



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 walls; 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 point in his life, and he had not been considered young for decades.

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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 employment, 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, possess. 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, inasmuch 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 inkstands and parchment. “Ryan chose to serve Varile of House Demonde. You did not. It is the only



thing that gives me hope.” This last was said in her dry, dry tone, the hint of a smile curving her lips. It was not a kind smile.	01
“Yet Ryan is one of your prized students, is he not?”	02
“Indeed.”	03
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.	04
“What is it you want from me?” he demanded. He had been a very tired man, on the other precipice of youth.	05
“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.”	06
“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 acknowledgment of that difference—her wisdom was sharp, cutting, even dismissive. It made him feel callow.	07
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.	08
“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?”	09
“Before you attempt to answer, consider your audience with care.”	10
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.	11
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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, in the end, it was the winter that would kill him. He could not see the second moon.	33
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He did not believe it was in the sky.	S38
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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 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,”	01
he replied, “is repulsive.”	02
One dark brow rose as the syllables echoed into stillness. “Varile is consid-	03
ered, by many, a man destined for greatness.”	04
Having stuck out his neck, he could not now withdraw. From another	05
speaker, perhaps, but not Akalia.	06
“By whom?”	07
Her lips twitched. “By many.”	08
“Then this mythical many may have the privilege of serving him.”	09
“Indeed. Do you feel that Ryan is a fool?”	10
Ellerson stilled. After a much more careful pause, he said, “No.”	11
“No, indeed. And yet he was willing to serve. He was willing to bind his	12
life to a man you consider contemptible.”	13
He did not argue with the choice of word. It was not the one he had chosen,	14
but in a pinch, it would do.	15
“If Ryan is not a fool, is he a mendicant? Do you think he seeks to somehow	16
enrich himself?”	17
Ellerson turned toward the door. He did not answer her question; he was	18
angry enough that he intended never to answer another.	19
“Ellerson.”	20
He froze, his hand on the handle. “I have not always agreed with Ryan.”	21
This was a gross understatement. “But I have never said he does not have his	22
principles. He is a domicis. He understands service.”	23
“And he has chosen to serve a man you believe unworthy of that service.”	24
Ellerson turned; he kept the door at his back. “Yes. And that is, as we have	25
been taught, his choice; it is not mine to judge.”	26
“And yet you do.”	27
“No, Akalia, I do not.” He spoke with force, with heat—and with truth,	28
although he had not once said this out loud. Had not perhaps said this even in	29
the quiet of his thoughts. “Were I to serve Demonde, I would judge myself,	30
and judge myself harshly.”	31
He expected anger. Or contempt. She was very adept at both. But she of-	32
fered silence instead, watching him, her hands by her sides, her eyes only	33
slightly narrowed.	34
“And what can Ryan offer that you cannot?”	35
“Respect.” He bowed his head. Lifted it again. “Respect for Varile’s author-	36
ity. Respect for his position. Respect for the responsibilities he has chosen to	37
undertake—and in my opinion, to undermine. Varile does things by halves,	S38
and <i>only</i> by halves.”	N39

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01 “He is, surely, young.”

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

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

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

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

07

08 *I do not know.*

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

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

20 He was not certain he would survive.

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

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

31 He hesitated, wavering in his resolve.

32 “Ellerson?”

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

36 The door opened.

37 Ryan, his raven hair drawn back in a long braid, stood in the frame, his
38S face shadowed by the interior light of rooms that would soon no longer bear
39N 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, all of a sudden, nothing to say.

“I’ve surprised you. At least I’ve managed that before I leave.” He set the

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01 shoes down carefully and lifted boots. These boots were less well-tended; they
02 were older.

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 “He is—”

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

16 Ellerson nodded. He did not speak.

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

23 “No.”

24 “His father?”

25 “No.”

