

This was originally in *Oracle*, from Chapter Six. It slots in around the events in the Merchants' Guildhall. Some of *Oracle* as it was published is also contained in this excerpt, for context.

## SIGURNE CUTS

Sigurne Mellifas did not hoard power; she husbanded it. The younger members of the guild—those who relied on displays of wealth, knowledge or power to cement their perceived status—had, for decades, decried her lack of distinction. They disliked being governed by a woman better known for her rigid sense of the Kings' laws and her dominance of internal bureaucracy than her formidable spellcraft or her patrician notability. She had not accepted the social eminence due her rank, and did not style herself a member of the patriciate. She was, in their minds, an embarrassment to the Order.

Such young men—and women—fell, or more accurately, threw themselves into the more political spheres of influence within the Order of Knowledge, attaching themselves to men whose standing, bearing, and personal esthetics better suited their youthful ideals. As they aged—and, one hoped, gained wisdom—they often repented of their former arrogance.

She glanced at Gavin Ossus. As Sigurne had, he had joined the Order of Knowledge because of his talent; he had been discovered in one of the free towns, and his family had allowed him to make the trek to the Imperial capital, to endure the travails of travel in a crowded, dense nest of hostile humanity.

Unlike Sigurne's, his home had not been the frozen North; his early teachers had not been a rogue mage of exceptional knowledge and power, and a *kialli* lord. He understood the people of this capital by the time he had reached sixteen years of age; during her sixteenth year, she had learned entirely different lessons. Gavin Ossus knew how to fit in. He knew how to excel. He learned to treat arrogance with full-on arrogance. He developed the style—and the social traits—of the most lofty of patrician nobles.

But he did not love the nobility of this city.

And the Henden of 410 had scarred him. All of his power, all of his talent, all of his knowledge had been rendered superfluous. He could hear the civilians that he frequently treated so brusquely screaming away the last minutes of their lives, and he could do *nothing*.

Neither, Sigurne had told him, could she.

He slid sideways, this brash, deeply enraged man. Instead of attaching himself to those first circle magi who had designs upon Sigurne's position, he had thrown himself at the feet of Meralonne APhaniel. When Meralonne approached the council with the suggestion that he take a personal interest in the training of the warrior mages, Gavin's was the impassioned voice that had swayed the vote.

Had he not spoken, Sigurne might — might — have prevailed.

She was grateful, at the moment, that she had not.

"Guildmaster," Gavin said. To his right and left stood four men. They did not wear the robes of the order; they did wear — prominently placed — the medallion.

"He is coming," she replied, although he hadn't asked. "Be prepared; he will leave you all behind if you cannot follow at speed." She spoke with authority, and it was the weight of that authority that prevented her from pacing the heights of the tower. The signal had been sent — but Meralonne was no longer within immediate, easy reach. Half of the magi were combing through the debris they had retrieved from the Merchant Authority building. Some handful were *in* the building, to the disquiet of the Authority's governing council.

None of them were Meralonne, and tonight, she was almost certain that only Meralonne would do. The men and women he'd trained might serve as support — and at that, necessary support, assuming one cared about the lives of the ordinary citizens who also lived and worked in the hundred holdings — but they could not face what he could face.

Nor did they believe they could, and for that at least she could be grateful.

“Sigurne,” Matteos said, handing her a cloak. She glanced down at its dark folds, and lifted her face to the wind. After a moment, she nodded, and allowed him to drape it across her shoulders. It was not, of course, meant to provide warmth; it was meant to provide protection. She did not intend the magi to enter the holdings without her.

She glanced at Gavin, and kept that thought to herself.

Every so often, the men and women who entered the Order were not youthful, not exuberant, not so steeped in their wild daydreams of what a mage was supposed to be that they failed to understand that mages were also people, and that an organization of so many egocentric intelligences needed to be guided. It needed to be protected in part from the demands of the patriciate—and the Kings—but it also needed to be protected from itself.

To such men, Sigurne’s lack of the obvious trappings of power did not immediately condemn her. And to a rare few, that lack elevated her. It made, of her power, something to be used sparingly and at need; it made, of her rank, a simple responsibility that encompassed an enormous amount of drudgery.

One of those men was Matteos Corvel.

Had Sigurne been the ennobled, beautiful ruler of a mythic guild, Matteos would have been her Knight Champion. She was not. He was her friend, her advisor—when she was willing to entertain advice—and her confidant, when she felt the need to speak. He understood her office, and its multiple piles of paperwork; he was one of two people who could bypass the complicated protections she had placed on every door, window and fireplace.

But he was not young, anymore, and he had not chosen the warrior’s path. She did not wish to take him with her. But she would.

Wind tugged at the hem of the cloak Matteos had carefully placed around her shoulders. She tightened the clasp and lifted chin.

Gavin Ossus frowned as she approached the crenelations. He did not

attempt to order her back. Had he, however, she would have ignored him entirely, affecting not to have heard the offending words as her hearing was not what it used to be. It would frustrate him, but on occasion, the act of breathing frustrated Gavin when it was not his own.

Matteos said nothing. He walked by her side, and when she reached the stone outcroppings, he offered her a hand and supported her weight as she climbed them. She glanced down at his upturned face and smiled; it was careworn.

“I know,” she told him, although he hadn’t spoken. Then, drawing breath, she stepped off the tower and into the folds of the night wind.

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The wind caught her before she had fallen ten feet. It buoyed her, although it was cold, and she rose in its folds, smiling in a way that would have surprised the members of the Order.

Meralonne APhaniel stood not ten yards away, his arms folded across his chest, his lips compressed in a frown. “That is not entirely wise, Member Mellifas.” As if she were still a girl, scarred and silent, in the press of halls so crowded with people they made her long for the vast expanses of snow and ice in the distant North.

“Not entirely,” she replied, as he approached. “We have received an urgent missive.”

“So I gathered, from your own summons.” His eyes were bright, silver, his expression calm as he gazed beyond the tower and past the bay, to the heart of the hundred holdings. “We will be missed if we tarry.” Raising his voice, he added, “Member Ossus, gather your men. We have work to do.”

Gavin Ossus nodded and gave curt commands; he stepped far more easily onto the battlements than Sigurne had. So did his companions: Eryk, Alldrich, Engel and Olivia. They were silent; Alldrich was pale. They were not obviously armed, but that would change as they approached the end of their brief flight.

They leapt far more gracefully into the air.

Matteos, notably, did not. He was not, and had never been, one to engage in actions that were purely a matter of style. He grimaced as the wind swept him off his feet—feet that were firmly planted against flat stone. Matteos did not care for flight of any type; he endured it because it was necessary, no more.

Meralonne was not without malice; he knew. He was not particularly gentle in his handling of Matteos. But he handled Sigurne with care, and she closed her eyes in the chill of the evening air as strands of silver hair broke free of their confinement. In the few moments before she was plunged into the chaos of battle, she was free of the tower and its many responsibilities. She could soar, here.

But she could fall, as well.

The time was coming when such a leap as she had chosen to make would end in her death. But it would be a quick and painless affair, which was perhaps more than she deserved.

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She could not hear the wind's voice; no more could Matteos, Gavin Ossus or his men. She knew that Meralonne could, and that he could speak in a voice the wind, in turn, would hear. The wind to which he spoke was not the common breeze that carried the scent of sea salt in any season, nor even the destructive howl of storm. It had will, intent, and a rough intelligence.

So she had been taught, and as any person, the earliest lessons were those she could not forget. They informed her; they informed the long, harsh choices she had made. The Winter was in her heart as she rode the wild wind, and she watched the back of her most dangerous mage in something akin to a young girl's awe.

She had seen him in the Northern Wastes, almost uncontained, his white hair flying—as it flew now—his blue sword incandescent. He wore no shield tonight, and if she understood his kin, he would not easily find another, but she could almost believe it superfluous. His eyes were flashing silver as the

wind caught him and swept him around; he met her gaze, his lips turning up in a smile that seemed the essence of youth.

Only the old could forget the cruel certainty of youth. Sigurne was, for a moment, stripped of that age. She saw him clearly, and desired to watch both his ascent and his descent. But she closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she gazed at Matteos. He was mortal in all ways, informed—as she was—by the passage of years, his face creased and careworn, his expression—she laughed.

He scowled. “I do not particularly enjoy heights.”

“No more do I,” she replied.

One grey brow rose; he did not otherwise accuse her of lying. His clothing was rumped, his arms and shoulders stiff; he did not trust the wind, and with reason. But Meralonne called it, Meralonne cajoled it. It would carry him—was carrying him as she watched—to the heart of the conflict.

From the air, she could see fire. It was limned in the red that spoke of its magical origins. “Meralonne,” she whispered. “Set us down.”

The ground approached; she heard Matteos inhale sharply. She herself reached into the folds of the cloak he had placed around her shoulders and she drew it tight as her feet alighted upon the cobbled stones of the Common.

“Sigurne,” Matteos said, his voice a bare whisper.

She saw as he saw: the Merchant’s Guild was alight with the transparent sheen that spoke of magic. Red was subtle and pale; it faded into the stronger glow of orange: fire and protective barrier. Neither were a positive sign; magics of this nature, to be legal, required Sigurne’s seal. They had not, of course, received it.

But it was the shadow, the black absence of light, that caught and held her attention.

“Demons,” Matteos whispered.

“Yes. Three, if I am not mistaken.”

His gaze was sharp. "I can see one."

"Yes. So, too, can APhaniel."

"Or anyone with eyes who happens to be foolish enough to stand in the streets." The streets, to the side and the back of the guildhall, were all but deserted, and with reason. Fire had scorched stone, and in at least one instance, blackened the flat, dry grass that struggled to grow at this time of year. The flower beds were likewise dark and lifeless.

"There are, apparently, fools," Sigurne said, her voice sharpening.

"Two."

"Three."

"Three? I see only—oh."

A man in dark clothing was attacking the demon; he leapt—from where, it was not clear to Sigurne's eye—and planted what appeared to be daggers in the demon's back. Dark tendrils of shadow sprouted from the wounds those daggers left, snapping like whips.

Were it not for those tendrils, the creature might have been a man. Tall, yes, but in form and appearance, as graceful—as beautiful—as Meralonne. It was to Meralonne, and not the man whose daggers now melted, metal flowing in silver streaks down his back, that he turned.

He laughed, and to Sigurne's ear there was genuine delight in his voice. "Illaraphaniel."

It was always thus.

Sigurne made her way with a speed that belied her age to the two men she had seen at a distance. She recognized them both, and if she had hopes that her eyesight failed her, they were dashed. Patris Araven and Jarven ATerafin stood on a patch of blackened earth, watching the fight as it unfolded.

"Guildmaster," Jarven ATerafin said.

"ATerafin. Patris Araven."

“Guildmaster.”

“This is not the place for spectators.”

“No. We were — until very recently — either combatants or intended victims. The building appears to be magically sealed to prevent escape.”

Sigurne did not ask how they had breached that barrier. She glanced at the building and nodded grimly. With a hand, she gestured; a pale, golden shield grew at her back, bisecting the grounds that remained.

Hectore turned. “I will call the servants out, with your permission.”

“Do it quickly. If they will be lead, lead them — but lead them away. The creature beyond my barrier is not the only one on the premises, and I believe him to be the lesser danger.” She did not raise voice when she spoke Gavin’s name; nor did he raise voice in reply. But he alighted on the right side of the barrier, bringing three of the four warrior magi with him.

“Leave the creature to Meralonne. There is work that needs to be done immediately within the guild’s walls.” She turned, not to Hectore, but to Jarven ATerafin. “When did it start?”

He did not pretend to misunderstand her, although he watched her with interest. “Fifteen minutes, Guildmaster. Perhaps fewer. It is my suspicion that the servants were to be slaughtered; there was a demon in charge of the kitchen.”

“He is dispatched?”

“Yes. I will travel to the Order on the morrow to make the agreed upon report.”

She turned. As a tide of terrified people came flooding out of the tradesman’s entrance, Sigurne Mellifas entered the guildhall. She cast one backward glance; saw blue light and red light clash and entwine. She felt no anxiety for Meralonne, but anxiety forced her to return to the world in which man lived, worked — and perished.

And when she stepped across the threshold of the torn — but not ineffective

—magical barrier, she felt the whole of her age return; it fell across her shoulders like an inescapable weight.

Matteos felt it as well: the ground shook. He turned toward the exit.

“Yes,” she said. “The earth is waking. Gavin.”

“Guildmaster.”

“Belay that order. If Meralonne can be separated from the demon, kill it. If APhaniel does not breach this barrier, the guildhall will be destroyed—and with it, some greater part of the Common. Tell him the wild earth is waking.”

“Tell him,” Matteos cut in, “that he faces the lesser of the creatures that pose a threat. If he dallies here, the greater of his foes will escape.”

Sigurne raised a brow at her closest aide, and then offered him a tight, grim smile. “I do not know if he will hear what Gavin chooses to tell him.”

“I know. But he will hear you, Sigurne. He always has.”

“The time is coming when even I will not be able to reach him.”

“I know. While I breathe, your words will always reach me.”

“Then help me,” she replied. “The *kialli* are not the only mages who can use protective or shoring magics.”

Matteos frowned. “What do you intend?”

“We cannot speak to the wild earth; the only one of us who could is no longer in Averalaaan.”

Matteos exhaled, steadying himself against the wall as the ground trembled again. “It’s almost as if they know she is gone.”

“It does indeed appear that they know. There is some chance that her protections will make their work here more difficult—but we must ask ourselves now how her departure was marked. There are a handful of possible sources, and every single one of them is deeply troubling.”

She knelt, placing her palm against the stone; as she did, the soft, orange glow of Matteos’ magic blossomed around them both. She nodded and closed

her eyes; Matteos would keep watch for both of them. It was imperative that she listen.

#

*Tell me, what do you hear?*

*The wind.*

*In the frozen wastes, the wind howls.* He did not smile. His face was pale as perfect, northern skin, but his eyes were dark; there were no irises that Sigurne could see, no light that was not reflected. Even the reflection wavered, as if it might at any moment be devoured.

It was dark; the light was candlelight, and at that, scant. This room of the tower was forbidden to all save the Ice Mage himself, and he did not choose to visit it often. Behind the banded doors that glowed so brightly with the mage's runic magic was the pride of his collection. The mage was not so foolish as to trust him, and when he had not chosen to bend his considerable will toward the *kialli* lord, he kept him caged. He was the only demon he kept in such a cage: to control him continuously, without making a single mistake, was far too costly; it demanded a concentration that the mage did not have; he was mortal. The Ice Mage needed to sleep.

The tower room had been constructed with care and magical precision; in its centre, the demon was —almost—free. He could not leave the tower; he could not breach the circumference of the circle. Nor could the demons littered throughout the fortress enter it.

But cages had bars and the enterprising could reach through them, even if they could not be broken.

She believed the words of the master she had not —and would never— choose. The demon was death. He told truth only when convenient, and only at a slant; his lies were more dependable. She believed, as well, that the demon was powerful, although his form was almost human. Most of the demons the Ice Mage summoned were creatures out of nightmare; they had limbs, yes, and voices —but everything about them spoke of destruction.

It was for these creatures that the Ice Mage was feared.

But it was the *kialli* that he himself feared.

Sigurne did not. The worse she faced was death, and she was not afraid of death. She wished to choose its time and place, of course. She did not want to perish before the Ice Mage was dead. But if she did, she did; death was release, a type of freedom.

“It is a freedom that the *kialli* do not know.”

She had not spoken aloud, but did not startle. Instead, she turned to meet the demon’s eyes. To hold his gaze. “What do you hear?”

“I hear the wild wind,” he replied. “Its voice is faint; it is keening. It calls me, but it does not hear my reply.”

“If you were free, would it?”

