. Liquid stone scattered, pushed outward in an oval that solidified to form an arch. It was round, not rectangular; it looked like uneven, melted glass when it ceased motion.

“It is not an easy thing to reach the heart of my lands,” the Oracle said softly. “Reaching them is the first part of your test.” She turned to the Kings and the Exalted, and tendered them a bow that was almost Weston. She did not speak. Instead, she lowered her arms. The crystal remained in cupped palms, like an offering.

“Go,” she told Jewel. “I must remain to close the way.”



Chapter One

*5th of Morel, 428 A.A.
Terafin Manse, Averalan Aramarelas*

HANNERLE WAS NOT IN a happy mood. Years in the company of his wife made this clear to Haval, although the rest of the people in this impromptu gathering did not know her well enough to realize it.

On the other hand, she wasn't angry with *them*. They had spent the earliest years of their lives—almost half of them—in environments in which anger directed at other people was safety, of a type. Or perhaps they were perceptive enough to realize that the age difference between Hannerle and themselves made it unlikely that they would become targets for her anger.

Looking mildly distressed, Finch stood before Hannerle, her hands enveloped by Haval's wife's. "Are you sure you won't stay?" she asked, squeezing her hands as if Hannerle were a beloved aunt and not a recovered convalescent.

"If I stay much longer," Hannerle replied, "I'll forget how to look after myself."

Finch's brows rose in mock-derision. "That's impossible."

"Trust me, it's not. The Terafin manse is impressive, but in the end it's not mine. And there's very little I can do to make it mine. You let me putter about in the kitchen—but the servants hate it, and can't say as I blame them. It's stressful being a guest."

"Haval, help me." Finch cast an imploring glance at the clothier.

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"I have offered my wife every possible entreaty to remain," he replied, his shoulders slumped, his expression one of regret at his failure.

Hannerle frowned. "You're the only reason I would stay," she told him, voice sharp.

Finch cringed. Not even she could pretend that the comment was delivered with any affection.

"It pains me to watch my husband wrap you all around his fingers," Hannerle continued. "I've half a mind to break something over his head—but none of the things here belong to me, and breaking *your* crockery seems like poor thanks for your hospitality." Her hands tightened briefly before she pulled them free. "I understand why he's here. I don't like it, but I understand it.

"So I'll give you advice, and it's worth every penny you pay for it. He's arrogant. He thinks the world of himself. And he hates to lose. He notices everything, so you might as well not bother trying to lie to him. But if you put your life in his hands, he'll keep you safe.

"Don't put more than your life in his hands."

"Hannerle—"

"Jay trusts him? Aye, I know. As do I. But I know him, Finch. If he causes you trouble, kick him out. If he causes you too much trouble, come to me."

Finch nodded. "I will." When Hannerle hesitated, she smiled. "He's not the only older man I have to keep an eye on."

"That," his wife replied, with a significant glance at Haval, "is exactly what I'm afraid of."

"I *like* the girl," Hannerle said, when she was of a mind to speak to Haval. This did not occur until they were almost at the bridge that separated the Isle from the mainland.

"Yes."

"I like Teller as well. Don't involve them in games they can't play."

"Hannerle, I am unlikely to involve *them* in anything. They are—in case it has slipped your mind—the putative regent and the *actual* right-kin of one of the most powerful Houses in the Empire. I realize they are young, but they are not incompetent children; there is no need to coddle them. If they actually require such coddling, there is very little I can do to preserve them."

"You know what I meant."

He did. He considered, and reconsidered, the wisdom of his present position. "Hannerle," he finally said, scrubbing his face of all expression.

"I hate it when you do that."

"I know. But you also hate it when I lie."

"It makes me wonder why I married you in the first place."

He smiled—and that, at least, was genuine. "I have often wondered that myself." He slid a hand over both of hers; they were not so loosely clasped in her lap. She had withered during her convalescence, much of her weight lost to lack of food and near endless sleep.

"Do *not*," she said, as if she could hear his thoughts, "mother *me*." But she did not pull her hands away. Instead, she met his unblinking gaze and held it.

In decades past, there were very, very few who could meet and hold that gaze. Duvari. Jarven. Ararath. Not his godfather, Hectore. Rath's protégée, the young woman who was now The Terafin, could—but only when anger swamped her uncertainties.

"Why have you accepted my involvement in Terafin affairs? I gave you my word that I would cease all my meddling and return to the store if you would but wake on your own."

"I didn't wake on my own," was his wife's stiff reply.

"It is unlike you to quibble trivialities, Hannerle."

She glared. The glare was comfortable and familiar. It was not, however, comforting. His wife was afraid.

Haval understood Hannerle on an instinctive level; he always had. She was no more a mystery than The Terafin or her many allies. But she had a combination of characteristics that he found in very few. She was the sovereign of her domain, but she had always been willing to share the spaces she created. She considered her responsibilities burdens—but in the way that children were, to other couples.

They had never had children.

He wondered, now, how Hannerle might have changed if they had.

And he wondered, as he observed her, his own expression remote and impenetrable, what had occurred while she slept. He felt the edge of anger; it was bracing. He was given to frequent irritation, but anger, seldom.

"What happened?" he asked, after a long moment of silence.