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

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

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

37 “I am. He is not the master for you. You were wise enough to realize it in-
38S tantly. But you and I are not the same man, Ellerson. We do not have the same
39N desires. We do not have the same talents. Given the past two years, it is odd

to say this to you—but I <i>will</i> say it. It is your disappointment that has made this choice so difficult. Not Akalia’s, not the guildmaster’s, but yours.”	01
Ellerson closed his eyes. Opened them to see Ryan’s, clear and unblinking.	02
“I did not mean—”	03
“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.	04
“And I hope, one day, to see the lord that you’re willing to serve.” He bowed then.	05
<i>So you can judge him as harshly?</i> he thought but did not say.	06
Ryan shook his head; the air was charged, and the thought was not silent enough.	07
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He did not often think of Ryan. Nor did he think, often, of the guildhall.	10
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 seer-born. 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.	11
The danger, he thought, shivering, that she would <i>become</i> .	12
But her den?	13
They had come to him.	14
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.	15
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.	16
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	17
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01 different from the voice of his younger self—"I am grateful for every hard-
02 fought lesson you have chosen to teach me. I am grateful for the opportunities
03 you provided, and for the patience you managed, however nearly, to show."

04 She said nothing as he rose.

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

07 She understood then. "I do not believe they have asked that you serve per-
08 manently."

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

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

13 He shook his head. "It is not necessary. Nothing need be said."
14

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

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

22
23 How long did it take a man to freeze to death? Less time, Ellerson felt certain,
24 than had passed since he had found himself in the heart of Winter. He was
25 not, and had not been, attired for the bitter cold; his breath hung about him
26 in thin, almost tangible clouds. His hands and his feet ached; his legs were stiff
27 enough that walking caused pain. He walked, regardless.

28 He could.

29 This meant either that his sense of the passage of time was flawed, or that
30 time did not pass in this place with its single moon the same way it did in
31 Averalaan. He was hungry, but the hunger was a secondary concern. If he did
32 not find shelter of some kind soon, it was not starvation that would kill him.
33

34 Thrice more that eve, the horns sounded. The third time, he could see the hunt-
35 ers passing yards ahead of where he cowered. They rode the wind, or so it seemed
36 to Ellerson; perhaps the wind merely followed in their wake. He knew that he
37 was not the target of this hunt, because he knew that were he, he would have
38S died the first time the horns had clashed with the wind's howl for dominance.

39N 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 seer-born, 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 farther 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 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 was. 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 a 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.

“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 nor 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 mousy.

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.	01
“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.”	02 03 04 05
He accepted the instruction as if it were an invitation.	06
“You should not be here,” the stranger repeated.	07
“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.”	08 09 10
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.”	11 12 13
Ellerson was silent for a beat. “Cannot, or will not?”	14
“Cannot and would not.”	15
“Why are you here?”	16
“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.”	17 18 19 20 21
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.”	22 23 24 25
“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.”	26 27 28
“And it has never been discovered?”	29
“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.”	30 31
“The food—”	32
“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 magics required to break it. Any who know how to look can see what is contained,” she added. “Or such magics would have been brought to bear.”	33 34 35 36 37
“There is history here. Your Empire did not exist when this city fell. Your kind did not exist.”	S38 N39

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

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

08 She opened her mouth, and horns robbed the air of the sound of her words.
 09 Her brow creased as she lifted her chin and turned, briefly, to glance out of the
 10 open casement to which she was closest. “Do not fear the Hunt here,” she told
 11 him. “What you see of the Hunt is memory, not reality. Those horns have not
 12 been sounded in this landscape since—” She fell silent. “Soon, Ellerson. Soon.
 13 It will be over, one way or the other.”

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

21 “And yours, lady?” he asked softly.

22 “Do not pity me.”

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

24 “I am, yes.”

25 “Have you seen The Terafin? Have you seen Angel ATerafin?”

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

28 “Did she pass your test?”

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

31 “It is not yet over.”

32 “No. That is the nature of the seer-born.”

33 “Does she know?”