“Yes. It is why I am here.”

“If you were free, would I hear what you hear?”

His silence was dismissive, but he chose to speak. Sometimes, he did not. “No. You will never hear it.”

“Because I’m mortal.”

He nodded. “There are mortals who have the power to make their voices heard; the ancient listen. But mortals cannot compel. They can cajole; they can plead. If they enter into conversation at all—and it does not destroy them—it is the conversation of the powerless with the powerful; they speak on their knees. If lucky, they will not likewise die on their knees.” He lifted his face; moonlight silvered his skin and his eyes, and his hair fell down the length of his unscarred back like a mantle.

He was beautiful. He had always been beautiful. The wind did not change his complexion; nor did the bitterest of cold, the deadliest of storms. Nothing the snows could birth or hide could harm him. He was death; he did not fear it.

She entered the room, following the patterns etched with such deliberation

into the cold, stone floors. She kept her back to the wall at all times, a lesson learned in her first week as apprentice. She had scars that ran the length of her right upper arm; they might fade with time. She did not resent them; they were earned. She had not been cautious enough.

She was cautious now, but did not lie to herself; this man — this *demon* — was compelling. He was beautiful the way the snow was: a killing cold. But pristine, untouched.

He smiled. Her breath caught. Every truth she could tell herself about him seemed thin and irrelevant. But she clung to the wall and the circle, which deepened his smile. “It is always thus with mortals; like moths you are drawn to end your life in flame.”

She nodded. She did not have the pride of the Ice Mage; she could not. She did not have his power. If she was not named and bound and caged, she was just as much captive.

His smile banked, deserting his face; she saw the movement of ancient fury in the lines of his perfect expression. She wanted — foolish, foolish girl — to touch that face; her hands rose. But her feet did not move.

“What can the wind do?” She asked. Sometimes he answered her questions; more often he posed questions of his own. They were, of necessity, treacherous, but they had not yet killed her.

“No,” was his soft reply. “Not yet.” He turned to gaze out of the single window the tower contained. “The wind is capricious. Of the four, it is oft considered the easiest to cajole. I believe, in this place, it could destroy the tower that holds me captive; it could break the stone upon which I now stand. But it would take time to convince the wilderness that such a destruction served its purpose.

“It does not like to be captive.”

Nothing did.

“You are wrong. Your dogs grow fond of their masters. They grow fond of the homes provided them. They seek only to defend what they would not

have chosen on their own. If I wished to destroy this tower, I would summon the ancient earth. I would wake it beneath my feet.”

“Would it not then destroy you?”

“It would destroy the containment of flesh, no more. There is no end for one such as I. If what you perceive as my body is lost, I will return to the Hells, much lessened in power—and therefore stature. I will struggle with memory, and if I am successful, I will once again be what I was before my name was called across the abyss.”

She did not ask him what would happen if he failed.

“But the earth is slow to wake. It is slow to anger—but once angered, its rage known no bounds.” He turned again, to face her. “Would you have me call the earth?”

“Would he die?”

The *kialli* lord laughed. “No. He, and perhaps a handful of others, might escape. You would not be among them.”

“Can you promise that?”

He did not answer.

“Could you call the earth if you cannot bespeak the air?”

“No. It was an idle question.”

“If—if the mage cannot hear them, how can he prevent you from speaking?”

“That is the first intelligent question you have asked me this eve.”

He opened his arms and she closed her eyes, dropping to the floor and sliding her arms around her bent knees.

“Come, Sigurne. I will not kill you this eve.”

She shook her head. “He has not let you hunt. If you will not kill me, you will make me long for death.” She lifted chin. “I know myself well enough; I am not strong enough to withstand your torture.”

He laughed, then. “But bold enough to dance along its edge? Very well. It is a subtle magic. You are aware of the basic protective spells with which your master —”

“Do not call him that.”

“Is he not? Do you not bow to him? Do you not offer him your absolute obedience?”

“I offer it in the same way you do,” she countered. It was a foolish, foolish thing to say, and she knew it, but did not regret it. Nor would she.

“And you are so certain, little mortal?”

She shifted, uncomfortable with the edge in his voice; he was both angry and amused. It was never, never wise to amuse a demon, or to assume that amusement meant safety, as it had in her father’s house. “We desire the same thing: his death and our freedom.”

“You barely understand the meaning of the word *desire*.”

She said nothing, then, but met his gaze, her eyes unblinking and narrowed.

His brows rose. “You think to convince me of the depth of your hatred? You have lived a handful of squalid years; you have suffered — what *have* you suffered, child? Have you lost everything to which you dedicated the whole of your existence? Have you lost the high wild, and the companionship of the earth, the air, the water? Do the trees refuse to speak when they hear your voice at all?”

“Have you been riven from everything you have ever valued, and for which you have killed, time and again, at the whim of the only being you have ever loved?” His voice was wild now; deep with fury — and with a bitter, bitter longing so tangible she could almost touch it. She could not imagine it was a lie, an act.

She tightened her arms, knowing that it didn’t matter. Lies, truth, joy, pain — they were *all* weapons in his hands. There was no comfort someone as ephemeral and powerless as she could offer the kin. None except literal

agony. He could be honest because she amounted to so little, her knowledge posed no threat.

Demons did not need to talk; no more did they need to sleep, or eat, or breathe. They did not require companionship. Only mortals did. She was not here for his sake, then. For her own?

And what advantage could she take from her presence here? She was beguiled by cruelty, ice, death—and by beauty. None of these things would give her an advantage; she owned none of them.

He was staring at her, the torment etched in the lines of his face fading as she watched. “You are not like your master.”

She did not choose to quibble the use of the word again—not that way. Instead, she said quietly and as calmly as breathing allowed, “in the North, we choose our masters.”

“In the North, power makes masters of men.”

She shook her head. “Where there is no choice offered, none is made. I serve because the alternative is death—and not mine. I understand that you are captive in the same way that I am.”

“It is not the same. Were I not chained by the use of my name, I would kill him. I would kill him slowly, and it would bring me great pleasure—if brief. But I would then return to the Hells, where I would serve. I will never be master again.” His smile was unexpected. “You are correct, mortal child. I take no comfort from your pity or your sympathy; I require nothing from you except your pain and your death.

“But were I only a creature of appetite, I would not now be caged in this fashion. You have not chosen, you have said; you slave, you do not serve. Very well. Stay where you are safest. I will gift you with some small knowledge of the world you have never seen and never experienced. What you will do with it—should you survive—I cannot see.” He turned, again, to the window.

“You cannot hear the wind. You cannot hear the earth. You will never be

able to speak to either. In time, you might learn to master fire; fire was always the most biddable—and least flexible—of the wild elements. But it will not burn here; not for me. The mage has wrought well.

“You might do the same. You will not be able to still the wilderness, should it wake before you are aware of the danger. Nor will you be able to control it. The simplest choice is therefore to contain the voice of the speaker who can.”

“Your voice is contained.”

“It is.”

“How?”

He smiled.

She did not. Her frown was one of focus and concentration. “I can hear you. I am standing within the protective rim, but your voice carries. If the wild air were at my side, would it hear you?”

“The second intelligent question of the evening. No. It is a subtle containment. I must be able to speak to the mortals I am sent to destroy—when I am sent; I must be heard by the lesser kin that litter the poverty of this fortress. If the containment depended entirely upon location—as your safety now does—I would be mute. It would lessen my utility.”

Sigurne had been taught only the theory and the rudiments of protection; she had been taught very little of anything else. She was not entirely certain why the mage had insisted upon taking an apprentice at all; given his actions, no apprentice would willingly choose to serve him if any other alternative existed.

“He is mortal,” the demon said quietly. “And as all mortals must, he ages as the years lead him inexorably to his death. Many, many of the most foolish among your number traded what little life they were given for the chance of immortality.”

“I am not—”

“You are the vessel by which his legacy will survive, if he does not.”

“I will bury his legacy,” she replied. “I will not spread it. If he dies here, the knowledge that he has gathered will die with him.”

“And you will die with it?”

She shrugged, restless. After a long moment, she rose and began to pace the confines of the binding circle. She passed the window, standing between the demon and his view. “Were you aware of the containment before you attempted to bespeak the wind?”

His smile deepened, sharpened. “A third question; of the three it is easily the most perceptive. No. It is not a magic cast directly upon me. It is, as I said, subtle. I am only peripherally aware of it; I cannot directly see it. The circumference of the circle in which you now stand is clear to me; I can throw the whole of my power against it, to no effect. It is built upon my name.”

“And the enchantment that prevents your voice from reaching the wild air?”

“It prevents my voice from reaching the world, child. I am hidden, here. You frown.”

“What do you mean by the world?”

He watched her in silence. She did not know what he saw; she could not be certain how it worked. She knew only that she could not prevent it, save by leaving—and she did not yet wish to depart, although the room itself was frigid and her breath was a pale mist in the air; no fire burned in this room because its captive did not require warmth. Or heat.

“When the world was young and less impoverished, child, I might have kept you. You know so little, yet you discern much with that meagre knowledge.” He gestured, and as he did, dark wings rose from his back; she saw them above his shoulders. They were the color of ash. “I will be confined here until the mage dies, one way or the other. You will be confined here until either you die or the mage does.

“If you are unprepared, any one of the lesser kin that wander the outskirts of this fortress will be your death.”

She shook her head and lifted her arm, drawing the sleeve away from her wrist. “I’m marked,” she said quietly. “They will not attack me unless the mark is removed—and I cannot remove it.”

“You’ve tried.” It wasn’t a question.

She nodded. “I don’t fear death.”

“No. And because you don’t fear death, you do not fear me.”

“I understand what you are.”

“Do you?” His smile was softer, fuller; his voice—she closed her eyes. “What do you think I mean by ‘the world’?” His voice was closer. She stiffened, but did not move, although the wind that came in through the open stone was bitterly cold.

“The ancient world,” she whispered; it was the only way she could speak. “And the hidden. It is not the world that I lived in before—” she shook her head and opened her eyes; he was standing inches away, his face above hers, his eyes unblinking shadow.

“You do not live in the world at all, you and your kin. It has been all but forbidden you. With care, with deliberation, you can reach it—but it takes power and knowledge, which most of your kin no longer possess. The gods will not offer you the keys necessary to reach what they have carefully hidden away—it would destroy most of your kind.”

“But he found them.”

“Yes. When I lived in the world, he would have been insignificant; it is only now, when power is denied you, that he can play god.”

“The same power is denied you.”

“Yes. But the edges are fraying. You cannot see them.” His smile sharpened, his eyes narrowed. “But it is now my belief that you will, if you survive. You understand the limits of your own world, and you have long accepted them as the natural order; it is your talent that gives you glimpses of the hidden. It is not the natural order. It is, in all ways, artificial. The world

lives, it breathes, and it sleeps—but all sleep must end.

“It is the taint, the seeming, the echo of mortality that lays between me and the wilderness, now. It is, as I said, a subtle thing. To learn to do this you will have to listen, child. You will have to hear what your kind was never meant to hear.”

“Are the others bound in the same way?”

“Among the kin he has gathered, only one possesses the ability to be heard. It is a skill, like any other, but it requires will, desire, intent.”

“Then I cannot learn—”

“But you can.” He lifted a hand and traced the shape of her cheek a hair’s breadth from her skin. “You will need to learn many, many things first.”

She stilled; she did not lean into the hand that passed so close to her face. “What must I learn?”

“To do as he has done.”

She turned to the window, aware of his presence; aware that the shadows he cast were not cast by any source of light in the room. They hemmed her in, but did not touch her. Not yet.

“Why must I learn what he has learned?” She finally asked.

“Because there is only one way to practice.”

She stiffened and turned to face him. Beauty and death were so entwined in this prison she could not separate them. And in truth, she yearned for both. “What will I do with this knowledge?”

“Who can say? It has been long indeed since I last chose to accept a student.”

“What happened to your last student?”

He smiled. “Does it matter? You wish to learn about the world that is all but hidden from your sight. There is only one way to do that.”

“There is more than one,” she countered, her voice soft.

He chuckled. “Yes. But for you? You are caged, little human. You might never be free. While you survive, learn. If you learn enough, you might buy your freedom, in the end.”

“Do you offer me power?” She asked.

“Perhaps.”

“And what do you ask in return? I cannot grant you freedom.”

“I have already told you, no one can. The binding placed upon me here is vexing, but transient.” He once again lifted hand. She was utterly still; if she moved—at all—she would touch him. “He is clever, in a fashion; I am contained. There is very little that I can do to harm or hinder him. But he is not nearly as cautious with you. Does he know you are here?”

“I don’t know.” But she did. He slept. While he slept, no one—demon or man—crossed his threshold; to do so was death. It had been tried, once; the mage had not even stirred; he had come across the corpse in the morning.

“I am not a creature of story or legend. I cannot take your soul. No oath you give is binding.”

“No oath *you* give is binding.”

“Such anger,” he said, amused again. “You will come to understand that your sense of honor, such as it is, matters only to you. It is not of notable value to me. I am aware of the value of both mortal oaths and mortal fear, and fear is by far the more certain offering.”

“I won’t fear you,” she said, voice low.

“Not yet. Perhaps not ever. But you will learn what I have to teach, child—and perhaps, if you are an apt pupil, fear will become your constant companion. It will remind you, in ways even your scars and losses cannot, of me.”

#

Could one be said to be treacherous if trust had never been given? Could one betray a trust that did not exist? Sigurne closed her eyes. She was not the

girl she had once been; she would never be that girl again. Were the gods to walk, were they to grant her youth as gods might once have done, they would change only the externals; her experiences would remain.

Most were hidden. Those who knew of her origins—and she did not take great pains to hide them—had long since given over the suspicions they invoked. She was Sigurne Mellifas. She did not turn a blind eye upon the study of—the mention of— forbidden arts; it was considered almost a vendetta on her part.

Nor had she adopted this stance to allay suspicions. She intended to bury the knowledge; to eradicate it. No mage would again leave the Order and repair to the Northern Wastes to enslave her distant kin. She was as effective as any guildmaster had ever been in this single regard.

Of course she was. She understood exactly what to look for. She knew the paths, slender and apparently unconnected, that lead, like haphazard webbing, to the heart of the forbidden. She had walked almost all of them herself.

#

“What do you hear?”

“Wind.” It was dark in the tower; it was almost always dark, here. She had brought, as she often did, a lantern; it sheltered candlelight. She could draw light from nothing, but it was not safe to do so in the tower room; magic, thus cast, could be detected, and its caster traced. Demons did not require light.

Sigurne learned to live without it. The window let in moonlight; the moon, reflected by snow, turned the world into shades of grey. “We are to be sent to Kasslin on the morrow.”

He nodded. “While we cross the snow, I will ask you the question again.”

He asked it every night. It was the first thing he asked, and the last, the sentence bookending their muted conversations. Her answer was always the same. If it frustrated the *kialli* Lord, he did not choose to share, but she remained outside of the circle of binding, where only his words might reach

her.

“You did not come last night.”

She said nothing; there was nothing to say.

“Why?”

“You already know.”

He smiled; in it, she saw echoes of the indulgent smile of a parent. Her father’s smile, not her mother’s. She could not, in the darkness of this tower, remember what her mother’s smile looked like, she had seen it so rarely. “Yes. You must learn to choose what you reveal. You burn so brightly,” he added.

“You’ve said that before. What do you see when you look at us?”

“The evening’s question,” he replied softly. “Why have you never asked?”

“I can’t see as you see. I will never see as you see. If you mean to teach me something to thwart the Ice Mage, it will never be that—I can’t learn it, no matter how much I try.”

His smile deepened. How pathetic must she be to want to be offered that smile? It meant nothing. It implied warmth; it implied affection. It offered neither—and only the foolish or the self-deluding put any faith in it at all. How could something she knew was a lie have value to her?