She frowned. "Don't play games with *me*. You were present in the Terafin manse for my entire stay; you probably have a far better idea than I do." She clasped her hands in her lap more tightly, and her knuckles whitened. Her skin was pale, and her cheeks, hollow. Months of forced inactivity had taken their toll.

And that would, of course, affect her. She required her home, her space, the rules of her carefully disordered life. She needed—had needed—her husband to be part of that. He had, of course, fully expected to dance around the im-

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placable ultimatum he expected to be handed the moment she realized she was no longer trapped in sleep.

He had not expected that no ultimatum would be forthcoming.

He knew his wife. There was only one reason she would forgo what was absolutely her right. “Hannerle.” He did not touch her again. She had withdrawn in place, and touching Hannerle when she was so barely self-contained had never been wise.

She turned to stare out of the window. It was not, sadly, the window by which Haval now sat. He gentled his voice. “Hannerle.”

She knew him. She did not know the details or particulars of his past; she never had. But she knew Haval. Perhaps that was the singular gift she had to give: she *saw* him. Facts were the detritus that, observed, confirmed what she knew—but Hannerle had never required outside confirmation of her knowledge.

As proof, she said, sharply, “Jewel did not *do* anything. You’ve never felt threatened by her before—don’t start on my account.” When he failed to reply, she turned to glare at him. “I mean it, Haval. Don’t take this out on Jewel. Don’t you even *think* of taking it out on poor Finch.”

“Hannerle, you misjudge me.” One brow rose as her lips thinned. He felt anger recede, but like any sharp-edged object, it left its mark. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“So? You’ve never answered all of mine. I don’t recall answers being a condition of this marriage.”

“Hannerle—”

“I mean it. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it. I want to go home. I want to go home while I can still believe I have one.” She exhaled, her shoulders curling inward, as if to ward off blows from an opponent Haval couldn’t see. “Will she survive, Haval?”

“Who?”

“Jewel.”

He understood what she wanted from an answer, and it was not information. She wanted comfort. Unfortunately for both of them, she was far too perceptive to take comfort from meaningless phrases. “I do not know. I do not know where she now travels—but my conservative estimate is that the lands she now enters resemble the most startling elements of her personal chambers. She is unlikely to venture into friendly territory, but she numbers men of significant power among her small personal guard. If she is attacked—”

“That’s not what I mean.”

He held up one placating hand. "It is not always clear what you mean." But it was, now. "Hannerle, I *am* fond of The Terafin. I have always felt a debt of conscience to her."

Hannerle nodded. Jewel was one of the many subjects they discussed with care, skirting around the edges of events that could not be changed, and a sleeping anger that could be wakened.

"I have followed—from a safe distance—her rise to power. It did not surprise me. But at the same time, it did. I could just as easily see her as the woman behind a shop that deals exclusively in fashions for the wealthy."

A grin tugged at the corner of his wife's lips, but faded into grimace before it fell away. "She's a good girl."

"She is mostly that, yes. I do not believe that she has ever done anything of which you'd disapprove—and not merely to avoid the cost of your disapproval, as I have. Hannerle, love, what did she show you? What did you see?"

"She showed me nothing," his wife replied. After a pause, she added, "I will not have you angry at her in my own house."

"We are demonstrably not in our home at the moment." When she failed to reply, he added, "I have given my word that I will not lie to you. I will not, therefore, promise that I will not be angry; I know myself well enough."

"She showed me nothing," Hannerle repeated. Her hands separated and curled into tighter fists. "But as you've guessed, I'm angry."

He had guessed she was afraid, but was wise enough to keep this to himself. "She is no longer the child she once was," he replied, gentling his voice. "Were she, she would not be Terafin. You think of her as young—as young Jewel—because she was, when she first entered our lives. But she's grown. She cannot be counted as a child forever."

"Do you understand what she faces?"

His wife was one of the few people he knew who never failed to surprise him. But he considered her question with the same care he might have considered a question posed to him by the Kings themselves. "No. You have not seen Jewel's personal chambers; I have. They are no longer part of the Terafin manse, although the doors that lead to—and from—them are.

"You have seen her cats. They are the smallest part of the magic that now surrounds her, in my opinion. If Jewel herself understood what all of these things presaged, I *would* understand what she faced. But she does not."

"Do you understand it better than she does?"

He smiled. "I have never been a modest man, Hannerle. I believe that I understand many things better than Jewel does. But in this, I am willing to admit that I am stymied. It does not suit me," he added.

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“No. It doesn’t.” Her smile was weary, but she leaned—at last—into his shoulder. He slid an arm around her then. “She’s afraid.”

“Yes. And she is wise to be so. I know very little of the dangers she now faces; I did not put much credence in children’s stories in my youth. I do not think what she faces will change her beyond all recognition—but yes, Hannerle, that is the heart of her fear. She has defined herself for the whole of her life by the family she’s built—and with a single exception, it is not one she can take with her while she travels.

“She does not know what she will face. Nor do the wise. The only thing we can do for her is preserve the House.”

“Can you,” she replied, putting the responsibility for it upon the correct shoulders, “while also preserving yourself?”

“I have not changed, love. I have grown wiser, perhaps; I have become less competitive. Nothing I do for the House, or within it, will alter the substance of who I am. There is only one thing that could. I will not pursue this if it will threaten you in any way.”