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

38S It was a complicated gesture, too formal for all but the ceremonial investi-
 39N tures of the highest echelons of the patriciate. He could not return it in kind,

but he 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.”	01 02 03 04
He stiffened.	05
“You walked into this landscape from a wardrobe.”	06
Breath held, he nodded.	07
“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.”	08 09 10
“Carver’s here?”	11
“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.”	12 13 14
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.	15 16 17 18 19
He spoke. He spoke in his authoritative, quiet voice. The word <i>open</i> did nothing. He tried it in all the languages he knew—it was a rudimentary word, and he could speak it efficiently in almost a dozen ways. He tried <i>shelter</i> next, and as <i>open</i> , it did nothing. He then tried <i>help</i> , <i>succor</i> , <i>sanctuary</i> .	20 21 22 23
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.	24 25 26
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 and closed his eyes, listening to the howl of wind and the horns.	27 28 29 30
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.	31 32 33
She could have found Carver instead. She could have delivered the same message; she could have led him to the same shelter. She had done none of those things. She had come to Ellerson.	34 35 36 37
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,	S38 N39



16 ♦ Michelle West

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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.

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.





Chapter One

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“**Y**OU STEPPED ON MY *tail!*” The outraged yowl of a great black cat echoed off the uneven walls and the rounded ceiling of the tunnel.

“It’s dark,” Adam said. He might have lifted his hands in a gesture of placation, but they were full. The thick wire of a lantern hung from the crook of his right elbow, swaying as he attempted to avoid compounding his sin. “It’s dark and the tunnel is narrow. I told you you should let me walk ahead.”

“What if something tries to *eat* you?”

He prevented himself from grimacing, a skill he had learned in his years overseeing the very tired younglings in his care. “This is the stronghold of the Oracle. There is nothing in these tunnels that will eat me unless she commands it.”

And nothing—not even the cats—that would save him from death if she so desired it.

“What if *I* try to *eat* you?” Night stopped walking. His tail twitched as it lay, extended, on the floor at his back. If Adam’s hands had not been full, he might have smacked the cat’s head in frustration.

He avoided the tail a second time; he strongly suspected he had avoided it the first time as well. There was no point arguing with Night. Although his brothers, Snow and Shadow, did, they were also cats. Mortals didn’t emerge from scuffles like this uninjured.

The cats were bored. They were so so *bored*. When bored, they shared. Adam was heartily sick of bored cats. His sense of self-preservation had dwindled with the passage of days; not even the most cautious of men could consider





18 ♦ Michelle West

01 these whiny, tired *children* a serious threat. Not even when he had almost died
02 at their hands. Or claws.

03 Jewel was the Matriarch of Terafin.

04 The Oracle was the Matriarch of Matriarchs.

05 In these halls—some constructed of worked stone that was smooth as glass,
06 with ceilings higher than any the Terafin manse could boast, and some rough
07 tunnels that were narrow and twisting—it was the Oracle's word that was law.
08 She did not speak often; Shianne disliked her intensely. Shadow concurred.
09 Avandar would answer questions on the rare occasions she chose to appear and
10 interact. For the most part, she kept her distance.

11 But she had asked Adam to run small errands for her, as if he were the most
12 junior of children, and he had agreed because she was Matriarch here, and it
13 was *always* wisest to stay on the good side of a Matriarch. He had, at her com-
14 mand, filled the lanterns that he found in empty rooms. She did not tell him
15 which rooms, of course, but he understood her command; if the doors were
16 open, the lanterns within were to be filled.

17 Many of the doors did not open and would not. Nor did Adam attempt to
18 force them. No, Night did that, shredding wood in his sulky boredom. The
19 great cats could not, however, destroy the locked doors.

20 Adam had also been sent to the lake that existed in just one branch of this
21 place, and he had drawn water in buckets—a familiar activity. These, he re-
22 turned to the room in which Jewel slept. He did not accompany Jewel when
23 she rose in the morning; Shadow did. But he was there when she returned,
24 with water, with light. Water, however, could not wash away the dark circles
25 under her eyes, and her hair had become tangled in the way it did when she
26 worried. He did not ask her what lessons the Oracle imparted; he truly did not
27 want to know.

