

PROLOGUE

He was old.

He had never denied his age, and if at times he resented the slow accretion of inefficiencies that were age's legacy, he did not decry them; they were what they were. Nor did he dread death, as some did; it held no fear for him. Death, like age, was an inevitability, a proof in some fashion of life's progression.

He was aware that experience might, were its oft humiliating lessons absorbed, grant wisdom; wisdom was the minor victory that could be abstracted from disaster, if one survived.

He was not certain he would survive this.

#

The winter winds were bitterly cold; the sky, a ceaseless, perfect blue, seemed to mock the desire for warmth. The man who required that warmth huddled against whatever shelter he could find, shorn of the dignity or majesty of those who might once have lived among these ruins.

He could see the uneven edges of what had once been external wall; some of those walls retained height. One was at his back now. All else appeared to be covered in snow and ice, but the irregularities that implied buildings implied that these had been grand, majestic, large. White snow and ice obliterated color, texture. Time had done the rest.

And time was not his friend. He had never felt so cold, so exhausted, so *old*, at any other time in his life, and he had not been considered young for decades.

#

Service meant many things to many people. Each man, each woman, who chose a life of service did so for their own reasons. For some, it was employ, pure and simple. Of the hundreds of men and women who comprised the Household Staff of the Terafin manse, employment was the primary concern. He did not fault them for it. They worked long hours, under the oversight of a woman who could, with a side-glance, reduce them to tears.

Had he made different choices, he might have been content to be one such servant; he had not, and even in this nightmare winter landscape, he did not regret it.

Ah, idle thoughts, idle, all. The cold was bitter here. Surrounded by forest, he nonetheless lacked wood for fire, and only the ruins of a half-wall protected him from the biting, stinging wind. He did not expect to survive the storm, but did not—yet—have surrender in him.

#

Possibly the most defining lesson he had learned before youth had deserted him was to recognize power. To recognize the potential *for* power. It was not a simple task, this last big lesson. To the young, power was often mistaken for appearance, wealth, brutality. Many who sought power wore masks; many claimed power they did not, in the end, have. Many claimed weakness and turned it on its edge, playing a binding, crippling game. In their weakness, they exerted influence on people who claimed none.

#

“I have told you before: we choose our service. What we choose defines us, Ellerson.” Akalia had not been, then, the guildmaster, in as much as the domicis had one—but she would rise to that responsibility in time. He remembered her clearly as she was on that day: forbidding, attractive, aloof. And disapproving. “What you have not, clearly, understood is that what we choose defines those we serve as well.

“You think of service as a young man thinks. But you will not *be* of service if you do not lose that notion. You are not meant to be obedient and pliant; you are not meant to be mindless. There are many who choose service as a way of avoiding responsibility.”

“I am not—”

“No. Not entirely, or I would not have allowed you to cross our threshold.” She rose from the chair behind a desk that was both worn and impressive, and began to pace, the desk between them covered in ink stands and parchment. “Ryan chose to serve Varile of House Demonde. You did not. It is the only thing that gives me hope.” This last said in her dry, dry tone, the hint of a smile curving her lips. It was not a kind smile.

“Yet Ryan is one of your prized students, is he not?”

“Indeed.”

He found Akalia frustrating on the best of days. This was not one of them. On the worst of days she was an obstacle the like of which he had very seldom encountered.

“What is it you want from me?” He demanded. He had been a very tired man, on the other precipice of youth.

“You fail to understand—again—what you must understand. It is not what *I* want that will be definitional. It is what you want.” She stopped her pacing for a moment, meeting and holding his gaze. “I am not the master you have chosen to serve. Even were I, you would not be the domicis I would choose.”

“And who would you choose?” Yes, he’d been young. Young, angry, restless. He had hoped to find answers in this guildhall. He had hoped that those with the greater breadth of experience could provide them. Akalia had that experience, but none of it had made her genial, none had made her kind. If she was wiser than he—and he had bitterly begrudged acknowledgement of that difference—her wisdom was sharp, cutting, even dismissive. It made him feel callow.

She had been silent for long enough he thought she would not answer. And perhaps because it would have been kind if she had chosen to maintain her silence, she spoke.

“Service is not a contest, Ellerson. It is not merely a matter of worth, of being ‘worthy’. You are not a child, to wait upon the approval of the nearest adult. If that is the total of your aspiration, you will not find the answers you seek here. What do you want, Ellerson?”