Yet it did. It did and she hated it. Restless, she began to trace the perimeter of the circle, as she so often did. “I don’t doubt that what you see exists. It informs the kin that are kept in the keep; they watch. They watch us. I note they watch in different ways. The Ice Mage—”

“Will you not use his name?”

“His name is irrelevant.” His smile dimmed, and she added, “Were he *kialli* I would watch. I would listen. I would pay as much attention as you demand. He’s not; his name means no more than mine does.”

“Indeed. Continue.”

“I thought their regard for—and of—the Ice Mage could be attributed to

his power; in specific, his power over them.”

“Continue.”

“They look at me differently. Again, I assumed at the beginning that this was entirely predatory. I am not the Ice Mage; I have neither his power nor his hold over them.” She shrugged. “If they could kill me, they would—and it would not be painless or quick. They cannot.”

“No.”

“You could.”

“Yes. But not while you stand where you stand. You are wise beyond your years.”

“They sometimes show an unhealthy fascination,” she continued, shrugging, as if to deflect the praise she conversely wanted. “I am no longer certain that it is entirely predatory. I don’t understand it.”

“You understand the broken and fragmented stories that comprise mortality’s general knowledge of demons. They are, in almost all particulars, wrong. But there is a thread of truth that runs through some of them.”

“And that?”

“They speak of the soul,” he replied. “Mortals die. They are born dying. They age and they perish. Were we to lift no hand against them, death would take them anyway. It is considered something of a waste,” he added.

“Not to us.”

“No. But the opinions of seals do not stay your hand when you choose to hunt.”

She did not resent the comparison to animals. She accepted, as truth, that her kin was prey for his. The creatures her people likewise hunted might flee; they might fight. On rare occasions, they might kill. Those deaths were a cause for grief and mourning, but they were not personal; no more personal than the sudden, terrible storms during which the careless might freeze to death scant yards from the warmth and safety of their homes.

“If you were merely mortal, you would *be* animals. But there resides within you some element, some fragment, of the numinous. You are not gods; you are not immortal. But when flesh dies, your spirit does not.”

“We travel to the Halls of Mandaros.”

“Yes. I do not know how the dead see themselves, if they see themselves at all. But we see what resides beneath the fabric of your life. Tell me, do you understand what happens in the Hall of Judgement?”

“Mandaros sees the whole of our life, and he judges us. He chooses a moment at which we might return, and we are born again.”

“In ignorance, yes. You are born again, and you return to the world, shorn of memories. Your lives are long — and often bitter — lessons.”

“What are we meant to learn?”

“It is not clear to me, even now. Very few of my kin have ever been concerned with the answer to that question — but our Lord is. If we do not understand what can be learned when memory is taken from you at each iteration, we understand that those lessons are nonetheless absorbed. They change the shade and texture of what we see.

“And what we see in you is bright. It is not a subtle shading; it is not a soft light. It has edges and definition. You will not come to the Hells when you die.”

“Will anyone?”

“Of course. But it is a slow process, a slow descent, and it can be interrupted or broken by life itself.”

“Would you recognize me? If — when — I die, and I return, will I look the same to you?”

“Yes. Having seen you, I would recognize you. But child, I would recognize you a dozen lifetimes from now. If you descend, if your light gutters, if you absorb the softness and shade, I would still be aware of you as you. You are both the sum of your many lives and separate from them, to us.”

“And I will not come to the Hells at the end of this one.”

“No. No matter how bitter your life is, you will not. Not yet.”

“And the Ice Mage?”

“Soon.” The single word was spoken in a different tone; it was raw, rough, almost—but not quite—bestial. She took a step back; her shoulder blades rested against the cold, stone wall. Shadows adorned his brow, and rose behind him like the arch of wings.

“What is your name?” She asked. She hadn’t intended to say anything until the literal darkness had passed.

“I would give it to you,” he replied, “but you are not strong enough to use it. You will not wrest control of me from our master that way, and if he dies, you will not be able to use my name against me. It is not simply a matter of knowledge; it is a blend of will, intent and power. You have the will, although it is mired in the doubts of captive youth; you have the intent. You do not have the power.”

“Will I?”

“I cannot say. You have the potential. Come. Listen to the wind.”

She did not turn to the window; instead, she looked at him. At the shadows that enshrouded him; that crowned him and gave him wings. At the color of his eyes. When angered, they developed a sheen of red; they were not, in spite of his tone, red now. It was the only thing about his face that implied the hidden—the thing that deception could not quite disguise.

“You are wrong,” he said, voice soft. “Mortals see what they want to see. Were I to walk among your kin now, they would not see the shadows; they would not see what you see in my eyes. They would fear me, yes—but they would do so instinctively. You are talentborn. What you see is not what they see.”

She nodded.

“What do you see, little mortal?”

“Shadow,” she replied.

“It is Winter; it is a Winter magic.” He gestured, and light came to his hand. Around its soft glow, she could see the lattice of violet that encased it. He spoke a single word, and fire came to his left hand, just as light balanced softly in his right. The fire was limned in the same red that bled, slowly, from his eyes.

“Violet and red,” she told him. “But I see the magic invoked in both cases: light and fire. I can’t see any effect of your Winter magic; just the shadow itself.”

He laughed. His laughter, like his smile, was warm and implied indulgence. “Can you not? When you look at me, what do you see?”

She frowned; to hear laughter was welcome; to be the cause of it, less so.

“I will not tell you, not yet. But if you guess correctly, I will acknowledge it.” He lowered his chin, in a graceful acknowledgement of both her humiliation and her desire for knowledge.

“How did the Ice Mage learn?”

“As you are learning now, child. He summoned and he questioned. The difference?”

“He had the power to enforce compliance.”

“Indeed. It is not a small difference. Listen, child. Listen. I will ask you the question on the morrow.”

#

She listened. She listened in the dark of the tower. She listened in the dark of her room when she was too weak or too injured to dare the *kialli* prison. She did not love her room; there was no privacy in it, and no refuge. Better by far to wander the halls of the keep itself; to stay on the move.

She did not hear the Wind. She did not hear the slumbering earth. It frustrated her, because she knew the Ice Mage could—and did. The fact that he could not speak to either brought no comfort. Nothing about her captivity

did.

By day, she learned magecraft. She was not, according to the mage, the most apt of pupils; she made foolish mistakes and she failed to grasp the confluence of different spheres. She endured his criticisms in the silence of her kin; they did not have the power to humiliate her. He had other ways of achieving that.

On the nights when he did not choose to visit her, she learned magecraft. The second master was forced to find more subtle methods of humiliation. But in his presence, she demonstrated her growing facility with the talent that was responsible for her captivity. She did not stumble often; nor did she fail.

Between these lessons, she watched.

She watched the kin. She catalogued their forms with a dry precision at the behest of the Ice Mage; she likewise noted the capabilities of those forms. She understood that their presence in the Northern Wastes required the knowledge and power of the Ice Mage, but as she did not summon the demons herself, she could only guess at the efficiency of any particular form; since efficiency was a concern, the Ice Mage continued to summon and dismiss.

The creatures he summoned were varied in size and shape; they varied, as well, in knowledge. From one or two, he pulled the names of others; once or twice, he cast without the certain knowledge of a name, confident in his ability to control what was summoned, regardless. She was required to witness the summoning. She was often required to witness the dismissal, as well—although in the case of some of the lesser kin, dismissal took the form of destruction: the Ice Mage commanded those he chose to keep and study to destroy.

She did not note any particular regret on the parts of the demons; indeed, it seemed to her to be the opposite. Where they were allowed to kill, they were happiest, if such a word applied to demons. They were not allowed to kill the mortals who served the Ice Mage—not often. But when he so chose, he would sacrifice a guard or a servant. Those deaths were not short, and they

were not pleasant; the victims could linger for days.

Only once did Sigurne attempt to intervene to put an end to the torment. Only once. The rest, she endured. She did not pray; she did not plead. She did not attempt to destroy the demons under the mage's control.

She did attempt to speak with them, when she traversed the keep. Some answered; some did not. They watched her with the contempt of the powerful and the frustrated desire of the powerless; she knew. She chose to ignore it; she watched. She noted that shadow infused them all in subtle ways; some greater, some lesser. She noted, as well, that the shadows were darkest when they fought.

But the shadows were bound to form, in ways that implied a second shape. Like the *kialli's* amorphous wings, they filled a space that was not immediately visible; they did not go beyond its bounds, even at their most dense.

#

“Why does the shadow conform to a physical shape, when the demon doesn't?”

“That,” the *kialli* said, “is the evening's intelligent question. Are you so certain of your observation?”

She nodded. She had learned, with time, that certainty was her only option. Doubt or fear brought her no new information—or no new information she welcomed.

“You are sensitive, child. You have a clarity of sight that your master does not possess.” He stood in the centre of the room. The room, which was never warm, chilled abruptly; she wrapped her coat tightly around her shoulders and waited, her breath a solid mist between them.

Shadow came. It took the familiar shape of wings; it darkened the whole of his eyes.

And then, to her surprise, it spread. The arches of pinions rose, and rose again, until they touched the ceiling. The ceiling wasn't flat; it rounded, peaking at a height far above the cold stone of floor. The wings then spread,

snapping out; they traveled across the curvature of the ceiling, and trailed, at last, down opposite sides of the walls.

No, not quite the walls; they took the shape of the tower, but they were confined to the inner periphery of the circle.

And oh, his eyes. No night sky had ever been so dark; not even moons at nadir could rob the sky of starlight.

“Are you,” he asked again, “so certain?”

She inhaled slowly, as if testing the taste and texture of the air. Shadow permeated everything she could see. “Yes.” She exhaled mist, forcing her hands to remain loose at her sides. “You are contained here. But you’ve never showed me the whole of your power.”

“I have showed you,” he replied, “As much of my power as I am permitted.”

She shook her head. “No, you haven’t. Not yet.” She frowned, watching. The shadow was dark enough it seemed to have a single consistency, at least at first. She covered the lamp’s flame, dousing its flickering brightness, watching the shadows in the room.

He stood at their heart, of them and yet separate; he was the first thing she could see as her eyes adjusted to moonlight’s softer illumination. It took far longer than she expected.

“You frown.”

She did. She was otherwise silent as she weighed the risk of magic, in this place. If the Ice Mage was alerted, he would know that she was here, in the tower prison. There were no others he could accuse; no one but Sigurne had been gifted with magical lessons. If she was very lucky, she would survive his anger; he did not trust the demon.

Nor did he trust Sigurne.

But she could not see. Oh, she could see the demon; she could see the shadows that now enrobed him. She could see the expressionless void of his

eyes. But the layers of shadow had texture, and at their heart, if she squinted and strained, shape. It was the shape she could not quite grasp.

“What,” he asked softly, “do you see?”

She had not yet recovered from the Ice Mage’s anger; the bruises had yellowed and greyed, but they were still visible. It was not the night to risk his wrath; she knew it. She suffered no illusions; she was not guaranteed to survive his anger. That she had so far signified little; when angered, it was his rage that drove him.

She took a risk. She did not call light, because light would not help her to see. Instead she chose to augment her natural vision. This was harder; she was no adept. Her lips moved, and her fingers drummed silent air as she struggled to find the shape—the exact shape—of the spell. She caught its ends, and buried them within herself. It was the only way she knew to tease her talent to the forefront.

Breath held, she watched the circle and the containment; they were glowing orange, now, flush against the demon’s shadow. She saw that light, a single, unbroken track that traced the entirety of the closed room. The door would not break it; nothing would, unless the Ice Mage desired it. He did not.

But no white magic crept out from the orange circle; no signal was sent to the mage. She did not relax, but gazed instead at ceiling and at window, where orange light graced the outlines of wooden beams and stone sill.

“What do you see?” He asked again.

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t. At the heart of the shadow, at the height, at the edges of its reach, there were shapes. They were denser, darker; she listened because she thought she could almost hear them speaking. It was muted, a slow, steady beat of sound; it might, were it not for the vowels, be akin to heartbeat.

She cast again, less hesitantly, her focus upon that attenuated, continuous sound; she watched the wards for movement. If the mage was aware of what she did, she must be away before he arrived. Away, and feigning sleep, for all the good it would do.

The *kialli* stepped toward her, lifting his palm; his fingers burned orange where they scraped the edge of the circle she had never once deserted while in this tower. For once, it was not his beauty, not the velvet of his voice—that promised death, only death—that drew her attention; nor was it the contempt that immediately followed the impulse to lean forward, into that hand.

The sound became fuller, richer, the consonants clearer. The syllables did not resolve into words—not in any language to which she had yet been exposed. She stepped away from the demon lord without thought; he blocked vision by presence.

It was deliberate. She knew it was deliberate. He chose to follow her once, but when she moved away from him, frowning in concentration, he did not do so again.

It was not just sound; it was shape. The syllables moved through the shadow, distorting it, almost commanding it. It traced the height of wings and ceiling as if it were a natural part of the demon's form. He had no wings, of course; he could, however, fly.

There was substance here. It would devour her if she touched it.

“What do you see?” he asked again.

She shook her head, lifting palm to signal for silence; she heard his chuckle at a remove. The syllables would not come into audible focus; she caught them, but could not hold them in place for long enough. She had not brought anything to write with; it was not safe to leave a record of these visits, because such records were almost certain to be discovered.

But she could not hold the whole of what she heard in her mind, no matter how focused she was. She did not yet have the magics necessary to capture sound—and even had she, she was not convinced they would capture this sound; she was no longer certain that it *was* sound.

It was heard, yes. It was seen. It was felt. She was almost certain that if she could touch it, if she could walk in its amorphous folds, it would have texture, and if she dared, taste. It was not a simple, single thing. It was magic.

It was magic the way the peculiar talent she was graced—or cursed—with was magic. It could not be heard, felt, tasted; it could not be seen. Not by mortals. Only if it flowered in a particularly dangerous way could it be marked by outsiders at all.

But it was real. If the person in possession of the talent could be trained, they could—as Sigurne did—touch the source of their power, transferring it, by will, knowledge, focus and visualization, into the world at large. Once invoked, much of the magic remained hidden; it could be worked and used in plain sight, with no witnesses who were not likewise trained and gifted the wiser.

She had not yet familiarized herself with all of the channels through which her talent could run. But she understood its limitations, understood its shape. It existed as part of her, as much as heart or lungs. She couldn't see it; she couldn't hear it. She couldn't touch it directly the way she might touch her own limbs. But she could touch it, perturb it, and command it. She did not doubt it was real.

She had never doubted it was real. Not even on the day she had been taken from her family. She accepted it as truth. She accepted what she saw now as truth in the same way: she could not force herself to doubt it.

She frequently doubted the wisdom of her decisions; she berated herself—in silence—for the foolishness of the risks she took. She knew the costs. But she did not doubt herself. She did not doubt what she saw; did not doubt what she knew. She might just as easily doubt the existence of the night sky.

So: this was magic.

She frowned. Her own talent did not exist outside of her; it was part of who she was. It would become part of who she would be, if she survived.

The shadows existed outside of the demon. But they were inextricably linked to him.

“You said, once, that when you are summoned, you are summoned by name and power.” She did not face the demon as she spoke.

“Yes.”

“You also said that if a demon was powerful enough, he forced the plane to surrender a body and shape of his choosing.”

“Did I?”

“It was longer and more circuitous when you said it.”

“Very well. Yes.”

“The body that you inhabit now was forced from the plane?”

Silence.

“But it doesn’t contain all of you.” She inhaled. Exhaled. She did not take her eyes off the subtle ridges in the shadow; nor did he withdraw those shadows to hide them from her inspection. It was almost as if this were a lesson he intended her to learn.

“What do you see?”

“I see ... your name.”