28 Today, however, he had been asked to carry clothing.

29 “You will find a chest in a room across the hall from Jewel's room,” the
30 Oracle told him. “And in it, you will find a set of robes. They are dark, but the
31 cloth is thick; it is perfect for this endless Winter.”

32 “You wish me to bring these robes to Jewel?”

33 “No, child. I wish you to bring them to someone else. I would carry them
34 myself, but she will not accept anything from my hands, not even food.”

35 He knew what the next task would be.

36
37 He had hooked a food basket—an awkward size and shape, but the Oracle had
38S not seen fit to supply him with another—over his left arm; the handle nestled
39N into the crook of his elbow. The rest of his attention was upon the robes. She



had not told him to be careful, but he understood that caution was absolutely required, because he had seen the chest that contained them. And when he had—hesitantly—attempted to pull the robes out of that chest the first time, he had paused, his hands an inch above the cloth. He had then washed those hands as thoroughly as possible.

He told himself that the robes were valuable, but that had been a lie. Ah, no, he believed they were of incalculable value, but that did not account for his hesitance. Something about the cloth and the color was a warning; these were not meant to be touched. Not by Adam. Even Night had sniffed in disdain, but he had kept his distance.

That distance had evaporated; the cats were very single-minded, and Night's mind was on boredom and the injustice of being forced to endure it. When Adam failed to step on his tail a third time, the great black cat took a forceful step back, and a paw landed on the trailing length of the robe.

The cat shrieked, a yowling sound that devolved almost instantly into a guttural snarl; his fur rose as he gained size through outrage and resultant fury. There was an enemy here, carried in Adam's arms, and he intended to do battle.

"That is quite enough."

Night hissed but froze in place. The Oracle appeared in the hall, casting a shadow that encompassed only the cat. Even in the dull lamplight, the cat seemed to dissolve into the darkness.

"My apologies, Adam. I forget the wild ones and their constant, querulous mischief."

Night had disappeared.

Alarmed, Adam opened his mouth, but the Oracle shook her head. "He will find himself back in The Terafin's rooms where he will argue with Snow."

"I'm not sure that's better."

"It is better," the Oracle observed, "for the cat. You have done well. I will be in your debt."

He froze.

"I am not a Matriarch, Adam of Arkosa. Nor am I one of the Winter people. I do not feel lessened by debt or obligation; they arise naturally from my sense of gratitude for services rendered. The gratitude of the firstborn is not the resentment of those who come after; nor is such gratitude onerous to us. If you proceed down the hall, you may set the robes down." She glanced at them, the shape of her eyes changing.

"I have waited for you," she said. "I cannot carry them myself. Even if I could, as I said before, she would not accept them from me. But you will survive the carrying, and no one else would."

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The door at the end of the hall appeared as Adam approached it. In any other dwelling, he would assume this appearance the artifact of light. Here, he did not. The Oracle had given him directions, and the tunnels conformed to her desire. She wished this door to be open, and it was now open. Light shone through the crack between hard door and frame. Something about the way it fell against the uneven floor felt strangely lonely.

On the open road, one learned to hoard one's privacy; to make a space inside oneself where one could retreat while surrounded by the noise of the children. One learned—slowly—to recognize the signs of that retreat in the adults, and as one approached adulthood, to make allowances for it. Sometimes people needed to be alone.

But loneliness was different. It was an isolation that was not desired, although it could exist side by side with those who desired privacy. Sometimes it could exist no matter how immersed one became in the noise and the chatter of family, of kin. Adam had learned early to tell the difference between these two states.

He therefore approached the door, pausing there. His hands were full. On the open road, there were sounds and signs that one used to ask permission to encroach; in the Terafin manse, one hit the harder doors and waited. If one were expected, the doors would open at the hands of a page or servant. If not, one waited.

Today, Adam waited. He heard nothing; no movement, no voice.

After a pause, he said, "Hello?" And when no answer came, he tried again, this time in Weston. He waited, his arms full of cloth, the basket on one and the lamp on the other growing weightier in the stillness.