“Before you attempt to answer, consider your audience with care.”

As if he had ever done anything else while standing in the shadow of this particular desk. The answer came to his lips, but did not leave them. It was Akalia’s wont to poke holes in every sentence; to reveal the construction of each as faulty, the logic behind it, untenable.

#

The wind was harsh; were his hands not tucked into his armpits, he was almost certain he would lose the use of his fingers. The trees—the shadows of trees—rose above him, cast into velvet and midnight by the light of a single moon. That moon was more disturbing than even the winter itself, although it

was the winter that would kill him, in the end. He could not see the second moon.

He did not believe it was in the sky.

#

What did he want?

The question maddened him, the answer was so obvious. He wanted purpose. He wanted a place. He wanted to be of use, of aid, of help. Thus did every applicant to the guildhall respond. It had been said well, said emphatically, said with fervent belief, and it had been enough to grant him small rooms within the student body. It had been enough to qualify him to take the lessons, many and varied, that were offered.

Choosing which had been difficult, of course; the choice itself was vetted, watched, commented on; it was questioned. Within a hall that was to give answers that might guide an entire life—or the remainder of one—questions were paramount.

The answers he offered to any other master were considered satisfactory.

And perhaps that was why, in this night in which his breath was so visible it was almost solid, he remembered none of them. He remembered Akalia—and at that, Akalia in a youth that he suspected she, too, had failed to appreciate for what it was at the time: strength, vitality.

She would have recognized his smile.

What had he wanted?

#

I want to serve a great man, a great woman.

Akalia had, predictably, been disappointed with the answer. She dismissed it out of hand. She did not, however, dismiss him. His only companions as he stood in the lee of her desk were frustration, anger and exhaustion—but this was common; she seemed to invoke them by presence alone. She had allowed him to accept only two contracts, each of a length less than a year, and she was the choke-point through which more permanent vocational work would come. Or not.

He had not disgraced the domicis; that much had been made clear at the outset of this interview—but it was made clear in a cool, casual way; there was no praise in it. Nor, he thought, should there be; if the lack stung, it was

his to deal with. He wished merely that he could deal with it without also having to deal with Akalia.

“What does that mean?” She had asked, after several silent minutes of awkward, shuttered silence.

“You did not ask this of Ryan.”

“No. You are not Ryan. You feel, perhaps, that I favor him?”

He was not fool enough to say *yes*, although it was a close run thing.

“You were offered House Demonde. Why did you not accept?”

He was underslept, and hungry. This was not the state in which to confront—or be confronted with, rather, as he wasn’t a fool—Akalia. “Varile,” he replied, “is repulsive.”

One dark brow rose as the syllables echoed into stillness. “Varile is considered, by many, a man destined for greatness.”

Having stuck out his neck, he could not now withdraw. From another speaker, perhaps, but not Akalia.

“By whom?”

Her lips twitched. “By many.”

“Then this mythical many may have the privilege of serving him.”

“Indeed. Do you feel that Ryan is a fool?”

Ellerson stilled. After a much more careful pause, he said, “No.”

“No, indeed. And yet he was willing to serve. He was willing to bind his life to a man you consider contemptible.”

He did not argue with the choice of word. It was not the one he had chosen, but in a pinch, it would do.

“If Ryan is not a fool, is he a mendicant? Do you think he seeks to somehow enrich himself?”

Ellerson turned toward the door. He did not answer her question; he was angry enough that he intended never to answer another.

“Ellerson.”

He froze, his hand on the handle. “I have not always agreed with Ryan.” This was a gross understatement. “But I have never said he does not have his principles. He is a *domicis*. He understands service.”

“And he has chosen to serve a man you believe unworthy of that service.”

Ellerson turned; he kept the door at his back. “Yes. And that is, as we have

been taught, his choice; it is not mine to judge.”

“And yet you do.”

“No, Akalia, I do not.” He spoke with force, with heat—and with truth, although he had not once said this out loud. Had not perhaps said this even in the quiet of his thoughts. “Were I to serve Demonde, I would judge myself, and judge myself harshly.”

He expected anger. Or contempt. She was very adept at both. But she offered silence instead, watching him, her hands by her side, her eyes only slightly narrowed.