#

## CHAPTER SEVEN

She had no protections except those engraved in stone; for the moment, she needed no other. She met his eyes from across the room; he made no attempt to approach. She should have been afraid.

She wasn’t. She was frustrated, and the frustration was large enough, pointed enough, that it left room for little else. What she had said was true — but it wasn’t enough of the truth. There was more, and she couldn’t quite grasp it.

“You are so very surprising,” the demon said. “And you are right: there is

something that you have not grasped.” He had not moved; his expression had not changed. Even his eyes were shadowed; there was no fire, no fury, in him. In this tower, bound and chained in subtle but inescapable ways, he was still in control. “Tell me, child—what do you hear?”

It was the same question he always asked.

But her answer was different. She listened. She closed her eyes to listen; she gave over every other sensation, ignoring or eliding it. Her first answer was, as it so often was, *the wind*. Like her guess, the answer she’d offered in nervous defiance, it was both true and false. Oh, she heard the wind, as she always did when she stood in the confines of the tower. But was that all she heard?

She had listened for almost nothing else. She knew the wind that the demon lord heard was not the same, but she chose, as her start point, the wind she *did* hear. Why? Why had she assumed that they were somehow the same, that she was hearing only the surface of a sound that had depths?

Yet it was not the wind that frustrated her now. It was the continuous low thrum of almost unintelligible syllables. She couldn’t force the sounds to cohere, and struggled to do so.

Minutes passed. The air grew colder, even through the thick folds of wool. She could not stand in this tower for much longer; she’d be caught. The mage often chose to make the *kialli* his first task of the day. During those visits, Sigurne was left to her own devices; if the Ice Mage insisted on her presence for the rest of his research, what he learned from this particular demon he did not wish to share.

Defeated for the moment, she opened her eyes.

“Tomorrow,” the *kialli* lord said.

She opened the door; she had one foot over the threshold before she turned, her eyes widening. “It’s not your name.”

“No.”

“It’s the mage speaking it.”

His smile deepened. “Yes. Yes, child. That is what you hear. That is what you see. You will see it every time you pause to examine one of my kin.”

“If the mage died—”

“Even then, the containment of form and power is dependent on the method of arrival. It is a good question; two, of an evening. You will find traces of the summoner in every one of the summoned. If you were adept, child, you might break the pattern of the containment, adding syllables or distorting them.”

“Would he know?”

“He would know instantly.”

“Could I learn the whole of your name that way?”

“If you were very, very lucky. You do not know what you attempt to control, and I would, of course, resist you.”

#

She listened.

She listened every night she visited the tower. She listened when she was sent, as the mage’s representative—such a tame, mild word for her role—at the side of the *kialli* lord. He was never the only demon present, and because he was not, the others, lesser kin all, were accorded more fear by the humans who served, however unwillingly, in the villages within reach of the towers.

She learned to hear the voice of the Ice Mage in the shadows inextricably linked to the summoned demons; she learned the ways in which those shadows—often barely visible—delineated the shape of their power, even when they did not choose to display their full capabilities.

And she learned that the *kialli* Lord knew the names of demons that had not yet been summoned to the plane by the mage. She did not trust him enough to attempt to summon them, not at the beginning. But she did not, at that time, understand that were the name itself a lie, nothing would answer the summons unless she were very, very unlucky.

No, worse: something would have to be listening—just as she listened—at exactly the right location; they would have to be waiting for just such a slip, just such an act of hubris.

Hubris was not a trait Sigurne suffered. Had she, before her tenure in this fortress, it would have been destroyed regardless. No sign of pride, no sign of resistance, no sign of anything but the quick intelligence that served the mage's studies, was left standing.

She was forced to stand for long periods of time, forgotten, as a chair might be when not occupied. And during this time, she listened. To the wind, and to the things that were not wind.

#

“What do you hear, Sigurne?”

She frowned.

“Ah, I forget myself.”

The sound of her name unsettled her, it was so seldom used. “It's no worse than child.” Her voice was rough and almost foreign to her ears, a fact she noted with some dispassion. “The mage will not be pleased to hear you use it.”

“There is very little that pleases the mage.”

“And very little you can do to deliberately displease him?”

“Even so. Will it cause you harm?”

She listened. His words caused ripples in everything she could hear. She did not lift hand to stem them; that habit, she had abandoned when it resulted in a broken hand. The mage did not like to be asked for silence, even by gesture.

“It will cause no more harm than I already face.”

“Ah. You leave the choice to me.”

“It was always yours. I am not your master. I am not,” she added bitterly, “my own.” More words than she had spoken for three days. She closed her

eyes. She listened.

Her voice was soft. The edges had been shorn from its tone; they were a luxury she could not afford. So, too, anger. Fear she could show, and if pride had prevented this in her early months in the tower, pride had been discarded. The mage expected fear. He did not, conversely, love it—but when he encountered the unexpected, his suspicions—and his anger—were roused.

She showed him fear. She showed him exactly what he expected to see. She could not feign desire; she could only barely feign respect, and even that had a grain of truth in it: as she mastered more and more of the basics of her talent, she could almost appreciate his skill and his knowledge.

She could not respect what he chose to do with them, but was bitterly aware that lack of respect didn't matter. She was almost irrelevant. Her voice, the sound of it, the texture of the words and the movement of her lips, made no difference; they disturbed nothing in this room.

They disturbed nothing in this keep.

Was it any wonder that the wild elements couldn't hear her voice? No. Her voice was sound, a perturbation of air, no more. It was, in every way that mattered, a mortal voice. She stilled. She turned the thought over, as if it had dimension and weight.

She opened her eyes and looked at the *kialli* Lord. He was, as he had always been, beautiful. Beautiful and cold. She could not touch him in safety; all desire lead to death. She did not hide the desire, although she did not act on it; he knew. He had always known.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “Always.”

“Is that why you chose your form?”

“No. When I lived, when I was part of the world and not sundered from it, this is how you would have seen me. I will never be part of the world again; I am dead.”

She closed her eyes. She listened to his voice. It sounded, to her ears, much like her own. Richer, yes, and softer; deeper. “Speak to me,” she whispered.

“I am.”

She shook her head. “Speak to me. Speak to me as if I were the wild earth, the wild air. Speak to me as if I could hear you the way they do.”

He laughed, then. He laughed and she felt the sound travel down her spine. “I cannot, Sigurne. I told you — my voice is trapped and contained.”

“Try.”

“It is futile. While I stand within the circle inscribed in too many ways across this stone, you will never hear me.”

She understood the implication. “Life is not so pleasant that I fear death,” she told him. “But I fear the pain that precedes it, and nothing I’ve witnessed gives me even the faint hope of quick, painless death. If you will not speak —”

He interrupted her. He spoke.

She did not, could not, understand a word. His voice had always been deep and resonant, but in the folds of foreign syllables she heard — magic. Power. It was not a power she could put into her own words; she didn’t have the voice to convey it. Talentborn or no, it was beyond her.

Words could form the underpinnings of magical structure; there were many students — she was told — who relied on speech to enter the focal state. But the words themselves did not convey the spell; they encircled it.

Her words were not his words. Her voice was not his voice. It was rendered thin and inconsequential by immediate — and practical — comparison. Although she could not grasp the meaning of the words he continued to speak, she felt them as a compulsion. Her cheeks flushed, her breathing quickened.

She closed her eyes. Again. She couldn’t remember opening them. She teased out the strands of sound; the superficial syllables, the power that lay behind them. There were layers to the totality, and only one of those layers could be clearly, explicitly, heard.

Yet she thought all of them could be felt. She could not name what she

heard; she used the word voice but knew it was too thin a word to be accurate. She *listened*. Some voices were considered musical, they were so pleasant, so lilting. She had encountered such voices only a handful of times in her childhood, and they belonged, always, to traveling bards.

The demon's voice was greater, by far, than those. It was both melody and harmony, song and instrument, and even the instruments seemed varied and multiple.

Yet it was lacking...something. Awe did not quite cover its absence. She could never speak as the *kialli* Lord now spoke, and she regretted it; she seldom cried, and knew that tears trailed down her cheeks at the exquisite beauty of a sound—of a *being*—so far above her, so far beyond, that her entire existence must be considered inconsequential in comparison.

As she had done for so many months, she listened.

And she understood that even in such a rich plethora of immortal, wild words, demons lied. He had lied.

“Of course,” he said, speaking as he had always spoken. The words, the Rendish words, did not diminish any of the other sounds; they skirted above it, inconsequential and almost meaningless, they were so slight. She could still hear everything that she had heard when he had chosen to speak in what she assumed was his native tongue.

And perhaps because she could, she did not hear the footsteps in the hall beyond the closed door. She did not hear the door open until it was far too late to hide or flee—not that that would have been much of an option. She had protective spells, and these she cast instantly.

They could not harm the Ice Mage. He tore through them with such easy contempt she might have failed to conjure them at all. His face was mottled with fury, and lined with an age that would never, ever touch the demon. He was not, could not be beautiful; only his cruelty and his power made him compelling.

And he knew.

He shouted in her ear, his hands on either of her shoulders; her head struck the wall twice, the circumference of the protective engraving was so narrow. Had she been less terrified, she would have pushed him across its boundary; by the time she thought to try, it was too late. He lifted her, grunting at the effort; her feet came away from the floor.

Panic set in, and then drained away. Since she had been chosen, she belonged to the mage. Nothing she had said or done since that day had given her even the hope of freedom. He shouted in her ear. He used words—Weston words—that she had never heard; they were a type of punctuation. He struck her, and this was familiar. So many of her bruises started this way.

She could smell no alcohol on his breath.

She could hear his anger.

But his words were so thin, so attenuated. They barely reached her ears, because the demon had not fallen silent. Oh, he'd stopped saying words. His speaking voice had fallen silent the moment the mage entered the tower room. The mage backhanded her while she listened to something other than him.

It hurt; her lip split; she could taste blood. The chorus of subvocal sounds shifted, wobbling for a moment. She knew why: pain fed the demon. It was pain he desired. Not hers, not specifically hers—but the fact that it was hers didn't matter.

The mage asked her what she intended, by coming here at all. He demanded to know what she had said to the demon, and what he had said in return. Each question was punctuated by a blow. She did not understand why he did not demand his answers from the demon, a creature bound so completely to the mage he could not defy him.

Her attempts to answer were broken by the flat of his hand and the rage of his own accusations. She had seldom seen him so enraged. She would have begged his forgiveness; she would have pleaded for her life. In any other space, but this one. It was the only wise thing to do—but she could not. Not here.

Not while the *kialli* watched.

She had thought herself done with pride. With vanity. With hope. Even with resistance. She had thought herself inured to humiliation, had believed that she accepted, as unequivocal truth, her weakness.

She willed herself to speak, to find the words that would allay the mage's fury, to channel it into punishments she knew so well. But her mouth was shut in a slender, mutinous line and she could not open it; she couldn't *find* the words.

Not until grabbed hold of the collars of her coat and dragged her around, because that was the precise moment her feet left the containing circle. He held her there, his hands a bridge between safety and death—the only bridge. He would never join her here.

“Is *this* what you wanted?” he shouted, shaking her as she brought up her hands to clasp his wrists. They were the edge of a cliff, and beneath her feet, a drop that would kill her painfully and slowly. “Is this where you wanted to be? Did you want to join the demon, is that it?”

She said no. She shouted it.

And then she fell silent. She lowered her hands, releasing the mage. His hands remained as they were for a moment longer, cloth gathered in bunched fists. There was nothing she could offer his rage, now. She thought he might beat her to death and still not be appeased.

This was not the death she would have chosen. But she had been too cowardly to end her life when other, less hideously painful options had been available.

And it was true. Ever since the first day she had laid eyes on the demon, she had wanted to touch him. She had wanted to lean into his open palms; to take comfort in the folds of his voice. Knowing that death and hideous pain awaited had been all that kept her confined to the circle, and even then, when she was foolish and homesick and exhausted from injuries and lack of sleep, it had been hard.

She was not surprised when the mage let go of her. She was not surprised when he shoved her backward, into the circle. She was not even surprised

when the shadows that she had watched so intently began to spread beneath her feet. Nor was she shocked to find them cold.

She kept her eyes on the Ice Mage. He was watching her, his expression distorted, the lines and creases around his eyes informed by rage.

“Are you truly done with her?” the demon asked.

The mage clenched fists as he stared at her. She held her breath, waiting; the air was thin and the wind that she had listened to with such frustration for months howled in the tower’s centre. She did not lift hand to wrap coat more tightly around her shoulders; she did not lift voice to beg.

“Teach her,” the mage finally said. “Teach her what demons are capable of. Do not damage her overmuch; do not destroy or break her mind.”

“And you will watch?”

“I will watch,” the mage replied.

#

She could not disentangle the memories of that night. She did not wish to return there; time had done little to dim them. She had the scars—but she had so many scars from her days in the North. Fresher scars—and more subtle—waited at the end of those days, but none as significant.

From the moment the mage had entered the tower, Sigurne had ceased to be significant; the game the demon played had everything to do with the mage, and very little to do with his apprentice. She was caught between them, just as she had been caught when the talent to which she’d been born, and of which she’d been unaware, had been detected.

And she understood, in the bitterest recesses of thought, the game being played; the demon might be ancient and powerful, his knowledge vaster and more significant, yet he was more of a captive than even Sigurne. His actions were circumscribed and dictated; he had less freedom, less leeway, than she. He would take any opportunity to vent his silent rage.

It wasn’t personal. She was merely an opportunity. But he could not

humiliate the mage and spare Sigurne, and he spared her nothing.

*You will always remember this*, he told her, his voice a whisper and a roar. *Nothing will drive it from your mind. And you will remember both of us: your two masters.*

And she knew that, had he not summoned the Ice Mage, had she not been dropped, like refuse, into the centre of the circle of containment, she would never have learned what she needed to learn. She would never have truly heard his *voice*.

She had thought she had known it. She had heard it in her dreams — and she would hear it, ever after, in her nightmares. He had told her that he was wrapped in the patina of mortality, and that had made little sense to her: what she heard in his voice while standing outside of the circle implied power.

But not like this.

He might have bardborn, the force of it was so strong; she was immobilized by sound alone. By *all* of the sound: the words, the harsh crackle of syllables; the velvet of the timbre that underlay them. Yet that was not all she heard, although hearing was rent, time and again, by pain and pleasure and the humiliation of both.

She heard magic. She heard a magic that made not only her talent, but the Ice Mage's power, insignificant, nascent. She heard the turn of seasons — of winter and summer — she heard the harsh melody of fire and water, earth and air. She heard death — but the desire for its opposite added anger and pain to *kialli* voice. Because he remembered it all: everything he had lost. Any time he spoke, any word he surrendered, reminded him of the things that would no longer welcome his voice or his presence.

If she had been deafened, it would not have surprised her. But she could hear everything. Every syllable of the harsh dissonance that comprised his name. She could even identify the voice she heard: it was the Ice Mage's, even here.

And beneath it, working against it, harmonizing with it, she heard the same sounds, the same quick syllables, the same attenuated, lengthened vowels,

and she knew, as she listened, that no mortal voice spoke it, even in shadow.

He was bound, when he walked among mortals. But he was bound when he returned to the abyss.

She did not, could not, pity him; he was so far above her, pity could not reach him. Nor, in the end, could she hate, any more than she hated winter storms and the bears who hunted in them. She could not ascribe mortal imperatives to any of his actions. She could only barely touch him.

“What do you hear?”

Everything. Everything. She could hear the voice of the wild wind. She could hear the rumble of the earth. She could hear the voice of a distant god. She could hear loss, endless loss. It was a loss she could only barely comprehend—and yet it was the loss that spoke to her. She clung to it, ashamed even then of her desire to somehow ascribe basic, mortal emotions to something that had never been, and would never be, mortal.