She stiffened but did not withdraw. “You’d leave them on their own, then, because I demanded it?”

“They are *not children*, Hannerle. Finch numbers, among her allies, the right-kin of the House. She will have the whole of the Merchant Authority at her disposal. She is no fool.”

“She’s a—”

“Young woman, yes. But like you, she has a spine of solid iron; she will not bend. She is more graceful in the way she refuses to bend, of course. Your home is the shop we’ve created between us; her home is House Terafin. She will not do less to protect it than you yourself would do were *Elemental Fashion* to be threatened. I am not certain that I have much to contribute to her success.”

“Liar.”

He chuckled. “I am attempting to be modest.”

“I didn’t marry a humble man. If I believed you believe what you say, I’d be seriously worried about *you*.”

“You already are.”

She exhaled. “Yes. Because I *want* you to play your gods-cursed game. I would never, *ever* have said that would be possible—the wanting, I mean. I didn’t believe you’d ever stop the game.”

“You know why I did.”

“Yes. Because I couldn’t handle the cost.”

“And now you can’t handle the cost of my inactivity?”

“I know you’re right. I know they’re not children.”

He waited.

“But they’re like Jewel: they’ve never played the games you’ve played. I feel as if they’ll be walking blind into a situation which could kill them—and if they die, Haval, I’ll feel responsible.”

“It will *not* be your fault. I am one man. If they die on my watch, I will not consider myself responsible.”

“And you promised you’d never lie to me.”

“I am not lying. While I understand the sentiments that The Terafin and her den invoke, I have trained men and women far younger than they to acts far more difficult. I understood the possible consequences before the training started—but I also understood the possible consequences were there no such men and women employed.

“I cannot materially change either Finch or Teller ATerafin. They do not have the time or the resources necessary to learn what I might once have taught.”

“Does anyone?”

Haval did not reply. Sadly, Hannerle did not fail to notice.

7th of Morel, 428 A.A.

Terafin Manse, Averalan Aramarelas

Jester was fifteen minutes late. He spent those fifteen traversing the public galleries with a very junior servant who was new to the Household Staff. Servants were hired for temporary duties; it happened frequently. But they were not given a place on the Household Staff without earning it.

Janni was new to the Staff, but not the manse; she was certainly new to the subtle changes in uniform. Her parents were inordinately proud of her new job, and she was therefore aware that she had much more to lose. Jester, like Carver, was fond of almost every element of the Household Staff. The exceptions, of course, were to be found in the senior echelons, and in the Master of the Household Staff herself.

Jester navigated the world by finding the humor in any situation.

The Master of the Household Staff starched her face, as far as Jester was concerned. She did not in any obvious way respond to Jester’s presence; nor would she. He was nominally adviser to a member of the House Council, after all. But she had ways of making the rest of the servants suffer.

The servants themselves were willing to grouse about the Master of the

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Household Staff, but they did so reluctantly—and not on short acquaintance. If they despised the woman—Jester did—they also held her in a fascinated awe that approached reverence. Jester couldn't understand why; he found ample fodder for comic relief in her parched, pinched voice, but little else.

"I don't know if you'll be assigned to the West Wing or not," he told Janni. "But I have hopes."

Her smile was genuine and entirely inappropriate, which is probably why Jester liked it so much.

"I, on the other hand, have an appointment which I was told I couldn't afford to miss."

Her dark eyes rounded. "Are you late?"

He smiled. "I'm always late. If I were on time, any number of older patri-cians would die of shock, and I don't want *that* on my head."

Janni tilted her head to the side. In her strong, soft voice she said, "I'm not sure I believe that."

Jester passed between the two House Guards stationed outside the double doors of the West Wing. They were new additions, and he didn't care for them, but Teller—or Torvan, more likely—insisted on their presence. They weren't Chosen. It had been decided—and by whom, Jester wanted to know—that the reassignment of Chosen only a week after Jay's departure would send the wrong signals.

Jester was not fond of the House Guard. They were the House equivalent of the magisterial guards, and looked every inch of it. He understood, thanks to Arann's careful and oft-repeated explanations, that guards—any guards—did their job best by being intimidating; the whole point of their presence was to discourage illegal or inappropriate behavior.

All of the den's earliest run-ins with the magisterians had involved the thin line of the law: they took what they could, when things were desperate. But never when they weren't. He grimaced as the doors closed at his back. Ellerson failed to emerge from the servants' room.

Ellerson, starched and consistently *proper*, had never been Jester's favorite person. Ironic, then, that his absence could create this hollow, silent space that implied loss. But it was a loss he could face. Carver's absence was in all ways harder. It brought back sharp, hard shadows: it was an echo of the end of their life in the twenty-fifth holding. Lefty, Fisher, and Lander lost; Duster dead on the day the rest of the den had made their narrow escape.

Duster dead because if she weren't, none of them would have made it out.

He couldn't remember Lefty's face. He couldn't remember Lander's or

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Fisher's, either. But Duster? She never left him. Every time he looked at Finch, he could see the echo of Duster's face. He'd never talked to Duster much. She was always on edge; a joke could make her laugh one day, and the next, be cause for drawn dagger and spitting, furious threat.