“And what can Ryan offer that you cannot?”

“Respect.” He bowed his head. Lifted it again. “Respect for Varile’s authority. Respect for his position. Respect for the responsibilities he has chosen to undertake—and in my opinion, to undermine. Varile does things by halves, and *only* by halves.”

“He is, surely, young.”

“Then he is too young to have the power he’s been granted. He does not know how to use it wisely.”

“And you would.” It was not a question.

Ellerson had never been humble; he had merely been silent. “Yes.”

“If that is the case—and I will not argue the point—why are you here?”

#

I do not know.

#

He had been young. He thought it perhaps the last month of his life in which he could truly say that. The single moon shed enough light that he could see the outline of ruined buildings. He was not, of course, dressed for the cold. Lighting a fire was not beyond his ability, but lighting a fire from nothing was. This landscape was, in all ways, magical. Wild.

The sound of hooves cut the wind; the sound of horns joined it, an odd blend of harmony and disharmony, as if wind and horn struggled for dominance of the aerial landscape, neither with any certainty of supremacy. He had managed to avoid those hooves; the snow here was thick and hard, not brittle; it carried his weight, and left little evidence of his passing.

He was not certain he would survive.

#

Akalia was not angered by his answer. If not for the very slight dip of her chin, he might have believed she had not heard it at all; it was quietly spoken. Quietly, exhaustedly spoken. She dismissed him. He left.

He returned to the rooms students — of various ages, and various competencies — occupied. He returned quickly, and he did not seek his own room. He sought, instead, Ryan's. Ryan, who would not be a student in these halls for much longer. Ryan's door, a narrow wooden door very much like Ellerson's own, was ajar; light in the shape of a doorframe's corners cut the darker floor of the hall.

He hesitated, wavering in his resolve.

"Ellerson?"

He was not surprised to be recognized; he himself could identify the footfalls of most of the people who graced his classes and the student halls. He hesitated, thinking the better of the long, swift strides that had brought him here.

The door opened.

Ryan, his raven hair drawn back in a long braid, stood in the frame, his face shadowed by the interior light of rooms that would soon no longer bear his name.

They could not be said to be friends; they could not be said to be enemies. There was, in their anger and hostility, a type of wary respect. They were not — exactly — rivals, but it occurred to Ellerson, as he met Ryan's gaze, that were they, Ryan would have been a worthy opponent. He wondered if Ryan saw him in the same light.

"Have you come to see me off? You are hours and a day too early."

Ellerson shook his head, and Ryan stepped back into a room made chaotic by his intent to vacate. Shirts were strewn across each flat surface, as were robes, pants, and two tailored jackets.

Ellerson grimaced and looked at Ryan; Ryan shrugged. "I've never had much in the domicis hall," he said — and there was something in his voice that Ellerson could not immediately name — "but..." he held out an arm to indicate the mess.

Ellerson entered the room. He was silent; they both were. And then,

because Ellerson had no words, having arrived in anger and frazzled desperation, he fell back on very early training. He liberated a hanger from beneath the piles of cloth of one sort or another, and lifted the nearest shirt.

Ryan hesitated again before he joined Ellerson, and they worked side-by-side, taking comfort from the simple, domestic actions that had been their earliest lessons.

“Why?” Ellerson was surprised to find that he had chosen to break the almost companionable silence.

Nor did Ryan pretend to misunderstand. “I am not—I have never been—like you. What I want is simple.”

“What I want is simple as well.”

“Is it?”

Ellerson glanced at Ryan; Ryan continued his fastidious handling of shoes.

“I have never been as certain as you, as quick to assess. I have never been as practical. No, don’t say it. We’re unlikely to meet again in the near future. We’re unlikely to argue, to clash, to turn lessons into debates—or worse.” He said the last with a wry smile. “I understand my weaknesses. I may not yet understand my strengths—but it’s the weaknesses I’ve spent so long assessing, I know them better than I know how to fold a sheet.

“You frustrate me, it’s true. You see the world so narrowly. You admit to far fewer possibilities than almost any other student who has chosen to remain in these halls. But there’s a consistency to your views—and your choices—that make the rest of us almost envious.”

Ellerson said nothing—because he had, of a sudden, nothing to say.

“I’ve surprised you. At least I’ve managed that before I leave.” He set the shoes down carefully, and lifted boots. These boots were less well-tended; they were older.