It helped.

His voice surrounded her, buffeted her, took her away from herself. She knew that the wind would hear—and obey—if it could enter this tower; that the earth would rage and destroy everything that stood upon it. She would die; they would all die.

There was bitter peace in that thought, and had peace been the whole of her desire, she would have drowned in it. She was not that woman. She would never be that woman. She was Sigurne, and she meant to have both freedom and revenge.

So she listened. She screamed, but she listened. She cried, but she listened. She heard what the demon meant her to hear, but she did not stop there. She heard the barest hint of the Ice Mage’s voice at the periphery of the essence of demonic storm; she heard the strands of it, interwoven with the syllabus of demonic name. She heard the frailty, the ephemerality, and understood that it was strong *enough* to contain everything that the demon was.

It was stronger than her voice. Stronger, in binding, than the demon’s. It

shouldn't have been; the strength of something so weak it could barely be heard defied logic. Even so, she didn't doubt what she heard, and as she could, she grasped the knowledge and held it tight in bleeding hands. She cast her own weak spells — spells of detection, spells that accentuated vision and hearing; these had been the earliest of her limited successes.

She used them now. She poured all of the talent she'd been given into shaping them and rooting them so that what she could see and hear would be burned into her mind, a type of script she could study and learn from. With it came other humiliations, other pain; with it came the expression of disgust and desire on the face of the watching mage.

She could not let go of the one without letting go of everything, and she *would not* do that.

She would learn. She would learn how to bind even the strongest of creatures in just this fashion. If she could not alter their essential nature — and how could she when she could barely touch it at all? — she could keep it hidden, blunting its force, just as the mage had.

She meant to be safe. In this wasteland, in this place where death was freedom, she nonetheless meant to be safe. To survive.

#

She practiced. She practiced on the demons that she did not own; changing the structure and shape of the shadows the Ice Mage did not appear to see as clearly as she could. This met with limited success, but the demons themselves did not see as clearly, either. The whole of their focus and their fury was aimed outward, at the mage they could do very little to harm.

She did not visit the tower for three months, unless commanded to do so by the mage. In those instances, she accompanied him, quill in hand; she catalogued the results of his experiments in the same way she catalogued the results of his attempts on the lesser demons.

But the Ice Mage did not leave his tower; Sigurne did. And she was accompanied, when sent as emissary, by the *kialli*. He did not ask her what she heard.

Had he, she would not have answered; not then. She was, and had always been, pragmatic. She could not change the events of that single evening; no regret, no self-recriminations, would accomplish that. Any weakness she had had been both exposed and exploited.

If she did not wish to be exposed or exploited in the same fashion, it was imperative that she expunge that weakness; to excise hope and desire and the folly of a young girl's idle daydreams. Even in this place, she had fostered them. If they died, she lost nothing; they were a weapon in the hands of her enemies, but they could never be used in a like fashion in her own defense.

Desire was death. The hope of love was contemptible.

And beauty? Death, as well. But she allowed herself that single appreciation, because she had always felt it, even in her childhood home—a home that would never be hers again. She had no family. She would never have a family. She would not teach her daughters to skin and smoke meat against the long, lean winters; she would not teach them to cure hides, to craft snowshoes. She would not teach them the songs of ancestry or the songs of departure—and no one would sing those songs upon her death.

She accepted the loss as inevitable. Destroyed, she found the shattered remnants of her life and began to build a new one. If she hated it, hatred signified nothing; she had purpose. She had a single over-riding desire, and she could endure in the face of its success. Failure was not an option.

Death was. She had no power over death; if the Ice Mage chose to end her life, she would die. She accepted this, as well. Life, death, everything in between, was his to grant or withhold.

But his knowledge, gleaned in the interstices of her own meagre lessons and her role as scribe, was not. She learned, she studied, she struggled. If she chose hatred over everything else, she had to walk that path with care; the demon kin understood all of its variations, and hatred, which kept her moving, could also blind her; it was its own type of desire, its own comfort.

#

At the end of the fourth month, she made her way to the tower. She felt a

visceral self-loathing, which she left at the door; there was nothing in it that the demon trapped within had not seen — and used against her.

Was she afraid?

Yes. But she leveraged the fear to catch his attention; to divert it. She understood that it prompted, in the kin — even the *kialli* — a type of desire that was not, in the end, less predatory than the mage's. Her own was ash.

She believed it until the moment she met his eyes; they were shadowed, their darkness lit with a sheen of translucent red. He did not smile when she entered the room; he did not smile when she closed the door, almost silently, at her back. Instead — and to her consternation — he offered her a perfect bow. It was not Northern in either form or fluidity, but it was meant, clearly, as a gesture of respect.

“Sigurne.”

She did not reply. She had forgotten, in the months of her long absence, how beautiful he was. Seen in the stark light of day, held captive in all ways by the mage, she could forget that she had ever seen him as he stood in the tower: he made shadow and darkness luminescent.

“You see the hand of god,” he told her.

She was silent.

He bowed again, and when he rose, he said, “I was called Sariastrasse in my distant youth. I was called Astrassi when I rose to take command.”

“Why the difference?” Her voice sounded thin and strange to her ears. She remembered the last words she had spoken to him in this tower, and her cheeks burned. She did not, however, struggle to regain composure.

“I believe it was a gesture of affection,” he replied. “In your kind, a diminutive.”

“Who would have dared?”

He laughed. “Those who served me dared much; they were certain of my regard. Do you think that we were always demons? Do you not understand

what the demons once were?”

“No.” She took a deeper breath. “And I’m not sure it matters, now.”

“It may, child. It may. You cannot see the value of any of my lessons, now—but experience is a fractured and unfocused master; what it gives you, what you hold if you survive the giving, is yours to use, and the use is often surprising and unpredictable. I did not think you would return.”

She exhaled. “I know you lie. You have no reason to tell the truth; not to the mage, and not to me. But this particular lie serves no purpose. You knew I would return.”

“No, Sigurne, I did not. Mortals break; they break easily. They scar easily. The damage done them is writ in equal measure on their bodies and their souls. They shelter beneath fear, rage, hatred; they learn to revile either our evil or their own weakness.”

“I have done all these things,” she replied. She chose to offer him a truth he could no longer easily take from her any other way.

“Yes. And you have accepted them. You understand that given the same opportunity, I would change nothing.”

She nodded.

“And you understand that, victimized thus, you were not the intended target.”

She nodded again. “That’s war,” was her soft reply. “The weak perish almost as an afterthought. I was weak. I am still weak. I will not always be weak.”

“You hear the wind,” he said. It was not a question.

“Yes. I hear the earth. I would hear neither, were it not for that night. But I hear the god, as well.”

He stilled completely.

“I hear him here; I hear him when you stand completely in shadow. He speaks the words the mage speaks.”

The demon lord was silent.

“You would do anything in your power to destroy the mage.” It was not a question.

“There is very little that is in my power at the moment; the harm I can do is subtle. But yes.”

“Why, then, do you serve the god?”

“You will never understand it.”

She shook her head. “I think I might. Say rather, you will never explain it.” She walked away from the door, but her feet did not cross the circle; she felt no temptation to do so now, another bitter gift. “I do not know what love demons feel, but I understand that having given devotion to a god, nothing else can ever compare.”

“You see too clearly.”

“It is the only gift I have that is of use in this place. I understand the bindings placed on you, but I cannot work them myself.”

“Not easily, no; you are not my summoner. There is no bond between us that we do not forge—and break—ourselves. You were of use to me. You may be of use to me in the future; I cannot see it clearly. I was of use to you—and you paid. I may be of use to you in the future.

“You will never bespeak the ancients.”

She nodded.

“But in this place, at this time, neither will I. If I could, they would not welcome my voice; they might, enraged, attempt to destroy it. You do not think to free me.”

“No. I seek to build a stronger cage.”

He laughed again. “Survival has made you bold. Tell me why I should continue to teach you.”

“Because it amuses you to do so. You will never be free again. But I will be.

You are like the mage in that regard: I will be free. What you have learned, what you have chosen to teach, will stay with me. You cannot dictate the use of it; you can guide me only in what you choose to reveal.”

“And what would you have me teach?”

“The names,” she replied, “of the kin.”

“And what will you do with those names?”

“Summon.”

“Ah. Do you seek to build power as the mage has done?”

“Yes.”

“To what end?”

“To understand my enemy,” she replied. She let him feel the hatred; it was not feigned. It was deep, and it was sustaining in the absence of any other attachment. “It is the only hope I have of defeating him.”

In its way, it was the truth. He would suspect she lied. He would expect it. The nature of the lie, however, she thought beyond him.

#

It was the right response. It had been, she was certain, accepted as truth, although demons did not privilege honesty in their communication; truth or lies from the mouths of mortals were like the angry bark of a stray dog; they signified little.

Mortals like the ice mage could revel in their momentary power; they could think they were playing a long game with their captive demons. Sigurne understood that if a game was played, it was never the summoners in control. They exulted in their power, as they demanded absolute obedience that was otherwise beyond their ability, no matter how much power they possessed, or how much terror they instilled in those around them.

Their summoning informed the shape the demons took. It informed the power they could control while they remained upon the plane, lessening it, confining it. Where it could not be so confined, the summoner died.

It was in the nature of the summoned to fight against such compulsion or control—but it was, at base, a matter of choice. Where such resistance might prove immediately futile, they could choose to accept the mortal cage. Sigurne could hardly believe it possible; not one of the creatures summoned in her presence by the Ice Mage had done so.

She considered the reasons why the *kialli* Lord might lie; there was no immediate advantage she could see, but she was aware that her ignorance worked against her.

She learned to summon. Between the mage and the *kialli*, she had observed enough to plan her first attempt, but there was no guarantee of safety. Any fear she had had, any compunction, about enslaving in its entirety another thinking creature, had been destroyed in one night in the demon's tower.

She learned to inscribe ephemeral circles with care and precision. She learned that the inscription itself required power, and not a little of it; that the symbols she formed were parts of a tongue that mortals could not, and did not, speak. Like the wind's voice, like the earth's, it was a thing above and beyond her; she was aware of it, she could listen at its edges, she could mimic it. But to speak it required that she become something other than she was.

She could, on the darkest of days, be spellbound by the ancient cadences of the wind—for it was always the wind to which she chose to listen. She could not, of course, understand what it howled or whispered, but in the end, it signified little. What she heard in its voice was the heart of the deadliest of storms, the height of tallest of mountain peaks, the brilliance of sunlight at dawn upon the untouched snows of winter.

What she heard was something that endured; that would exist when she was gone, and that would never rely on her, or her power, for either sustenance or safety. Nor would it shun her or doom her to an exile that no others of her kin would share.

#

She survived her first summoning because she chose an imp as her target. Imps were the small creatures often destroyed by the Ice Mage when he

wished to test the destructive power of a new demon, and did not wish to lose one of his mortal servitors. She had seen these small creatures summoned countless times, and had considered them trivial.

Perhaps they were. But they were deadly when uncontained, and they did not choose to fight with the force of their will alone; nor did they attempt to use their innate magic; they used their claws, their teeth, and the painful shriek of their voices.

She did not lose an eye, but only barely; she had not expected the imp's thoughts and impulses to so instantly and completely swamp her own. She did not expect to see herself as he saw her. She did not expect to feel the dim echoes of his life in the world; to feel his confusion and his sense of inexplicable bereavement.

He grieved. He grieved and his grief, almost but not quite unmoored, turned quickly to mindless rage. She was the only thing he could see, and he did not see her clearly; instead, he saw her as an impression of light made solid. He hated it.

Hated it, yearned for it, sought to drive it—and the pain it caused—away.

She was arrested by his grief, it felt so much like her own—unacknowledged, untouched wherever possible, but present, consistent: he was homesick.

She had not thought it possible. He did not miss the hells; he hated them, as he hated her; she was part of them, yet destined to escape. No, he missed the world. He could hear what she could hear: the wild wind, the sleeping earth. He could hear the distant movement of water, something she could not, no matter how long or hard she listened.

They were lost, lost, lost.

All that was left was pain and pleasure: her pain. His pleasure.

She had time—barely—to reorient herself; she did not do so in time to prevent injury. She managed to move his hand half an inch, and his claws slid superficially across her cheek, missing the left eye.

She caught him, then. Caught him, held him, heard his hatred and the resentment and self-loathing he felt for his lack of power and significance. It was so twin to her own she could not be certain, at first, that it was not a game; the demons were malice personified.

And he *was* that. He wished her nothing but agony and death—a slow, humiliating death. But there was more. There would always be more. He felt what she felt; the loss was just as damning.

They were both defined by their losses. They were both focused on their hatred and their desire for vengeance. The difference? She was alive, and in the world, and of it.

Had she never loved, and never been loved, she wondered if she would hate so strongly. And she wondered about the imp and the *kialli* and the god that they both served. In the imp, the shadows were tighter and smaller; they were far more confined. They controlled what he thought and how he reacted, and to her surprise, she could hear them more clearly than she could when the demon lord released the shadows in the heart of the only space he could truly own.

#

She worked with the imps. Every subsequent time she summoned them, she felt their keening loss, their bitter sense of betrayal, and their endless rage. It was beyond anger; it was almost incoherent. They could speak, although they were sullen and monosyllabic. They could hear the wind and the earth, but their voices were too small, too insignificant, to wake them or command them. Even the fire did not come at their call.

They were, except in form and size, so like Sigurne herself; captive and powerless. They could kill. They could kill a grown man. But they had no avenue to do so here; they could not fight their way to freedom. If they knew she considered them kindred spirits, they had no compunctions about using that knowledge; they did not feel a like kinship, and hated her for the presumption.

Their hatred held no sting for her. Their anger, none. She did not fear

them. She feared, instead, what she saw in them, because she saw it in herself so exactly.

What, in the end, was the difference? The question, uncomfortable at first, became her focus as she continued to experiment, to take risks with power she did not fully understand and could not fully predict.

#

She learned to bind the tiny voices of the imps, but it was hard to test what she'd done with any efficacy. She could hear a difference when she listened, but could not quantify it precisely enough.

So she turned, in the end, to more powerful creatures, and to greater risks. The imps were hardly likely to be detected by the mage, but the other creatures? Far more so.

#

"Why do you pursue this, Sigurne? You are taking far greater risks than is wise."

"There is no summoning that is wise," she replied. "It is not in the power of the creatures that the greatest risk is taken."

"No?" He smiled.

She was silent. She listened, as she often did, to the wind. To the wind, to the shadows, to the distant voice of a god. She listened to Astrassi. She did not listen for the earth; that was a slow and ponderous affair, and too often she lost track of time. She had been caught only once in this tower, and she did not intend to be caught again.

To that end, she had learned spells of misdirection and of illusion; they would be detected if the mage was looking for them—but they blended now so carefully with the protections that surrounded all elements of this room, even the window. The mage had power; he seldom troubled himself with unnecessary subtlety.

He saw, frequently, what he both wanted and expected to see.

“Why do you pursue this? You are not—yet—at the peak of your power; you cannot summon anything that could contest the forces the mage now holds.”

That, presumably, was his arrogance speaking. He was the heart of those forces. Nor was he wrong; Sigurne did not have the power to summon him. Nor had she the power to hold a *kialli* lord if she somehow managed to speak a name similar to his across the abyssal plains. She had suspected this was true, and knew it now for fact.

“I do not intend,” she said, “to fight a war with the mage. I would lose. When I choose to act against him, I will have only one chance. I do not intend to waste it on pointless aggression or pointless defiance.”

He frowned. “You have become adept at controlling your thoughts.”

“No,” she replied, listening, always listening. “Tell me, did you ever protect anything but yourself?”

“Pardon?”