At length, he pushed the door open with his foot and entered a room that should not have been at the end of a poorly carved tunnel. It was a bright room, the floors gleaming where they could be seen beneath the knotted fringes of a large, oval rug. There was a table pushed up against one wall, the wood of its legs light against the darker grain of floor. There were windows; curtains had been drawn and roped to either side of each. Sunlight touched floor, changing the color of the carpet; it stretched to touch everything, even the bed.

The bed, like Weston beds, was above the ground, and it was occupied.

Its occupant was covered by heavy blankets, but they had bunched beneath the crook of her left arm; she slept on her side, her back toward the wall. She did not wake as Adam entered the room; given her appearance, he wondered if she would wake at all. He set the basket and the lantern down and carefully placed the mass of robes on the single chair tucked beneath the table. Long



after he'd finished, the cloth rustled, the noise louder than breathing. He turned his back on it and headed toward the room's occupant, but he stopped before he reached the bedside.

Her hair was a tangled, black mess; her skin was not ruddy, but dark with what appeared to be soot. Soot that still bore the marks of tears. Her hand—or the hand that could be seen—was not much cleaner, and there was a trace of dried blood on the tips of the exposed fingers. She was wearing clothing that was about as clean as she herself.

He wondered where she'd come from. She was close to Adam's age, although sleep often deprived a face of the weight and characteristics of age. He hesitated for one long moment, and then went in search of water.

By the time he returned, the girl was no longer sleeping. She was sitting, back against the wall, across the bed, her body still tangled and covered in blankets. Her hair was not less of a mess—but even this, the Oracle had foreseen; the water had already been warmed and a brush and comb lay on a tray beside an enormously heavy bucket. He tucked them into his satchel and carried the water back to the room. There was no bath, and no lake or river, but there was easily enough water to clean one girl.

The girl, however, did not appear to want to be clean. Or to want to clean up while Adam was anywhere near her. Her eyes were so narrow it was hard to see their color, but when he did, he froze. They appeared to be violet.

Voice almost a whisper, he spoke a name. *Evayne*. Her eyes widened, and yes, they were violet, a particular shade that he associated with only one person.

Her eyes narrowed again, her body stiffening. "Are you one of the Oracle's people?"

"Ah, no. No. I serve Terafin."

Her brows rose again, in concert. "Terafin? You mean one of The Ten? You're a long way from home."

He reddened. "I serve The Terafin while I remain in her Northern city. I am of Arkosa. My Matriarch is Margret. My home is the Voyanne."

"We're not in Averalaaan, are we?"

"No. We are in the Oracle's domain. We have taken shelter here while the demons hunt us."

She was pale then, as if she had never seen sunlight. He could see the whites of her eyes. "They came to you? They came to you, too?"

"They have been hunting the Matriarch," Adam replied. "But, yes, demons also hunted my kin in the Sea of Sorrows." He would have died there, so much mortal detritus, in the wake of a battle that had broken earth and unleashed

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01 storms in the hard, baked clay of the desert. He would have died had his talent
 02 not manifested itself then. And he would have been broken permanently had
 03 it not been for . . . her. Evayne.

04 But this girl and that woman were not the same; he could see the shape of
 05 the older face in the younger one—but none of her experience, none of the
 06 measured and weary control she exerted over her expression.

07 “Have you—have you taken the Oracle’s test?” he finally asked.

08 She lowered her chin toward the knees she had folded into her chest. “. . . No.”
 09 She shuddered at the question. Adam could understand this. The Oracle was a
 10 power the like of which existed only in stories told to children. But so much of
 11 the world he had experienced since his mother’s death was. If she had not yet
 12 taken that test, she would. He was certain of it; he’d seen proof of it, held in the
 13 hands of the older Evayne—and any age was older, compared to this girl.

14 Ah, he’d been mistaken. She wasn’t shuddering. She was weeping.

15 Adam understood the difference between being alone and being lonely. He
 16 understood, as well, the different shades of pain; the pain that was a wall, and
 17 the pain that could be a bridge. He was Adam of Arkosa; this was a bridge, and
 18 he crossed it before he could stop to think because he had done it so often in his life.