“Leave them,” Ellerson said. “They won’t suit the service you’ve chosen.”

Ryan set the boots aside very slowly. “Do you recognize them?”

Ellerson frowned. Stopped. Lifted them. He felt something like pain as he looked at the inside of the worn leather and saw his own initials. “Yes.” But he hadn’t, until Ryan had asked.

“You do not approve of patris Varile. I understand this. Half the student body understands it,” he added, with a grimace.

“Why?” Ellerson asked again. “Why him?”

“Because if he is all of the things you have claimed that he is—and I will not lie, you are not wrong—he is still more, besides.”

“He is—”

“He is fragile in a way you are not. He is, perhaps, fragile in a way I once was. You see him as lazy and irresponsible.”

Ellerson nodded. He did not speak.

“And in part, he is. Don’t make that face. This is the last time I will be able to discuss him with you or anyone else except the guildmaster.” Ryan glanced at Ellerson, at the boots in Ellerson’s suddenly nerveless fingers. He took them back, folded their heights carefully, and set them beside the shoes and short boots that *were* suitable. “In part, his irresponsibility comes from fear and uncertainty. Have you met his mother?”

“No.”

“His father?”

“No.”

“Neither were inclined to part with either their power or their influence—nor are they now. They do not live under the same roof; did they, there would only be one. Varile has long had to balance between the animosities of his parents. He fears to make the wrong decision—and so he often makes none.

“And yes, Ellerson, it *is* a weakness. It is, further, a weakness to which he will not admit. Do not think that I have agreed to serve him because I intend to change him—that, at least, would be too much of a disgrace to both of our teachers. I see him as he is. And I see his fear. I believe that were the shadows of that fear less dark and less cold, he would make different choices and different decisions—and I have bet my life on it.”

“And you would be willing to serve, regardless?”

“I am. He is not the master for you. You were wise enough to realize it instantly. But Ellerson, you and I are not the same man. We do not have the same desires. We do not have the same talents. Given the past two years, it is odd to say this to you—but I *will* say it. It is your disappointment that has made this choice so difficult. Not Akalia’s, not the guildmaster’s, but yours.”

Ellerson closed his eyes. Opened them to see Ryan’s, clear and unblinking. “I did not mean—”

“No, of course not. My only regret in leaving the guildhall is that I might never see the master you would be willing to devote your life — and not months of your life — to. You’ve always said you have interest in serving men of power — but you don’t trust them. You can’t. You’ve come close, in your time, to being one.

“And I hope, one day, to see the lord that you’re willing to serve.” He bowed, then.

So you can judge him as harshly? He thought, but did not say.

Ryan shook his head; the air was charged, and the thought was not silent enough.

#

He did not often think of Ryan. Nor did he think, often, of the guildhall.

He thought, instead, of Finch, Teller, Jester; of Arann and Angel and Carver. He could not, in good conscience, have remained by Jewel’s side as domicis, and was surprised, still, by the pain that had caused him. But he had known that she was seerborn. He had known that if she was not born to power — and she had not been — she would have no choice but to rise to it. Given her gift, given her almost singular talent, she would not long survive it without some intervention; she required someone with power beyond his own. And he had not, in his own estimation, been wrong. If anything, he had underestimated the dangers she would face.

The danger, he thought, shivering, that she would *become*.

But her den?

They had come to him.

He had gone to speak with Akalia, that interview so very, very different from the early ones. She had, as guildmaster, handled their request. She had, as guildmaster, no advice to offer him — he was retired, or should have been; he had become a permanent fixture, a teacher in the domicis halls.

He had waited, as he could not easily wait in his youth, while she had explained what was desired, what had been requested, and what his responsibilities, should he choose to accept, would be.

It was — they both knew it — pro forma. She had known what his answer would be before he had even opened her door. But he surprised her on that day, perhaps for the last time. He had bowed — a gesture of respect, yes, but

also a gesture of leave-taking, and he had said, in his quiet, unadorned voice — so different from the voice of his younger self — “I am grateful for every hard-fought lesson you have chosen to teach me. I am grateful for the opportunities you provided, and for the patience you managed, however nearly, to show.”

She said nothing as he rose.

“Everything you have taught me, deliberately or incidentally, leads to this. This is why I came to the guildhall. This is why I stayed.”