She met—and held—his gaze. “You do not speak of duty. You do not speak of honor. You speak of power, and of love, but it is not love as we understand it, and you have assured me that if you did, it would be beyond my comprehension. Yet in the demons I have summoned, I have felt only what I *can* comprehend. Perhaps it is because I have summoned few, and they are not *kialli*.

“But I begin to doubt it.” She glanced away from him, toward the window. “I begin to think that demons—even one such as you—play so well upon mortal weaknesses because they are not dissimilar from your own. You understand the rage and the fury; you understand the self-loathing and the helplessness. You understand the desire for power, even when that power is not so obvious to us.

“I do not know what you were before you made the long choice. I do not know what you might have been had the Lord of the Hells not been sent into exile. But I know you were once called Astrassi by the men who served you. A diminutive. A sign of trust in your affection.”

He was silent.

“How many of those men survived? How many of those men chose as you chose? How many are—”

“*Kialli?*”

She waited.

“Very few. Do you understand what we are?”

“Beyond demonic, no.”

“We choose to remember. Just as,” he added softly, “you have done. Knowledge cannot be separated from pain. We can return, at will, to the moment we understood the cost of our choice and the depth of his betrayal. There are some among the kin who remember without any sense of betrayal; they are his. They have always been his.

“But not all.”

“And the imps?”

“Have chosen to forget.”

“They do not forget.”

“They remember the pain and the anger; they remember the loss. But they remember it only here, and it is brief. They were shattered by the truth. They do not retain enough of themselves or their previous lives to build and gather power. They cannot plan. They cannot think because to think is to be shattered again.”

“They wish to destroy everything.”

“Yes. Destruction is a distraction.”

“Your wishes are not dissimilar.”

He did not smile. For a long moment, shadows gathered about him. “You do not understand the reasons for the war that sundered us from the lands of our birth.”

She waited.

“It was your kind. What we see in you, the gods also saw, and they chose to elevate its import, to protect its containment. Mortals are, and were ever, fragile. They did not survive, except in enclaves of their own creation.”

“There were such enclaves?”

“There were. They were called the Cities of Man, and in them, men ruled as gods. They had the power to withstand the gods themselves, and where those cities stood, the earth heeded no call but theirs.”

Sigurne frowned. “How could they make their voices heard? They were not mortal?”

“They were. You will not see their like again. Nor does it matter. In the long war between gods, the gods decided to destroy the world so that you and your kind might live. Were it not for you, our loss would not have been necessary.”

“So your purpose is our destruction?”

“Our purpose,” he replied, “is our Lord’s.”

“And that?”

“To win the game of souls. To change the world enough that the only choices left to your kind are dark; that the only world in which you might survive is one of despair and loss.”

Sigurne nodded as if this did not surprise her; it did not. “But if he wins the long game, what then? You—and all of your kind—will still be dead; you will not return to the world you once left. You might walk here,” she continued. “You might walk free. You might kill as you please—but what will it change?”

“It sustains us,” he replied, voice low. “When we lived, we enjoyed pain no more than you. It was one of the elements of change in our transition. We could not become custodians to those who have chosen if we could be moved to pity or horror.”

Sigurne stared at him. She stared as if seeing him for the first time, although she kept her expression carefully neutral. Pity was deadly, and demon lords had a memory that survived unscathed. What she herself might forget, he would not. She hated him in a way that she did not hate the mage; she hated the mage in a way that was more personal, and possibly less deadly.

But she took no joy in what was almost a confession. “You will remain as you are, then.”

“We will. The gods do not have the power to return to us what was taken.”

“Would they, if they walked this world?”

“No.”

“And you can be so certain?”

His eyes were darkness and shadow. “We are not mortal,” he said quietly. “We are not contained as you are contained. The gods might grant what you view as immortality—but only to you. You are mortal.”

Immortality held no fascination for Sigurne. Even the thought of extending her miserable existence for another year in the wastes of Dimkirk’s tower was difficult. “I don’t understand.”

“No. You do not. Nor will you. We are not as you are. When the world was young and fierce and truly beautiful, Sigurne, gods warred. Gods died. Gods grieved. How many of the dead gods could be resurrected?”

She was silent.

“Not one. It was tried,” he added, with a slender, edged smile. “It was tried. Gods died. You cannot imagine what our world was like while we *lived*.” He turned, then, to the open window, through which the wind howled. Sigurne did not understand why the window was left open; perhaps it was a small act of torment on the part of the mage.

“You see the distant mountains? You see the Northern Wastes?”

She nodded, and then, when he failed to look back, said, “Yes.”

“Those mountains were the work of an hour. The snows, the work of a day.

Were the gods to walk here, war here, the whole of the landscape would shift beneath their feet; we might bespeak the ancient earth—who had the strength to make ourselves heard—and survive those changes; we might not, if the earth was enraged.

“You have your bears, your seals, the stunted, harmless creatures you now call dogs. And those were more complicated; the work of days or even weeks. Such wars destroyed them, of course. They could not be heard; they could barely be seen. Not all such creatures survived, and those that perished completely were also mourned by the gods who had had a hand in their creation. But new creations beckoned; new children.

“The moons rose in a sky that saw flights of dragons; they sank in a sky that saw leviathans; the sun burned in azure and crimson and gold. There were mountains of crystal and castles of glass; there were trees that spoke and some that walked, ancient and deadly in their own right. At times the snows perished to fire and heat.

“And from the South, the White Lady would ride to meet our Lord; of the firstborn she was the *only* one who was close to being his equal. She commanded wind and earth and water, and even the frozen snows obeyed her. There was no path closed to her; no god who did not offer respect when she passed. Even the Cities trembled when she assembled her hosts.

“And her servants were the *Arianni*, the firstborn of the first: the children of the children of the gods and the wilderness. It is said that she made them; that she willed them into being, that she forced them to wake and to see her, first, and foremost. She woke them in the forests above the earth; she woke them in the deepings beneath it; she woke them in the waves of the wildest and darkest of oceans. How could they fail to love her? How could they fail to serve?

“She was winter and summer and life; she was death. She was as cold and cruel as the Lord of the Hells, but in her season, she was also refuge and brief, perfect peace; the power did not exist that could break the peace she granted—and it was tried. Ah, it was tried—fire and flood and the great drakes and the winged gryphons who ate the air and exhaled it.”

She was certain she had never heard him speak so much, but if she had, she had never heard this wild, impassioned tone. What he saw, looking out a window he could not escape, she could not see. For a moment, brief moment, *mage* moment, she regretted it.

“They fought for her. They roamed the world in her service. They were hers. Her people. The *Arianni*. But Sigurne — so were his.”

His. “The Lord of the Hell?” she whispered.

“Yes. *Allasakar*.”

#

He did not speak of the Lord he served. He did not sing his praises; he did not speak of his power or his conquests or the wild and deadly beauty of his creations. He spoke of the White Lady who was his enemy.

“You may see her, if you escape this place,” he said softly. “She could not leave the world, as the gods did. She was fully of it; to leave was to perish.”

“As you did.”

“As we did.”

“And would I survive such a meeting?”

“I do not know. I do not know if you would escape it, either. But she is no longer my Lord.” He turned from the window, his shadows once again wrapped so tightly above him their presence did not suggest wings. “Those who served the White Lady went into exile with her.”

“Where?”

“There are hidden paths and byways, upon which the ancients might walk; there are hidden courts and deepings in which they might live. Those ways are not the ways you walk. You are talentborn; you have some small chance of happening upon them.

“And some chance,” he added, “of seeing them when the seasons of the world shift. The ancient seasons are tied to the mortal seasons; the mortal seasons echo them dimly, so dimly. There is no grandeur in the passage of

your time and your days. No one of us understands what was built, or how, but the wilderness sleeps. The air, the earth, the water—even the fire. Like the White Lady, they are *of* this place. No,” he said, after a long silence, “I believe they are more than that; they are the source of even your life, at a great remove.

“While the world exists at all, they exist.”

“Then the wilderness also exists.”

“Yes. And there is some hope in that. Not,” he added softly, “for you, who can not touch it—but for those of us who remember its ancient glories. Immortality,” he added softly, “is the desire of the mage. It is not yours?”

“No.”

He smiled, then. “No. It is not. And so I will tell you this: immortality, eternity: it is loss. It is always loss. No beauty is eternal. No moment. No companionship and no love. They end. They pass. Eternity is loss.”

“Other beauties might be found. Other companions,” she said. She had not meant to speak at all.

His smile was soft. “And to what end? They, too, will perish. They will pass. We find, and we lose. It is loss that is the only certainty. If another of my kind ever tempts you with life and youth eternal, remember what I have said.” His smile sharpened. “And remember, also, that the *kialli* do not fear loss; it does not break them. We endure, always.” He turned away from the northern view, the wind, the distant mountains. “You have not answered my question, and it troubles me.

“If you will not summon an army with which to defeat the mage’s captive kin, and you do not desire immortality, why, then do you take these risks?”

“Does it matter?” her words were laced with such bitterness, they surprised her.

“Eternity,” was his soft reply. She almost hated him, then. “There is very little that surprises me. There is very little that amuses me. I would take—I have taken—considerable pleasure in your pain. I would gain nothing from

your death, beyond that.

“And I would gain nothing from that death if I were not the cause of it. You risk what little surprise and amusement I have in this place.”

“That is hardly incentive to stop.”

He chuckled. “No. Perhaps it is incentive to continue.”

“No.”

“Why, Sigurne?”

“Why have you found me surprising?”

“If you were my kin, you would be *kialli*. You remember pain clearly, and you hold onto it because to cast it aside is to lose the ability to build power at all. You are not immortal. You will never be that. But it is not immortality that defines the *kialli*. It is will and anger. It is the desire for power.”

She did not tell him that she did not desire power; she felt no need to lie.

#

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Ah, it had been decades since she had *listened*. Decades and more. Averalaaan did not know winter; it used the season's name for something that was too mild, too slight, to deserve it. The winds rarely howled here, impeded as they were by buildings and harbor. Her tower was not the demon's tower; there were no windows open to air, and no bindings or containments to keep the darkness trapped within. In *Averalaaan Aramarelas*, there were so many voices, it was difficult to pick out the hidden and the wild.

Only in the Terafin gardens had she heard the elements unleashed. She had expected to die, there. But she had expected death so many times, now; it always failed to arrive.

It failed her the first time she had learned to hold, and shape, a demon's name. It was not, of course, a simple matter of syllables. Those syllables might be written or engraved or suggested—but they contained no power; they formed the barest hint of containment. Power, such as it was, was provided by the mage. Only the talentborn could speak the language in which those names were writ, and only briefly.

If they could not speak it well, or long enough, they perished. She could, but only barely, and the exhaustion made the subsequent lessons with the mage very, very difficult.

Death failed to arrive when the mage fevers came in the wake of her fledgling summoning.

Death failed her when the magi sent by the Order of Knowledge had at last arrived in Dimkirk, only a few miles away from the fortress. It failed her each and every time an ambitious young man—or woman, although it was rarer—attempted to have her vacate her seat by dying, with their assistance.

She knew that if the Terafin were within the city, the demons could not act, not this way; they could not wake the earth; they could not command it. In its sleeping rage, it might rise to destroy those who had chosen to abandon it in favor of the Lord of the Hells—but Jewel could command it to sleep, and it would.

Sigurne labored under no illusions; she knew the ancient wilderness would not hear her voice. She was mute in the face of its ancient power; she had always been mute. She felt no envy of the young woman who wasn't. Jewel did not understand just how significant her voice was, and Sigurne hoped that her ignorance was never shattered.

But she was magi; she wondered what Jewel would hear, if she listened, truly listened, as Sigurne now did. Would she hear the voice of a distant god? Would she feel his power and the weight of his intonation, even if the spoken words were in a language that hovered just beyond intelligibility?

Would she understand, as Sigurne did, that the demon at the heart of this building, this fragile, ephemeral structure otherwise known as the Merchants'

guildhall, had not been summoned by mortal mage, and was not therefore bound to any service but a god's? Would she understand how dangerous that made him?

No, Sigurne thought. And yes; the Terafin's instincts were honed and sharpened by a talent granted to very, very few.

Jewel was not here. But Sigurne had not, until the past few months, had any hope that she might rely upon any other to bear the weight of the burden she had chosen—at less than twenty years of age—to shoulder.

She listened. She listened as she had not listened for decades. It did not return to her the desperation—and fury—of distant youth; youth, in the face of the ancient earth, was not distant. She had lived decades; the earth had lived far, far longer. She was not certain that it was contained, as her life was and would be, by the simple constraint of time.

Hers was. She knew no other life. She had come to see life as duty, responsibility; it was burden, and the brief joy of her few victories seemed so fragile as to be insignificant. But there was only one way to lay them down, and she would struggle to carry them until that moment; she was mortal.

She was mortal, and mortality was a limitation; it was considered a gift by those who did not possess it and would never be subject to its whim. It was a binding, an encasement, a weave that suppressed all prior experience, all early memories; only on the rare occasions that it was punctured or broken could a past life—if indeed, the gods did not lie—be touched or remembered.

Yet it did not change the essential nature of what lay contained within it. Only living could do that, and even then, it was a slow and unreliable shift, an accretion of hope or despair. It was a shell, the *kialli* Lord told her, a binding created by the gods to encase the fragile shards of the numinous; it was a complicated binding, and an ephemeral one.

She could not create life in the way the ancients had. But she knew life intimately—and she knew it without reservation, without resentment; she was not possessed of the Ice Mage's envy. Living, with its many failures and its many successes, its bitter compromises, its unexpected joys, its binding ties

and its accrued losses, was not a thing the ancient understood.

How long had she practiced, as a youth? How many decades had it been since she had done what she would attempt now? *Many*. Too many.

But magic was not math; it was not simple rote. What she had learned, she retained; it was part of her thought, both conscious and subconscious. Yes, she listened. She listened for the voice of the earth. In the wastes, she wouldn't have bothered; earth had a voice both slow and ponderous, and to even *find* it took hours.

In the Merchant's guildhall, she did. She did not have hours, but didn't require them; the earth would wake, was waking—and once woken, its voice was neither slow nor ponderous. She was surprised that the demon would try; the earth, enraged, presented a very real threat to the kin. More of a threat than most of the magi could.

Most.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the most powerful member of her Order. His eyes were silver; he watched her. "Go," she told him. "I will join you when I am able." She did not tell him where the demon could be located; it wasn't necessary.

Nor did she tell him that this demon had not been summoned to the plane by anyone but a god. To Meralonne, it was irrelevant.

She felt wind brush her cheek. Her hair, as silver as his, fell in strands down her face. She did not have to listen very hard to hear the wind's voice; it was, for a moment, his. "Work quickly, Sigurne. I do not think you have much time."

"You might help," Matteos said, his voice oddly flat to her ears.

"I intend to," was Meralonne's amused reply. "Do we have need of all of these walls?"

"We don't. The Merchants, however, do. Bring the walls down only if there is no other easy entrance—or exit—in the halls. And Meralonne," she added, as his cape began to fly.

“You want me to preserve the merchants.”

“If any of them still live, yes.”

He was gone. She returned her attention to earth, to gods, and to demons. Matteos did not speak. He did not understand what she attempted. Meralonne did. Of course he did. If she had had two masters in the distant North, she had taken only one in the Imperial South. And she had risen to prominence in the guild in part because of his teaching. Had he desired the position she had held for decades, it could have been his; he had never wanted it. He threw his support—his fractious, unpredictable support—behind Sigurne. He did it with subtlety, of course.

There was to be no subtlety this evening.

Not on his part.

But on hers? Was life, in the end, subtle? It did not have the grandeur that Meralonne did; it had none of the wild beauty, the reckless deadly grace, of things ancient and untamed. It was not, like the mountains in the North, a distant monument; life could be scaled, climbed, approached. Life could be lived in.