He understood the fury. He understood the pain.

He understood how hard it had been for Duster to make the choice she'd made on the night a fat, self-indulgent patrician had come under her knife: kill cleanly, or walk away from the den.

Jester would have been fine with the messy, lingering death. No one had asked him. Duster had asked Lander—only Lander. But Lander had been the most obviously broken by their shared experiences. In his pain, she saw a reflection of the pain she herself would never acknowledge. In Jester, she saw nothing.

Jester saw nothing himself. Nothing except the family that had been so haphazardly built. It was an awkward, angry family, prone to theft when all other avenues of extending its sputtering existence had vanished—but it was his. He was part of it. Part of it, and separate from it, as well.

He was like Duster; he didn't acknowledge pain. Unlike Duster, he didn't acknowledge anger. Neither made any difference.

Jay was gone. This time—this time she'd had the time to say good-bye. This time, she'd taken Angel with her. Angel with his broken spire, his hair flat against the curve of a skull they'd almost never seen. He looked like a stranger. He talked like Angel. Having him here wouldn't do any good; he'd climbed walls when Jay'd been in the South.

That left Finch and Teller, the two quietest members of the den. Teller had a sense of humor. He liked cats. He hated confrontation, but he'd learned how to diffuse the worst of it. Barston, his starched taskmaster of a secretary had seen to that, over the years. Jester knew that Teller was new to his role, and the role itself was as secure as Jay was. Jay, who wasn't here. He still didn't worry about Teller.

He worried about Finch.

He worried about Finch because he knew Finch intended to take the House in everything but name. She intended to launch herself into the game patricians played—using many of the same tools: the Merchant Authority, the external contacts she'd built there over the years, her position as House Council member—even if it was junior.

No one, after the events of The Terafin's funeral, could take the House from Jay. Not that they hadn't tried, in one way or another, but Jay was just damn hard to kill.

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None of the rest of them were. None of the rest of them had *ever* been hard to kill. They'd arrived at House Terafin in Jay's wake, and in that wake, they'd been installed in the West Wing. Because of Jay. Because of her vision.

They were still standing in her wake, in most ways, but they'd bled into the House as well: Arann as Chosen, Finch as merchant, Teller as right-kin. Carver was their unofficial ear behind walls. Daine was their Alowan, and if he had far more edges than Alowan had, he was also sixty years younger. Angel was her liege.

And Jester?

He was Jester, same as before—in better clothing. He talked to the servants in Carver's absence because someone had to, especially now. He knew how to be practically invisible in a crowd—and he did it by demanding attention, rather than hiding from it. But the attention he demanded was jovial, friendly, and entirely noncommittal; no one felt threatened by it.

He opened the doors to the great room and entered.

Haval was standing by the fireplace, his hands behind his back, his clothing unusually austere. He wore no apron. Only when Jester closed the doors in his wake did the clothier turn.

"You asked to speak me with me," Jester said, entering the room.

"Demonstrably."

Jester sauntered over to the cabinet. "Are you drinking?"

"It depends."

"On?"

"The drink and the length of the interview. My wife is not particularly pleased with me today, and this is not the only appointment to mar my day's productivity."

"Teller told you I'm seconded as adjutant to Finch on the Council?"

"He did, indeed, make that clear. He feels that your clothing is not appropriate for the position."

Jester shrugged. He lifted a bottle of fortified wine from the cabinet, considering it for a long moment. "If I were there for anyone but Finch, I'd refuse to change."

"Yes. I believe he is also aware of that."

"And you?"

"I am aware that clothing does not make the man. Do you have any particular preferences, or will you trust my sensibilities?" Jester retrieved two glasses. He set them down, poured, and lifted them. He had none of the fluid

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elegance—or the starch—of the Household Staff, and accepted the lack; he sauntered over to where Haval stood, observing him.

“If it’s good enough for Finch, it’s good enough for me. I don’t care for fussy skirts, though.”

“No. I don’t believe they would suit. There are certain shades of color it would be best to avoid, as well; most of the blues the House requires will work with your hair.”

“You don’t appear to be carrying a measure.”

“No.”

“You know my measurements.”

“Yes. The knowledge is inexact; it is based in its entirety on observation.”

“And you had me summoned because you wanted exact?”

“No. I wish you to answer a few questions before we proceed to the measurements—or, more precisely, the fittings.”

Jester shrugged. Questions didn’t bother him, no matter how pointed. They were just words. He could slide out from under them by answering. His answers, however, weren’t generally heavy with meaning. “Fire away.”

“What, exactly, do you do here?”

“I see you’re starting with the easy questions first.” Jester smiled. It was bright and lazy. “As little as I can get away with.”

Haval didn’t smile. He didn’t blink. His expression was smooth as stone, and it gave just as much away. “How little is that?”

“These days? Finch expects me to deliver three messages—in person—this afternoon. Without giving offense to their recipients.”

“I believe you have it in you to manage that.”

Jester handed Haval a glass; the older man accepted it without comment. “In at least one case, yes.” He walked to the largest couch in the room and sank into its center as if his spine were melting.

“It has come to my attention that you’ve been spending some time in the garden, with the groundskeeper.”