She understood, then. “I do not believe they have asked that you serve permanently.”

“No,” he said, smiling. “They have not. But I will serve them until I am incapable of service. There will be no other master.”

It was her turn to bow, then. “Will you tell them that the terms of the contract have changed?”

He shook his head. “It is not necessary. Nothing need be said.”

#

He was far from Terafin. Far from home. Far from the responsibilities that he had chosen to undertake. And he could not undertake them in this winterscape of bitter cold and ancient ruins. His breath hung about him like a pall; the horns passed by. He rose, then.

He did not know by what magic he had found this place; he knew only that some magic might reverse his course. He was Ellerson, domicis; he knew his duty, and he had not yet surrendered it.

#

How long did it take a man to freeze to death? Less time, Ellerson felt certain, than had passed since he had found himself in the heart of Winter. He was not, and had not been, attired for the bitter cold; his breath hung about him in thin, almost tangible clouds. His hands and his feet ached; his legs were stiff enough that walking caused pain. He walked, regardless.

He could.

This meant either that his sense of the passage of time was flawed, or that time did not pass in this place with its single moon the same way it did in Averalaaan. He was hungry, but the hunger was a secondary concern. If he did not find shelter of some kind soon, it was not starvation that would kill him.

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Thrice more that eve, the horns sounded. The third time, he could see the hunters passing yards ahead of where he cowered. They rode the wind, or so it seemed to Ellerson; perhaps the wind merely followed in their wake. He knew that he was not the target of this hunt, because he knew that were he, he would have died the first time the horns had clashed with the wind's howl for dominance.

But he knew, as well, that the hunters were not human; silvered by moonlight, they carried spears whose heads absorbed light, rather than reflecting it, and their hair, cloaks of platinum that parted as they moved. They were of a height, apparently of a gender, and they did not ride horses.

They were Lord Celleriant's people.

He had always recognized Lord Celleriant as a power—and at that, a dangerous one. But Lord Celleriant served Jewel. He served in a way that the winged cats did not, and probably could not, given their nature. Ellerson had never seen that man in his element—and his element was Winter. Jewel had, and she had not only survived, but triumphed.

It was daunting, to realize just how far above them she had risen.

She did not see it herself, of course; it was her nature to cling, to hold, to bind herself. She looked to her den, the heart of the home she had built. It was a struggle for her to look in any other direction. Ellerson had watched it, seen it, recognized it. He had offered her the only help he could: he had taken her den and its affairs in Terafin in hand.

He wished her to know that they were safe. And he understood that she could not know this because she was seerborn, and it wasn't true. He had walked into a wardrobe. He had stepped into Winter. He had had no way to return to the Terafin manse.

Perhaps this odd translocation was due to the nature of the Terafin's personal chambers; they existed in a space that was joined to the rest of the manse only through the doors that granted entry. Those doors were guarded by Chosen, as was their right and duty—but that duty had become decorative.

No one that passed through those doors without invitation or permission would find the Terafin. But Ellerson had had both invitation and permission.

He had been in the act of performing the duties that had been requested, although technically they were not his.

He was here.

He wondered how many of the Household Staff would join him — if they joined him at all. The sky above what the Terafin Library had become was an unchanging amethyst; the sky here had passed from perfect azure to midnight, a blue black that was startling in its clarity.

Were it not for the driving wind and the fear of the hunt itself, Ellerson would have avoided the ruins; he did not know why the hunters chose, always, a path that bypassed them. He could not imagine they were men subject to fear — but that was irrelevant; they did not seem to feel cold, either; they were certainly untouched by something as trivial as age.

Anything that roused caution or fear in the Wild Hunt would destroy him. But many, many things that did not would kill him first. Cold. Hunger.

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The edges of walls and foundation stones peered above the endless snow, redefining the shape of the drifts. Some were no taller than his ankles — most, in fact. They would not be useful. But further in, he could see broken walls that stretched to his thigh, to his chest. It was to these that he headed. He was cautious in his footing, and he kept his eyes open, but he moved quickly. No trees provided visual cover for him; until he reached that part of the ruins, nothing could provide shelter.

If he was not the target of the hunt, he had no doubt that he would draw their interest if they sighted him. Nor had he any doubt what would follow.