Even a life such as hers. Hours of her day were spent toiling over paperwork, permissions, and the petty bickering of men far too old to be treated like children, although they frequently failed to realize it; hours were spent eating and sleeping, preparing for the day. Hours were spent listening to old men and women complain. Hours waiting on the Kings, the Exalted, and the dour and suspicious Duvvari.

Was there magic? Yes. But magic was always fraught; it did not offer joy. If she was clever, if she planned well and saw far enough, it failed to kill. The magic that lit the streets, that protected the Kings, was small and slight in comparison; it was so commonplace it might not have been magic at all.

The *kialli* considered mortals almost beneath notice; certainly the lives they lived were. They knew a fierce exultation, a wild exuberance, and occasionally, a pronounced awe. Joy? No. It was too slight. Nor could they be content. They ruled, where they had the power. They died, where they did

not. Humanity had attempted rule-by-power many, many times in its history.

But humans were not, and could not be, absolute. They were not, and could not be, unchanging. Experience and understanding often weakened their resolve. It blurred the strength of their voice, the certainty of their vision. They could not be unwavering.

They could not, in the mass of humanity scattered across these lands, make themselves heard, unless they were talentborn, and even then there were limits. To live in these lands one was surrounded by things that were caught in a constant, slow march toward death.

She understood that march.

She understood the weave of mortality, the sound of it, the absolute truth of it; it was hers. But it was also theirs: the people who lived in this city. The people who lived in the Empire. The people who lived beyond its borders. It was the truth of trees and the truth of animals and the truth of insects, of crops; it was the truth of *life*.

So, she wove. She reached into herself, and into the painful—for it was painful—well of her talent, and she pulled from it what she needed, sending it into channels that she had not touched for decades. She wrapped it with care and deliberation around the voice of a god, whose murmuring was syllabic and hypnotic and—yes—painfully beautiful. It was the last that was, and had always been, hardest. It *was* compelling. Every instinct she possessed screamed against touching it at all, it inspired such awe.

Here, experience was her friend. Only her own death would end that reliance. She was small and insignificant and unworthy in comparison. She accepted that as fact. As so many facts were, it was irrelevant. She was Sigurne. This was her city. Her duty.

She had practiced, with dubious permission, upon no less a power than Meralonne APhaniel himself. He did not accept—as Astrassi had—that her voice was inaudible to the wild air. Nor would he, for the first decade. He was not a demon; he was not the Ice Mage. His lessons, however, had never been kind. To Sigurne, harsh words signified nothing. They would have, before

Dimkirk.

But harsh words or no, no amount of effort drew the attention of the wind —not when Meralonne held it.

She could not make herself heard. Not then. If what Meralonne feared was true —if power was seeping back into the world in a haphazard and unpredictable fashion, she *might*, with effort, do so in the future. All that she had managed to achieve under Meralonne's tutelage was this: she could silence the voice the wind heard.

She could make him invisible, in the eyes of the elements.

It had never been easy, and her success engendered in him both the warmth of pride and the bitter cold of anger. She never ignored the latter, although in her fashion, she trusted him, which was folly; she had some experience with the wild and the ancient. The air that bore him aloft could destroy half the city in its lazy play; there was no malice in it, but malice signified nothing. Intent was entirely a secondary consideration; if one understood intent completely, the rules of the game changed significantly, that was all.

She had never believed that she understood the intent of the wild wind; no more did she believe she understood the intent of Meralonne APhaniel. When the Order had come to Dimkirk, Sigurne had not had the power to stand against him; she had accepted him as master and tutor because the alternative was death.

And now? Did she truly believe she might have that power now?

Eyes closed, she could see the magi as he had appeared on the day the Order had arrived in the lee of the Ice Mage's tower: his sword and shield carving arcs in the air itself as he rode, leaping into and out of its folds. She knew the wind could hear him; she could hear the wind. She could hear its joy, its recognition and its delicate, beautiful pleading. She could hear its song.

And oh, she could hear his reply —because he could. His voice, the wind heard.

“Sigurne?”

“Not yet,” she whispered. Listening, always listening. She wasn’t certain that she would finish in time; the earth was rumbling. She could almost feel what she could hear: its anger, rock shifting beneath her bent knees.

Meralonne could not bespeak it to still its anger; the wind was too close, too tightly wound around him. What the earth did not do, the air might, in its rage. She did not understand the imperative possessiveness of the elements; nor did she doubt it existed. She could hear the wind. It wanted the freedom to destroy, now. The earth was close.

But Meralonne cajoled it, distracted it, sent it against—ah. Fire.

She could not cut the demon off from the source of any of the rest of his power; no more could he cut her off from hers. Meralonne could, because Meralonne could destroy him. He was not the creature that had appeared in the heart of the Common during the aborted victory parade; he did not have that creature’s power.

Nor had he needed it until this moment.

She wove. It was not a simple construction; it was not a solid shield that might stand between the two. Such barriers were simpler to conjure, although they required power; they were her last resort. Sigurne had never been able to discern which part of *kialli* voice—which part of Meralonne’s—reached the wild elements.

No, what she did was simpler, an act of illusion that existed just beyond the reach of the *kialli*. It was bound, in all ways, to the mortal world. Her world. It was built entirely out of her own life experiences, shorn of event: it *was* the bone deep certainty that mortality ruled this space. It ruled Sigurne.

And it was stronger in all ways than the first such glamour had been, because Sigurne was stronger. Wiser? Perhaps. Experience bred wisdom, if one survived and one learned. Wisdom was often bitter when lived in.

But it contained more than just the bitter. It contained the odd, elusive moments of joy, of relief, of surprise; it contained the abiding curiosity that

she had clung to in the wreckage of her first life in distant Arrend. It contained the shards of hope which had still, decades later, not lost all power to cut, the sharp fear, and the growing disquiet. It contained certainty and doubt; frustration and, yes, anger; fury was beyond her, now. She was grateful for that.

It was not the weave of containment in which the Ice Mage had enclosed the *kialli* Lord. It held none of the desperate envy of things that existed beyond mortal ken. It was her understanding of what being human meant.

It was not flesh, of course; that power was not hers. She doubted that it belonged in any but the hands of the gods and the first of the firstborn. There was no power in her spell in comparison.

But there was. Absent flesh, it was the patina of mortality itself, externalized. She wondered if he would be aware of it immediately; Astrassi had been. But the Ice Mage's spell was an artifact of the summoning in many ways; Sigurne's was not. She had not bound this demon; she did not hold his name.

But she was not yet done. Did Meralonne suspect the truth? Had the *kialli*? Is that, in the end, why he had taught her his bitter, bitter lesson? Listening to the elemental, the wild, she had *also* heard the voice of a god, and over time—time and the bitter, bitter pain of countless physical humiliations and countless secret summonings, the latter growing in ambition—she had learned to hold *enough* of the god's voice in her mind that she could feel the resonant wholeness of the words the god spoke.

In each and every case, they were different.

In each and every case, they were a name.

It was knowledge she had forbidden the Order's many mages. She had discouraged the studies of lore; she had diverted attention and labor into branches of modern, useful magic. They had resisted her, as expected.

Where discouragement failed, she had been ruthless; she remained ruthless. If Duvari was suspicion personified, she accepted his hostility; he had been useful to Sigurne in her time, and she surrendered those mages she

could not control to his *Astari*. She had survived her captivity and servitude in distant towers; she did not intend to allow *any* man to succeed where the Ice Mage had failed.

Even so, she had not been vigilant enough; she had failed, and the city had faced a Henden that had almost destroyed it.

If she had allowed the study of the forbidden, if she had chosen and groomed apprentices, if she had *taught them* what she had been taught —

“Sigurne.”

She felt Matteos’ hand on her shoulder; he helped her to her feet. She did not feel, as she rose, that mortality was a gift; she felt it in her stiffness; she felt it in the reach of the cold, because she was cold, now. She saw it, in the lines of Matteos Corvel’s face. In as much as she had family, it was Matteos. The only kindness she asked of death was that she precede him to the bridge.

And it was not a kindness, would not be a kindness, to Matteos. He did not question her, even now. What he suspected, she did not know; he had never shared his concerns, except in this way; he supported her. Physically, if necessary.

Could she have taught him what she had learned? He was a mage of considerable power in his own right—but he had been content to suborn that power to her service. His ambitions on his own behalf had always been slight. Oh, he had written his papers, and engaged in the politics of the Order; he had carved a place for himself in the council. None of these things had been done at Sigurne’s request; they had, she was certain, been done so that he could continue to offer her support. He could not do so from the distant ranks of the majority who stood in the outer circles.

Could he have learned?

She closed her eyes. Possibly. Possibly, but she did not know a way to teach these lessons that would not break all but the most driven, the most contained, of men. And she did not wish to inflict her early life on someone she both respected and, yes, trusted.

Yet the only mages she might have considered as students were those, and the Order would not have been served well by their loss. "Only two remain," she told Matteos.

"You are certain?"

She nodded. He had never asked her how she knew; nor would he ask her now. "Let us find Meralonne."

Matteos frowned. "That, I fear, will not be difficult."

#

The trembling of the floor beneath their feet did not lessen; it grew. It was not, however, the work of the angry, ancient earth. Sigurne frowned. "Did I not tell him to destroy walls only as a last resort?"

"Those were not your precise words."

Her frown deepened. "I do not trust these floors." She gestured, and the two mages rose.

Matteos now frowned. "Let me," he said. "You have taxed yourself enough."

"I have not," she replied, but the cold belied her words.

"Let me," he said again. "If you have not taxed your powers yet, you will be on the edge of fever before this is done."

They had turned two corners, and the halls were now strewn with both rubble and wood. Along the left side of the narrow servants' hall, the wall was black; the bronze torch holders had melted. She did not need to listen carefully to hear screaming. Exhaling, she nodded.

Matteos cast. Grey light rolled across the debris strewn floor like a carpet. Orange light encased them both with a harsh brightness that implied fire. It was not, of course. Matteos was worried. She knew this not only because of the obvious protective enchantments; his eyes blued, light spreading from pupil to the edges of his lids.

"How many?" She asked. She did not spare the power to enhance either

vision or hearing. Matteos, too perceptive by half, had not been wrong; the enchantment whose nature he did not know had been more costly than she had intended. And if the screams implied that merchants still survived, she would need what remained of her husbanded power.

Where Matteos' protections were a bright translucent orange, the spell Sigurne now cast was gold; it gilded the former.

"A dozen are dead," Matteos said, frowning. "A dozen are dying."

"The rest?"

"Alive. Injured, but alive." He glanced at her. "You are not surprised."

"No. Demons are not known for granting quick and painless deaths where they have any other option. I do not believe they thought to be disturbed before the earth rose. They do not hunt in the city; if they hunt at all—and they must—they are kept on a very tight leash. This would have been a gift to the one who remains.

"We must hurry," she added. "Or they will all perish. The demon now knows that we are here." As she spoke, shards of stone flew down the hall, veering at the last moment to embed themselves in floor.

*Meralonne*, Sigurne thought. She did not often indulge in prayer; she did not do so now. The hall ended in what had once been door frame; the door was gone. The wall that held the frame had been broken in several places; the wind played with the pieces.

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The great hall in the guildhall was two stories in height, the ceiling that capped it, rounded. The Order of knowledge boasted only two rooms that approached this one in size.

It was, of course, the room in which Meralonne chose to contain his battle—if containment was a word that applied. Matteos braced the crumbling stone of the wall that had once contained the servant's entrance and exit. Sigurne's gaze swept the hall; she saw the edges of winter magic trail away from the two public entrances: the doors were closed. They were also

standing.

She regretted her former annoyance; Meralonne had done exactly as she'd asked. He had taken down wall where no other option was available. Most of the merchants—those who survived—were huddled against the walls of the great room, or beneath its tables. She noted that some were huddled protectively over those who had fallen; it was folly, of course.

But folly was part of humanity, and there was, in this reckless and hopeless attempt to come to the aid of friends—or even strangers, as she did not recognize all of the men and women trapped here—something she would spend the rest of her life attempting to preserve.

“Matteos.”

He nodded. He knew her. He knew what she wanted of him, and she knew she could trust him. The demon was occupied with Meralonne APhaniel; he could not afford to be distracted. She glanced up; the familiar brilliance of blue sword met the sharp edge of burning red in mid-air; the impact drove the combatants apart. They did not stop; their trajectories were decided by air, by fire, by power. Driven back, they travelled in an arc, the lowest and highest points the moment at which they pivoted, gaining traction in a way that no one mortal could.

She could not afford to watch more than that. She could listen; they spoke. They spoke in a language that sounded familiar; the words, however, were taken by wind and rock and the sharp, harsh crackle of flame. It devoured tables in an instant; Sigurne heard the screams as the merchants realized their slender protections were gone.

Gone as well were table cloths, pitchers; shards of broken crystal littered the floor; they had already drawn blood.

She gestured, then; Matteos had been—as he so often was—correct. Summer magic, warmth against raging, painful heat, filled the room. She heard the demon roar, and she smiled. Lifting her voice she spoke to the huddling merchants.

“Follow the path that appears on the floor in front of you. Those who can

walk, help those too injured. We do not have much time.” Her voice filled the narrow corridor of summer’s defensive light. She extended a shield of protection above that path; if the fire and the air could not touch it, what the air carried could, and the air was angered.

She hoped Gavin Ossus and his companions had had some success; the only exit lay back the way they’d come, and she knew the demon that had been fighting just above the heads of Jarven ATerafin and Hectore of Araven was not yet destroyed.

Matteos stood on the other side of the ruined wall; his voice was rougher and harsher than Sigurne’s, but it would be; he had not learned to play at the almost grandmotherly fragility that had been Sigurne’s shield for so many years.

She could sound calm and harmless at the heart of a storm. Even this one. Some of the merchants, she recognized; not all of them were alive. Her glance grazed the characteristic greatcoat of Loren; he had lost the whole of his left arm, and lay unmoving and wide-eyed in his own blood, one of two dozen such bodies.

Some of the living hovered over the corpses, shouting their names in a series of repetitive, cascading syllables that denied not death, but truth. She understood, and understood further that too many of these people were bereft of their normal good sense.

And oh, it brought back memories.

The guildmaster of the Order of Knowledge was considered a polite force to be placated when events became ‘unpleasant’. Were the demon and his fire gone from this room, she could have lead the injured away from the guildhall.

He was not, and his fire posed a very real threat—as did Meralonne’s wind. She looked past the dead, the dying, the injured; past the men and women who stared, unseeing, at nothing. She required help, and she did not have the time to fetch Hectore of Araven, who she felt would be almost equal to the task. Nor could she see the logical choice of designated commander, the guildmaster of the Merchants’ guild, in the hall, either alive or dead; she

looked. An autocratic and proud man, the cut of his clothing would have given his body away, and he was unlikely to cower.

But he was not here; she continued to scan the crowd.

She exhaled with otherwise unvoiced relief when her gaze alighted on a familiar woman; she was surprised to see her in the guildhall, as she was not aware that the merchant had returned to the city. Eva Juwal had seen her share of death; she traveled, caravan firmly under her figurative whip, through war zones, in which deserters lurked in wait for merchants and their cargoes. Eva was not without scars; she was perfectly capable of wielding a sword when necessary, although she was practical enough to prefer a crossbow at a distance. She was not small; she was not retiring.

Her scars—the visible ones—were stretched and discolored; she was unnaturally, but not unexpectedly, pale. “Merchant Juwal,” Sigurne said, gilding her voice with magic so it might carry. Sigurne’s talent was not bardic; she could not pitch her voice so that it was heard only by the individual in question—not without a great deal of preparation.

But Eva recognized Sigurne’s voice instantly; she turned. “Guildmaster.”