Jester drank. “And?”

“While I laud your ability to play host to a new employee, you’ve been spending time with Birgide Viranyi.”

“I happen to enjoy her company.”

“You are aware of who she is?”

“One of the most famous botanists in the Empire. The Master Gardener has been at great pains to threaten me personally in the hopes of keeping my behavior on the up and up.”

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"I imagine he has. Have you found her company instructive?"

"I still have dirt under my fingernails, if that helps."

"Let me ask you the question again. What occupies your time in the Ter-afin manse?"

Jester drank, regarding Haval as if seeing him for the first time. Smiling, he said, "You're not going to let this go, are you?" Without waiting for a reply, he sipped his wine. Jester's lazy smile bounced off Haval's face.

"Birgide?"

"She's *Astari*," Jester replied. Haval did not appear to be surprised by the accusation. He barely appeared to hear it. "For reasons I trust I don't have to explain, I don't trust the *Astari*. If the Kings aren't here, they shouldn't be either."

"You have not asked her about her botany?"

"I've asked her questions she couldn't answer without some research," Jester replied. "Not many, though. Whatever she does for the *Astari*, the botany's real."

"You feel you are now enough of an expert to make that judgment."

"After weeks in Birgide's company? Damn right."

Haval's lips twitched. "It was not one of my more stellar inquiries. What do you think her role in the *Astari* is?"

Jester hated, on point of principle, discussion. This, on the other hand, could barely be considered that—it was an interrogation. He could just get up and leave, but he was curious. Curiosity was not one of Jester's obvious, public failings. It was, however, a weakness. He generally satisfied curiosity by observation. Observing Haval, on the other hand, was like watching rock grow.

Teller had made clear that he considered this appointment significant, and had all but begged Jester not to screw it up. What Jester wanted to know at the moment was why. He therefore chose to answer Haval's questions. He knew it was a bad habit to develop. "Poisons."

"Very good. Does she keep them here?"

"I doubt it." He didn't. "She's been studying the big trees in the back. She tried to take a couple of silver leaves, and the branches moved. They don't apparently like to be studied."

"Interesting. The other trees?"

"Same effect. She's made no attempt to touch the burning tree."

"No. She is not a fool."

"Do you know her?"

"I know of her. My role as clothier to the powerful and well-placed does

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not often put me in the path of a botanist, however well-regarded.” Haval lifted his glass to his lips. “Do you understand what is about to occur in this House?”

Jester nodded. “Is that why you’re here?”

“It is.”

“And the clothing?”

“A lesser part of my responsibilities. It is not, however, optional. You will attend Finch in the Council hall, and you will do so in a fashion that does not embarrass her.”

“I *highly* doubt that.”

Haval’s lips twitched again, and this time, he surrendered a smile. “Very well. You will embarrass her in ways that do not reflect poorly on *me*. You have managed to answer very few of my questions. Even Finch is more forthcoming.”

“If you want a weaker link, try Teller.”

“Indeed. How much training have you had with weapons?”

Jester rose and headed back to the cabinet. “About as much as the average orphan from the twenty-fifth holding.”

“Truly?”

“No.” He poured. Back toward the clothier, he continued. “I know Jay trusts you,” he said. “I’ve never understood why.”

“Ah.”

“You sent her to Lord Waverly.” He turned, glass in hand.

“No, Jester, I did not.”

“You had to know what would happen.”

Haval met, and held, Jester’s gaze. Give the old man credit; he didn’t blink. Literally. “Clever,” the older man finally said. “And perceptive. You have not talked with Jewel about this.”

“No point. Waverly died. Duster came home with us.”

“Duster also died.”

“She was always going to die. The only surprise was why—she bought us time.”

“You don’t resent Jewel for her death.”

He didn’t. He was beginning to resent Haval Arwood. This conversation was circling a space where Jester did not go. “Should I?”

“There is no imperative one way or the other.”

“The right-kin made clear that this appointment was somehow important. I’ve got maybe five more minutes of good behavior left in me. You want to tell me what you want?”

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“Tell me about the Master of the Household Staff.”

“I’ll take that as no.”

“As you please. What are your impressions of that woman?”

“She terrifies the crap out of the rest of the Household Staff; she butts heads with the right-kin’s secretary—frequently—and she’d support Iain ATerafin in any position he chose to adopt on the House Council. She is not friendly—she considers it a lowering sin—but she’s consistent. She’s not loved. She *is* respected.”

Haval nodded.

“She has a small plot in the grounds, a flower bed. The Master Gardener is fine with this because he’s just as terrified as any of the under servants. She grows flowers and one or two plants that might or might not produce something edible.”

“Are they poisonous?”

Jester laughed. He drank wine, briefly, as if it were water. “Yes.”

“Has she killed many members of the Household Staff?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“You acknowledge the possibility.”

“No, I don’t. If she had reason to kill a member of the Household Staff, she would fire them first. It would probably cause the person more pain in the long run. Resigning from a position on staff is one thing; being dismissed in disgrace, quite another. If any member of the House causes difficulties for any member of the Household Staff, she has the pull to have that person removed; she can’t do it directly, but she’s respected.”

“You do not consider the contents of her small garden odd.”

“Not as odd as this meeting.”