He was surprised to find walls that were taller than he. Time had had its effect, of course; if the walls remained, what had once been roof had long since decayed. But there were window casements in the longest, whole section of wall he could find; they contained no glass. He could not immediately determine which side of the wall was the interior side — not until he found corner, and another preserved wall that was sheared at an angle.

He walked around that second wall and came to an immediate halt.

There was a woman standing against the stone between those empty windows. She was not tall enough to be a hunter, and she did not gleam the way they did. No, she wore robes. For a moment Ellerson thought she might

be Evayne a'Nolan—but that was a delusion of hope. Her robes were not midnight blue, and they did not move and rustle with an apparent will of their own.

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“You should not be here,” the stranger said.

He executed a shallow but entirely proper bow—as if this woman, in her robes beneath the open sky, were the owner of what remained of this building. “My apologies,” he replied, rising. “I did not realize that any of the buildings in these ruins could serve as a home to anyone.”

The woman lifted her hands slowly, as if to make clear they were empty, before she pulled back the hood of her robe. Ellerson had never seen her before. Had he, he was not certain he would have remembered her; everything about her was nondescript. She was neither too tall or too short, too heavy or too slender, too old or too young. Her hair was not dark, but it was not light; it fell in that range that was considered mousey.

But her smile, if brief, was genuine. He was certain nothing else about her—except perhaps the robe—was. “You did not realize it because of course it is not true. No one calls this city home, now. Well met, Ellerson of the domicis. Ellerson of Terafin.”

“I am not ATerafin,” he replied.

“No, of course you are not. But Terafin has defined your life for years, or rather, it has defined the shape of your life. Were it not for Terafin, you would not be here now. Come. If you approach these empty windows, the air is much less chill.”

He accepted the instruction as if it were an invitation.

“You should not be here,” the stranger repeated.

“I would not be here had I the choice,” Ellerson replied. “Nor will I remain if I can find a passage back. I have responsibilities and duties that are being neglected in my absence.”

She smiled again. “You do.” The smile faltered. “Understand that I cannot interfere directly. I cannot guide you to a passage that will take you back to your Terafin and the lords you serve.”

Ellerson was silent for a beat. “Cannot, or will not?”

“Cannot and would not.”

“Why are you here?”

“If I cannot grant you passage back to your world and your time, I can ameliorate some of the difficulties you now face. I have already done so, of course.” Studying his carefully neutral expression, she added, “Or perhaps I have merely arranged that it be done. These walls stand because of enchantments laid upon them at their building. So, too, the floors.”

Ellerson found, to his surprise, that the air was distinctly less chill by the windows, as the woman had said. He took care to keep a respectful distance between them. He was not Haval Arwood. His appearance was not a mask or a feint. “You expected to find me today.”

“Yes, as you’ve surmised.” She gestured to the floor, and he saw that she spoke truth; although it was dusted with snow, the snow was thin. There was no ice beneath it. “There is a door, of sorts. It will open on command.”

“And it has never been discovered?”

“It hears only the voice of mortals. No, it has not yet been discovered. You will find clothing, supplies, and food; you will find shelter, of a kind.”

“The food—”

“As the walls were, it is enchanted; unlike those walls, the enchantment has never been under siege. There are no treasures contained therein that would justify the use of the magicks required to break it. Any who know how to look can see what is contained,” she added. “Or such magicks would have been brought to bear.

“There is history here. Your Empire did not exist when this city fell. Your kind did not exist.”

He did not ask her how enchantments could be keyed to mortality if mortals did not exist. It was irrelevant, and he felt that the questions he would be allowed were few, the time for them passing as the night darkened.

“You will not find your way to Terafin on your own. That is not the nature of this most ancient of places. Not all of the beings that dwell here are inimical to you and your kind; some will be curious. Some will be fanciful. Some will destroy you not because they desire destruction, but because you are so fragile.”

She opened her mouth and horns robbed the air of the sound of her words. Her brow creased as she lifted her chin and turned, briefly, to glance

out of the open casement to which she was closest. “Do not fear the hunt here,” she told him. “What you see of the hunt is memory, not reality. Those horns have not been sounded in this landscape since—” she fell silent. “Soon, Ellerson. Soon. It will be over, one way or the other.”