“Your help would be greatly appreciated.”

Eva, a woman half Sigurne’s age on a bad day, had an arm beneath an older man’s; he was bleeding at the left temple, his eyes wide and almost unblinking. He moved because Eva supported his weight; if not for the merchant’s support, Sigurne doubted he would be walking at all. He did not seem to be fully aware of his surroundings. “I’m a bit busy, guildmaster.”

“Of course you are, dear.”

A merchant from the tender age of four if one listened to her stories about her own life, Eva frowned. She was taller than Sigurne, although some of that height was due to Sigurne’s posture. “I hate it when you ‘dear’ me.” She had the voice of a military man; she regularly terrified men of rank, wealth, and more delicate sensibilities. But fully a third of her personal income came from the Order of Knowledge—she traveled to and from the west, as far as the mottled collection of small countries known as the Western Kingdoms if one

didn't happen to live in one of them.

She could not afford to offend the guildmaster, and they both knew it.

Her language when annoyed was salty. She was clearly annoyed at the moment; enough so that she didn't flinch when fire landed two inches above the top of her head, spreading to either side as it flowed around the protections Sigurne had cast.

Sigurne, however, failed to hear her. Eva was a merchant in almost all of her dealings, but the man she escorted to the jagged remnant of what had once been wall was not one of her subordinates. Left to her own devices, Eva's instinctive reaction was almost always to offer aid when it wasn't too costly.

Cost, in Eva's case meant money. She didn't seem to recognize that death generally prevented earning any more of it, but she had always survived what many considered to be her recklessness. Sigurne had never considered her reckless. She waited while Eva barked at another stunned merchant, handing responsibility—and physical burden—to him. That accomplished, Eva strode quickly toward the magi.

Sigurne did not waste time. "I have three different barriers erected at the moment. I cannot supervise our retreat without losing at least half of the people present."

"Conservative guess."

"Yes. Take command as you can. There is a narrow strip of ground the fire will not reach."

"The gold one?"

"Yes. The protections are not the only work I have done today; in the context of the city, they are not even the most significant."

"How much time do we have?"

"As much as we absolutely need—but not a minute more. Leave the dead."

"The injured?"

“Use your discretion. What did the demon demand?”

“Death,” Eva replied, shrugging. “And fear.”

Sigurne nodded. “It feeds them, in a fashion. If he meant to kill you all, he was far too self-indulgent—but even thus engaged he is not without power.”

“And we are.”

“Unless you were prepared for demons and magical attacks, yes.”

Eva wasn't talentborn, but she understood that the use of talent exacted a toll. “You'll owe me for this.”

Sigurne expected no less; she wasn't pleased, but she didn't have time to make this clear. Loss of a handful of merchants caused difficulty—but loss of most of the guild would be far, far worse for the city. “Yes. Where is the guildmaster?”

Eva frowned.

“Never mind; now is not the time.” A cascading rain of raging fire swept the room, charring flesh; the stench made breathing difficult, and the barrier buckled under its concerted attack. Not all of the merchants had moved to safety. There were men and women she could not save. There had always been men and women she could not save. She concentrated only on those she could.

She bent her head as Eva left. The younger woman kept her wide feet firmly planted across the narrow stretch of illuminated floor that Sigurne had pronounced safe. “Listen up,” the merchant snapped, her voice filling all of the space not occupied by wind, fire, or immortals. “Corin, get the hell away from the mantle. *Now*. Bring that idiot friend of yours with you.”

The idiot friend appeared to have lost half a hand. It was his left.

“Jill—shut it or *I'll* give you something to scream about.”

No less a person than the head of House Montaven's jaws snapped shut. She was younger than Eva; she was not a woman to whom commands were given. But she had undeniably been whimpering. And she had never, in

Sigurne's hearing, been called an unvarnished 'Jill' before. Sigurne was not certain that that *was* her official given name.

Eva never failed to surprise.

The merchant had already moved on. She understood, as Matteos had, exactly what Sigurne wanted from her; it was likely she would have taken the lead regardless, but where it was possible at this late stage, Sigurne did not wish to leave things to chance.

In the rain of fire, lightning was red and blue; thunder was demonic, a great roar of fury that shook the ground—but did not wake the earth as was intended.

Eva's voice was drowned out, twice, by the clash of two swords. What was almost metallic thunder died before the merchant's voice did; she had a job to do now, and bent a ferocious focus upon only that. Demons were foreign, terrifying nightmares—but the magi were now here; men who fought creatures standing on nothing but air were therefore *not* Eva's problem. The merchants were.

She wasn't gentle; she didn't have the time. She slapped at least two people; Sigurne heard and registered the sound, but didn't see who; nor did she now care. The shadows that had sealed the public doors, so effectively preventing escape began to flow away from them.

Toward the merchants; toward Eva herself.

Those doors now burst open; standing in them were armed and armored men. Men, Sigurne thought, not demons.

But men could be bought; men could be coerced. They could also be killed—but not with any ease, not while the barriers were being maintained. The calculus of magic was always difficult; one borrowed against oneself, and one repaid the debt with interest. Some debts could not be paid; a fourth barrier against men wielding plain steel could be erected; it would halve the duration of the other three.

She raised voice. "*Meralonne.*" She called Eva's name as well, but Eva didn't

turn; she stilled. She understood.

Not all of the merchants did, and four died running *to* the open doors. Their deaths answered the brief doubt Sigurne had entertained—and such a doubt was folly. Hope often was.

The wind did what Sigurne could not; it bore down upon the armed men who had entered the hall, driving them back into their comrades. Armor clattered against armor, and at least three swords flew in the wind's folds. Fire answered, but it was an imperfect tool; the men could not breach it without burning.

Sigurne did not look up. She shortened the summer path. She did not intend to offer any succor to men who had sold their swords to a demon. They had; they evinced no surprise at the aerial combat confined—for the most part—to the ceiling's height; nor did they seem surprised at the fire. The wind, yes—but the wind was no part of their forces.

They regrouped, attempting to navigate the fire that now reached for the wind—as it had, in patches, since they'd breached the shattered door. The demon shouted perfectly clear, Weston orders. The merchants were to die. All of them. No exceptions.

Orders were barked—in the same Weston. They were passed back through the open doorway through which more men poured. As fire flared, as blue light flashed, Sigurne recognized the tabards half a dozen men wore: they were Merchant Guild.

The merchants—those that could move, with or without aid—clung to the path that Sigurne had made, fear of the most mundane of the threats they faced speeding their movements. The golden light on the floor did not seem to the unschooled to offer much in the way of protection—but it lead away from the armed men. One or two of the merchants sported daggers that had been drawn only in the face of the new arrivals; many of them had faced bandits, and they had all demonstrably survived.

Because they had, they knew survival was never guaranteed. Yes, she thought, as she heard *Kalliaris'* name raised. Pray if you must, but *move*.

Sigurne did not pray. She had long since discovered there was no efficacy in it. Prayers were offered when all other avenues had failed, because at that point, efficiency signified little. All that was left was the pain of raw hope.

It yawned before her now. She did not count the merchants that passed before her, clinging to the path she'd created. Matteos would; she hadn't the stomach for it. *Any* survivors were better than none.

Demons were not careful about their merely human servants; fire rose, sweeping across the guildhall floors; what it touched, it consumed. The flooring fell away in large patches. Wood, blood-soaked carpets and the corpses that lay strewn across them, turned to ash, bone, black rising smoke.

She felt a distant, grim satisfaction as armored men fell through the floor to the basement rooms beneath it. The second layer of Sigurne's cast protections maintained the solidity of her summer path under the feet of the merchants; she had expected this. It had come later rather than sooner, allowing her to husband some of the power she now spent in earnest.

She felt the sudden silence of a god's whisper and glanced back, over her shoulder; APhaniel fought above. But his magi had succeeded; the demon that fought outside of the guildhall was gone, the binding that held him upon the plane, unravelled. Sigurne could not divert power to send commands; she shouted Matteos' name, instead.

He answered, his voice attenuated.

"Tell Gavin — enter the main hall through the front doors; use whatever force he deems necessary. There will be resistance. Very little of it will be magical in nature.

"Eva."

The merchant was now less than ten feet from where Sigurne stood. She herded — there was no other word for it — the last of the merchants toward the gaping hole in the wall. The floor beneath her feet was solid — but the gaps that opened up to one side of it yawned, waiting for a false step. Waiting, Sigurne thought, for the wind that could not — yet — pass her barriers.

“The fire, guildmaster —”

Sigurne exhaled. “It will die when the demon does.” And let that be soon. Let it be before the exultance she heard in Meralonne’s voice reached the ears of the rest of the merchants. “The halls beyond this room are not yet contested. Matteos will tell you where to go — make sure as many of your cohort follows his instructions as you can.”

Eva nodded. She wanted to argue — no doubt to demand more information — but that was just instinct, and a stronger instinct overwhelmed it: survival. If Sigurne did not believe that prayer was beneficial, she would nonetheless offer a benediction to the triumvirate for any who survived this evening’s work. She held the path. She held it, although her arms began the involuntary shuddering that indicated that she had pushed past — far past — her reasonable limits.

Now was *not* the time for such weakness. It was, however, the time for such risks. “Meralonne!”

She didn’t look up, although she desired a glimpse of the most fractious, disorderly member of her Order. She knew that he was almost unconfined here, unfettered by the trappings of life as a mortal. And yes, it stirred her; the ancient and the wild both elevated and diminished her. She could never be what he was; no amount of study or power could change her essential nature.

Yet she could stand, as she might stand in a storm, in awe of a force that was so much beyond her it might have been tidal wave or earthquake.

She could no more command a tidal wave than she could command Meralonne; what authority she had, he ceded her. He tolerated it. But obey or no, he had always heard her voice.

He heard it now.

He replied: the wind roared. Fire and been summoned and fire had scorched floor and charred corpses, adding to their count when the living, too traumatized to comprehend basic commands, failed to stand on the only safe ground marked by three different magics. But the fire that had been called

was bound to the voice and the power of a ghost.

The wind was not.

Sigurne retreated to the wall; it was far simpler to sustain protections in the gap there, and the moment they were no longer necessary—and that time was coming—she could allow them to lapse without fear of perishing herself. She did not count the merchants who passed her by; she did not tell them to hurry.

Eva did that, her voice strident and clear. She lead—harshly—where leading was necessary, but she returned to the stragglers and the back of the line. She was not gentle; if she had ever been gentle, travel with caravans had cured her. Where her words couldn't reach the last of the merchants, her hands could; the sharp sting of her palm was silenced by the wind's anger and the crackle of fire.

She lead, cajoled, and dragged. Each merchant clambered out of the gaping hole that had once contained both door frame and door, passing Sigurne, until only Eva remained. Her dark eyes narrowed as they met Sigurne's.

"Where the hells are the rest of your magi?"

"On the other side of the far doors," Sigurne replied. "Do not tarry here, Eva."

Eva snorted. "I should throw you out first, myself."

"Go. I will follow."

"You're practically unconscious as it is, guildmaster."

It was true; Sigurne did not waste breath denying it.

She listened. She listened to what she heard in Meralonne, his voice familiar, even if the words that it uttered were—and would always be—beyond her. He rode the wind, and it carried him in graceful, sudden arcs; his sword left a trail of light in her vision, a ghostly lattice, a map, of sorts.

He was as wild, here, as the wind; as wild as the fire, almost as compelling as the muted, hushed whisper of a god. There was beauty in savagery as

compelling as storm and mountain and the vast depth of ocean on a clear day. She could not own it; she could not touch it. But she could bear witness.

“Sigurne, come away.” The words were no part of the wild; they contained no magic, no majesty. The voice that spoke them was older, rougher; it dipped and faded as the wind roared. It was not the voice she wanted to hear, now.

But she could.

“Sigurne, Eva has taken the last of the merchants. Meralonne cannot finish this combat while you are here.”

“He does not see me,” she whispered.

“No. But he knows. Come. I cannot maintain the path for nearly as long as you have, and we must be away before the floor collapses.”

She did not have the strength to repeat the words of a distant god. But Meralonne was here; she did not have to try. She could listen. She could listen to things that would never, ever hear her voice in their turn.

“Sigurne.”

Matteos gripped her arm, pulling her through the ragged hole. Splinters of wood lodged themselves in the backs of her calves and caught in the hem of her robe. Clumsy, really. Had her spells unraveled so much in so short a time?

“Sigurne.”

Ah. Yes. Yes, she thought. They had. But the time was not so small a span; she was not in the Northern Waste, and the demon was not her master; the only thing the past and the present had in common was the white haired man with the sky-blue sword and the shining, silver eyes. She had watched him in the Northern wastes, where the snow was so white it caused the eye to water. She stood, tall, as tall as she had ever stood, her hands by her side, her eyes dry—and wide. She knew he would come for her.

But not before he killed the Ice Mage.

Not before he killed the *kialli*. The demon lord did not fear him. She wondered if he understood that the white-haired man was his death—if death

had any meaning to a creature who claimed that he had died when the world was young and the gods still walked the earth. She had been sixteen years of age. She had no expectation, at that moment in time, that she would see seventeen—and she did not care.

So many years between that day and this one. She was old, now, bent with the weight of age.

The only thing she waited for was death, but death—ah, death had not come. Not for her, not yet. Sigurne Mellifas had her pride; if death avoided her, she *would not* walk toward it; he would not beg for mercy. Not then, when death would have been a welcome relief, and not now. Not when she still had work to do.

“Matteos.” She did not look at him; she tried. But she spoke his name in a voice that was shorn of all strength.

He spared no glance for Meralonne as he shouldered the greater part of her weight, turning her toward the servant’s exit. Toward life. Touch alone confirmed what he was too observant to miss, but he did not coddle or otherwise undermine her.

That would come later, in the privacy of her Tower, when the undamaged halls of the Order of Knowledge once again enfolded them both. “Sigurne.”

“I know,” she whispered. “We are almost done, here.”

“You *are* done here.” He glanced past her, sliding an arm beneath her arms and taking as much of her weight as she was willing to allow him. Her knees were weak; she locked them. She was accustomed to being treated as if she were old and frail, and it had its uses.

It would not be useful here.

“Meralonne?”

Matteos glanced back. “...The damage to the guildhall will be extensive.”

“And Gavin?”

“I am not certain there will be anything left for Gavin and his magi to

detain.”

Sigurne grimaced. “Gavin is not a fool. He understands what the Order — and the *Mysterium* — now require. We cannot capture or compel demons; we can, however, interrogate mortals. The men in guildhall tabards were no demons.”

Matteos nodded; it was a gesture meant to stifle discussion, rather than to indicate agreement. The nimbus of orange that had surrounded them both brightened around only Sigurne. “Let your protections go,” he told her.

Her nod was mirror to his, and he did not press her. She watched Eva’s back until her vision was too blurred to continue. Her eyes closed almost of their own accord as she listened. She had not stopped listening. In her current state, eyes closed, listening was no longer a matter of intent or will.

The god’s voice was soft and pervasive. She could hear its tone, its texture, the way syllables rolled into syllables in a continuous thunder. But the storm itself was compelling the longer one stood in its lee; it was breathtaking in both its distance and its grandeur.

“Sigurne.” In comparison, Matteos’ voice was thin and rough.

She did not lie to comfort him. “Yes. I was ... unwise. I did not realize how much of a drain the first cast spell would be. It was not an act of folly,” she added, although her voice shook. “The damage done to the Empire if all of the merchants had perished here would be catastrophic.”

Matteos did not argue. And Sigurne, shuddering, let the last of her protections lapse as his enfolded her. He was, she thought, her knight, her liege, her oathguard. He would not argue with her here.

But she could not relinquish the god’s voice, although he was her enemy. Not until she at last surrendered consciousness — and even this, she fought.

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