Haval smiled. “How did you come across the garden?”

Jester shook his head. “I’m not answering that one—she hates me enough as it is. If it helps, I don’t take tea with her.”

“Possibly wise. Do many?”

“I’ll let you answer that.”

Haval inclined his head. “Three. She will, on occasion, speak at length with three members of the House Council. One of them is Jewel herself; it is not a meeting that I imagine engenders much joy in either woman. The other is, as you’ve suggested Iain. Iain is a scrupulously careful treasurer; he is also old enough to treat almost everyone with healthy suspicion.”

“That’s two.”

“You will have to unearth the third for yourself, although I believe you know of whom I speak.”

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“If you don’t mind,” Jester replied, “I’m about to get drunk. This conversation couldn’t possibly make any *less* sense.”

“You will have to drink far more than that. You have a naturally high tolerance for alcohol.”

It was true.

“You have several scars on your hands, and one long scar on your left wrist. They are not, to my eye, wounds taken in sword practice.”

“The twenty-fifth holding was a rough place.”

“Oh, indeed. I imagine you bear scars from your years there—but the scars of which I speak were not taken in the hundred holdings.”

Jester shrugged. “I don’t remember where they came from.”

“I highly doubt that. I will assume a familiarity with daggers and throwing knives. If you had some skill with long daggers, it might prove useful, but it is not entirely necessary. If you are required to kill, it is best to do so in a way that necessitates no obvious weapon and leaves no obvious trace.”

“I am never required to kill.”

“A figure of speech. I have known the current Terafin for over half her life. She would not command any of your den to kill.”

“She wouldn’t command anyone in House Terafin to kill; she’d accept death as an outcome of their duties—but only then.”

“And so we come back to duties. Tell me, Jester, what are yours?”

Jester glanced at the empty glass in his right hand. He rose. “I think we’re done here.” He walked to the cabinet and set the empty glass down.

A knife flew an inch to the right of his hand and embedded itself in the rounded lip of the narrow shelf. Jester sighed—loudly—and retrieved the bottle. “. . . or not.” He filled his glass, cupped its crystal bowl in his left hand, and turned. “As a way to keep a conversation going,” he added, grabbing the knife’s slender handle and pulling it free, “that’s not going to get you invited back into many polite houses.”

“Possibly not. I’m seldom concerned about such invitations on my own behalf, and my wife dislikes patrician company. She doesn’t dislike it enough to refuse their custom, however.” He crossed the room as Jester held the knife out. “Your reaction is interesting.”

Jester shrugged. “You can’t afford to kill me. Not that way.”

“No.”

“Which meant you wanted my attention. Now, you have it.” He drank.

“Remarkable,” Haval said. “I thought you had potential; I didn’t realize how much.”

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“I have, in theory, wasted potential,” Jester replied. He was grinning. “I’m considered a bit of a gadfly, and a general social failure of the type people enjoy.”

“Meaning you tweak the noses of the powerful in a way that the rest of the Terafin patricians cannot safely do.”

Jester nodded. “It’s one of the few amusements I have. I’m not fond of patricians. I make exceptions for my friends, and they’ve obliged me by refusing to become what I detest. It’s a delicate balance.”

“How familiar are you with the layout of the manse?”

“The only person with a better sense of the labyrinths behind walls is Carver.” Jester grimaced. “We don’t mention his name much. I don’t suggest you bring him up in polite conversation in this wing.”

“I had noticed that you’ve become somewhat less withdrawn, of late.”

Jester shrugged. “The cats could cause more of a ruckus—with less consequence—than I could. They’re gone. It’s on me, now.”

“Yes,” Haval replied. “It is. As you have failed—several times—to answer a simple question, I will assume, as people will, that you have. And of course, that the answer suits my purpose.”

“What is your purpose?”

“I wish to employ you.”

Jester laughed. It was hard to sustain laughter, given Haval’s utter lack of amusement, but Jester had had a decade of practice. “To *hire* me? I suggest you run that past your intimidating wife. I’m sure she won’t approve.”

“She will, as you suspect, have a dim view of the prospect; it is, and will remain, immaterial. You will not be an apprentice clothier.” Haval frowned. “I don’t think you have the patience for it; I do believe you have the eye.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“More or less what you have been doing, with a single notable exception.”

“You want me to report to you.”

“Indeed. I have a few questions to which I require answers. They are not,” he added, stepping past Jester and reaching for the wine, “direct questions for you. Even I have a limited supply of both patience and time.” He topped up the glass that Jester had given him one abrupt bend in the conversation ago. “Before she left, I spoke with The Terafin. I suggested that you were underemployed in a variety of ways, and she—reluctantly—gave her approval for this interview.”

“Did she reluctantly give my consent?”

“No. I don’t believe she considered the matter; were she here, I would

perhaps take her to task for that failure. Or perhaps not. She is seldom subtle, and this appears to be a subtle maneuver on her part.”

“She expected me to say no?”

“In retrospect, I believe that was the case.” He drank. He did not have Jester’s garrulous energy; all of his movements were economical. “You know how to throw knives.”

“Yes. And yes, I’ve had some practice with long knives. I tried the sword, but I don’t have the height for it.”

“Height is not an excuse. With the right weapon—”

“I don’t have the height for the House Guard. Short of that, there was no point.”