She was not old, but sounded, momentarily, ancient, the weight of the burden she carried apparent in her voice, her expression, her endless weariness. “This is all I can offer you; it is meagre. But you are not mine; you are not my distant kin. Could you take and survive my test, I could offer more—but even were you born to see, you could not now undertake it. You have made choices for the whole of your life that have defined the choices you might make now. And your choices are binding.”

“And yours, lady?” He asked softly.

“Do not pity me.”

“I could not.” It was truth. “You are the Oracle.”

“I am, yes.”

“Have you seen the Terafin? Have you seen Angel ATerafin?”

Understanding that he must ask the questions, no matter what his current situation, she nodded. “Yes.”

“Did she pass your test?”

“It was not my test,” the Oracle replied softly. “But her own. In as much as she could, she did—but...”

“It is not yet over.”

“No. That is the nature of the seerborn.”

“Does she know?”

“I do not know. She will, if she does not yet.” The Oracle lifted the folds of hood from her shoulders and pulled them over her head again. “I cannot stay. Your presence here is faint enough that it might continue undetected—but even hidden as I am, mine is not.” She surprised him; she bowed.

It was a complicated gesture, too formal for all but the ceremonial investitures of the highest echelons of the patriciate. He could not return it in kind, but offered her the bow that was appropriate for his own station in the life he had chosen. “You wish to resume your responsibilities,” she told him, as she rose. “As you must. But you are mistaken if you believe that you must return to Terafin to do so.”

He stiffened.

“You walked into this landscape from a wardrobe.”

Breath held, he nodded.

“When you did not return, Jewel went in search of you—but she had waited too long. She entered a different dream, a different geography. Before she did, however, Carver entered the wardrobe.”

“Carver’s here?”

“Yes. But I must warn you, he is not as you are. The dreams of this place are more real to him; he does not know how to avoid them. Find him, and find him soon.”

Ellerson nodded and bowed again. He was not surprised to find her gone when he rose—and had she not been, it would not have mattered. He began to search the floor upon which she’d been standing. As it was solid stone, he could not find the trapdoor he’d expected, and after a few more minutes, he gave up on that notion.

He spoke. He spoke in his authoritative, quiet voice. The word *open* did nothing. He tried it in all of the languages he knew—it was a rudimentary word, and he could speak it efficiently in almost a dozen ways. He tried *shelter* next, and as *open*, it did nothing. He then tried *help*, *succor*, *sanctuary*.

He was not the den; he didn’t give way to cursing until he had run down the list of obvious words, and when he did, he did it deliberately, each word tested in the languages he knew.

When he had exhausted even those, he tried different words, each with a decreasing amount of hope, an increasing amount of urgency. After this, he slumped against the wall, closed his eyes, listening to the howl of wind and the horns.

The Oracle had come to him. She had come to where she knew he would be. Jewel didn’t speak with any frequency about the Oracle or the Firstborn, but he understood what the Oracle could do.

She could have found Carver instead. She could have delivered the same message; she could have lead him to the same shelter. She had done none of those things. She had come to Ellerson.

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Ellerson seldom thought of the guildhall of the domicis. But he had

stumbled through the ruins, thinking of his past, the sharper images and interactions, the odd illuminations. His friendship—his rivalry—with Ryan had not defined him. His clashes with Akalia had shaped what was already there.

But those memories folded into a single word, which remained unchanged no matter which language he might choose to speak it in.

Terafin.

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The ground beneath his feet began to glow with a faint, pale light that was reminiscent of moon, not sun. There was no other change, but he could see that the glow was confined to—and defined by—a specific area. He cleared the light snow with his feet, and as he worked, he thought of Ryan. He had not seen Ryan in years, had had no reason to speak with him.

If he returned, if he survived, he would seek him out. He could not, of course, introduce Ryan to his lord—it would be difficult to gather the den in one place, given their disparate responsibilities. But he could tell Ryan at least this much of them: their names.

Finch.

Teller.

Angel.

Arann.

Jester.

He watched the glow brighten, and he heard something crack or snap beneath his feet. He spoke the last name, because at the moment, it was the most important.

Carver.

A staircase opened up before his feet. It opened not into the darkness of disused cellar, the mustiness of crypt; it was brightly lit, a stretch of hall visible from the height of the stairs. He descended quickly but carefully; he could not afford to fall, and his limbs were thick and stiff with cold.

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