“And the knife-work?”

Jester shrugged. “Helps me sleep at night.” He swallowed the rest of his wine in one long, acerbic gulp. “I’m not great at it. I’m good enough for my purposes.”

“I will not ask for an explanation of those purposes as you seem to find it wearying. I will give you three names.”

“Do they have anything in common with the messages I’m to deliver—without offense—this afternoon?”

“Very good.”

“You know the names. You clearly didn’t pick up on the ‘without offense’ part. I’m well-known for some of my unfortunate foibles—but even those won’t be good enough excuse for accidentally finding myself in possession of information that is not, strictly speaking, public.”

“You do not feel you are up to the task.”

“I don’t even know what the task is, but given your expression, no, I don’t. I don’t particularly feel bad about it, either.” He set the glass down, and glanced at the mark in what was otherwise pristine, well-oiled wood. “Nice arm, by the way. Especially at your age.” He headed for the doors.

“You are aware that Finch has already been subject to one assassination attempt.”

“I’d be surprised if it’s that low,” he replied. But he did not reach for the door’s handles. “When?”

“If Finch has not discussed this with the den, I am not certain I’m at liberty to do so.”

Bastard. Jester turned. “I like playing games as much as the next man, but only when I have a shot at winning. There’s no win in any direction here. Are the three involved—in any way—with that attempt?”

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“Two are not, in my opinion. The third is a possibility.”

“Name the third.”

“I decline. You are an observant young man, and you are resourceful. You have taken up the task of being the loud and the obvious in any gathering; it allows you to control the image you present, and allows you, further, to hide behind it. I was capable, in my youth, of doing as you do; it is not an avenue open to me now.”

“You’d need to be consistently—”

“Obnoxious, yes. I believe you have twice caused House Terafin embarrassment that was not immediately dismissed. Given the years you have been ATerafin, I consider that significant; you have certainly not spent most of your life behind the shut doors of this wing. I should not keep you further. But if, after the events of the day, you wish to entertain my offer of employment, I will not withdraw it.” He then pinched the bridge of his nose. “I will, however, insist that you be properly attired. I want exact measurements, now.”

“Of course you do.”

The three people to whom Finch had written messages were merchants. Two were ATerafin, but had not been given quarters within the manse. Like Lucille, that veritable dragon of the Merchant Authority, they made their residences elsewhere. Unlike Lucille, in Jester’s opinion, they hadn’t been offered the option. Lucille was the commander of any building she happened to live, or work, in—and the Terafin manse already had one.

No other merchant was this practical. The Isle was considered important and significant, but it was also expensive; only one of the three boasted a home on the Isle. The others, like Lucille, lived within the hundred holdings.

Jester chose to visit Ludgar ATerafin first, as he was closest. He hadn’t exactly lied to Haval; he preferred to get by on as little useful work as possible. He also proposed to be home by the early dinner hour, and therefore took a Terafin carriage. It wasn’t necessary, and in the more crowded streets of the holdings, it wasn’t *faster*, but in general people were more inclined to be respectful and polite if the carriage was obviously from the manse itself.

Jester was not a member of the House Council, although he could in theory attend as Finch’s adjutant should he so choose.

He considered the House Council matter with a grimace. He did *not*, in the usual run of things, choose to sit in the closed, stuffy chambers; he found the politics both irritating and boringly obvious. He knew in advance where each member would choose to offer their support; some were subtle, some

like thunderstorms in the rainy season. He knew that they would talk until they were blue in the face, given half a chance, and he knew he would be forced to listen. Finch had made clear he would listen *obviously* and *attentively*, and added a trailing *please* after she'd made this request.

Jay, to her credit, had never tried—but Jay had the smarts she was born with. Like Jester, she didn't put effort into anything pointless; like Jester, she was practical. She was more obvious in her suspicion—but she was also capable of trust. It was a weakness. Jester knew it. Carver had spent his early years with the servants not just because he wanted to bed Merry, but because he knew they were the best source of gossip, and that gossip, if not entirely reliable, would be close enough to give the den warning, if necessary. Not all of the servants considered the West Wing a personal favorite, but many did. They knew where the den had come from; they knew that the den had none of the built-in advantages that birth generally conveys.

They knew that, in part, the West Wing was, and had been, in their hands. They were invested in its success, and in the success of The Terafin—a woman of mean birth and no connections who had risen to prominence by her contributions to the House itself. She was like them, not like the patricians who generally climbed the rungs of House political ladders.

The servants offered Carver quiet warnings, and Carver passed them on, stripped of all identifying marks, to Jay or her kitchen council, most of whom were willing to trust Carver's take on the advice. Carver had, on the sly, checked out some of it himself—he had access to the back halls. Jester strongly suspected that the Master of the Household Staff knew this, but as she treated everyone with stiff disdain, it was hard to be certain. She made it difficult to access those halls on the best of days—but Carver liked the challenge, and the Master of the Household Staff had never taken her suspicions to The Terafin—either Terafin—directly. It was a game to both.

Jester didn't particularly like the Master of the Household Staff; he did, on the other hand, admire her. No rank—not even The Terafin's—was proof against her ire or her suspicion. If she treated the new maids and servants like carpeting that needed to be thoroughly beaten and trod on, she treated anyone that way. She was not particularly fond of the West Wing—but she was not particularly fond of the House Council, either. He knew almost nothing about the Master of the Household Staff, and the servants were incredibly reluctant to talk about her at all—as if she, like ancient creatures of myth, were invoked by the mere mention of her name.

But he knew about her small garden. He knew about what she grew there. He knew that, on three separate occasions, men—always men—had fallen

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extremely ill shortly after they had overstepped the bounds of their authority. He had not lied to Haval; none of them had been Household Staff. One had died. If The Terafin suspected foul play—and certainly the servants did—she had said, and done, nothing.

But House Terafin harbored men and women of great ambition, as any House did, and she accepted the behavior that did not politically embarrass her House, either externally or internally. She, therefore, had many men of the caliber of Ludgar under her auspices. She had passed them on to Jay.

It wasn't Jay who had deposited Jester in the Council Chambers as Finch's adjutant—it was the previous Terafin. He had spoken no more than a handful of words to the woman whose House Name he bore; he had spoken several thousand *about* her, but not in her hearing. She occupied a central role in his thoughts, which he kept largely to himself.

The only exception to that—and it was a rare exception, and prone to make him uncomfortable after the fact—was Finch. He knew where Jay had found Finch; she had found Jester in the same place. He knew that Finch had been sold to the brothel by her family, that she'd been saved as something "special," and that if she escaped, she had nowhere to go. The only people likely to offer aid were also likely to abuse her in exactly the same fashion, without the need to pay someone else for the privilege.

Speaking to Finch was speaking to someone with a breadth of common experience—and neither of them talked much about that past. Neither of them spoke about Duster. Jester vastly preferred not to speak about unpleasant things; they caused pain, to no one's amusement or benefit.

But he thought, as he mused in the interminable carriage ride to Ludgar's, that Haval had observed what Jester himself rarely thought about for long: Finch was important to him. All of the den was, but Finch occupied a space no one else did—or would. He was not, had never been, in love with her; he frankly doubted the existence of that emotion, at least as it pertained to himself. She was like a sister to him; sometimes an older one, sometimes younger. He really never thought more about it than that.

But it was clearly obvious to Haval, and that irked him. Nobody took Jester seriously enough to search for his weaknesses; Haval, almost unobtrusive, had merely noted them. And he had shown, in one baffling and inexplicable meeting, a willingness to use them.

What did he want?

He had asked Jester to work for him. He hadn't explained in exact terms what he expected, but the specific lack of explanation made clear—to Jester—what that work entailed; subtlety and possible sleight of hand. Jester

would not be surprised if it involved more than that and, frankly, of a more dubious legality.

The clothier had waited until Jay left to make his offer of employ. This said something to Jester. He had no doubt that Haval had discussed the possibility with Jay—but every doubt that he had made clear what he wished Jester to achieve. Yet Jay trusted the old man.

Trust was a luxury she could not afford. They were all far too trusting for Jester's liking; all except Finch, and no one considered Finch naturally suspicious. She wasn't. She didn't sort people into trustworthy and untrustworthy; she didn't appear to make judgments at all. She accepted them as people—and she knew full well what people considered respectable by a vast swathe of humanity were capable of.

He adjusted the ring on his finger. It identified him as ATerafin, but frankly, anyone could wear one, if they could find a jeweler willing to create it. Ring on hand, he generally chose not to wear House colors. All official correspondence was delivered by House messengers; as Jester had not been sent in that capacity he had no desire to appear to be one—although he had, a handful of times in the past, chosen that camouflage when it suited his purposes. Finch had not elected to use the official service, for reasons of her own; Jester was the informal option. Informal or no, Ludgar would be well aware that Jester served—occasionally—as her adjutant; any message he carried would therefore be weighed with that knowledge in mind.

It was not the first time he had been sent to both carry and fetch messages. It was unlikely to be the last. In truth, he enjoyed Ludgar's company; the man had a sense of humor, something often absent in the pompous and pretentious. He did have a healthy sense of his own importance—but Jester found that true of most of the Terafin merchants, especially those who spent half of their life at sea, as Ludgar did.

He would not have considered Ludgar a threat, although he was well aware that Ludgar could throw his weight around when it suited him; Ludgar was both ambitious and practical. Practical, smart people were generally predictable if one understand the paradigm in which they worked: they took calculated risks, not stupid ones.

Was Ludgar involved?

He had certainly paid court to Finch—in her role as House Council member—when things appeared to be up in the air; he had kept an otherwise respectful distance since then. Very few people were afraid of Finch; very few were not wary of Lucille, and Lucille had practically posted signs on Finch's forehead warning people off.

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Ludgar, however, knew how to charm Lucille. She didn't trust him, but liked him in spite of herself. He was capable of subtlety when he chose it; he didn't choose it all that often.

Then again, he was a giant of a man in almost all ways. It was rumored that he hoped for a position equal to Lucille's or Jarven's, and Jester admitted it was a possibility—but he privately thought the man would go mad within the month trapped as Jarven was. Jarven was canny, competent, and seemed to care less for his personal dignity—or authority—than the much more voluble Lucille.

Jester didn't believe it.