19 He slid an arm around her shoulder, dropped beside her on the bed, curving
 20 his knees beneath his free arm to lessen his height, to make his size as insigni-
 21 ficant as he could. She stiffened but didn’t push him away. Had she, he would
 22 have released her, moved back, and waited. It was always easier with small
 23 children; they were still young enough to seek comfort, to accept it.

24 As they grew, what brought them comfort changed, and sometimes there
 25 was no comfort that could be offered or, rather, none that could be taken. He
 26 accepted that, too. Trying was necessary; accepting rejection was simply a part
 27 of that. He had learned, with time, to understand the instant rejection that was
 28 part of a child’s rage—that they might push him away and then scream when
 29 he actually attempted to leave.

30 But he understood, as well, when walls had dropped that could not be
 31 climbed or breeched. She did not speak, but she did not push him away. She
 32 was lonely; pain had dulled the edge of suspicion—or overwhelmed it.

33 He did not speak. He did not ask questions. He did not offer her platitudes
 34 or promises that things would be all right. How could he? His mother could
 35 have. Adam, however, was neither a good liar nor an authority. What comfort
 36 could she take from his words? And he knew that there was no safety for
 37 Evayne. And no home. The Voyanne at least allowed families to be together.
 38S The road she walked did not.

39N



He sat with her for an hour, perhaps longer, before she stopped shaking. She had fallen asleep.

When Adam disentangled himself—taking care not to wake her—he carefully folded the robes she was to wear. He would have cleaned the room, but there were no brooms, no cloths, no odd Western dusters. Night did not return. The door did not open. He tested it once; it was not locked. But the door did not open into the same crude tunnel that had led to it; it opened into sunlight and greenery. The room, which had not seemed dark in comparison to the tunnel from which he'd first emerged, was no match for the light that now streamed in through the open door. The light cast shadows, and his shadow fell upon the bed and the girl who lay in it.

As if that shadow had substance, she stirred, turning away from the light—and then, in turn, toward it. Her eyes opened to Adam framed by the door and what might appear like escape. She shed blankets and sheets and swung her legs toward the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said in quiet Weston. "This is not escape or freedom."

"There is no freedom," was her equally quiet reply. "But—there's been so little light. So little air." She reached up to her neck with both hands, her eyes widening in alarm.

"No," Adam said quickly. "It is on the small table."

She all but leaped toward that table, her hands shaking and outstretched. Her hands closed instantly around the only item of value she seemed to carry: it was a metallic lily, a flower in worked silver, caught and held by a slender, silver chain. She put it on—or tried; her hands were shaking, and the clasp was undone. Adam left the doorway to come to her aid.

She lifted her chin as he held both ends of the chain and lowered it again as he worked the odd clasp. "It's my birthday present," she told him, although he had not asked. "My sixteenth birthday present. It's the only one I could carry—it's the only one I had in my hands when—" She stiffened. Adam continued to ask no questions.

After a pause, he said, "It is lovely. The craftsman who made it was skilled."

"He is!" She turned then, the lily on the outside of her clothing, her hair a sleepy mess. "He doesn't make much like this—there's so little call for it in the village. Mostly, he works with my father. The blacksmith. But he made this for me. I don't know when he did the work—he—" The smile fled instantly. "He'll never see me wear it."

"Are you so certain?" Adam was not. Suddenly, he thought the opposite.

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24 ♦ Michelle West

01 “He won’t survive.” Her hands became fists, but she did not remove the lily.
02 Would never, he thought, remove it.

03 “He lived when you last saw him?”

04 “He was trying to *fight*,” she said. “He’d gone back for his sword.”

05 “Against demons?”

06 “Against demons. Because he used to be a soldier before he lost part of his
07 leg. He has a leg—my father helped to craft it—so he can walk.” But not well
08 enough to fight, in her opinion. Adam slid an arm around her shoulder, hold-
09 ing her up, bracing some part of her weight against his chest. She wasn’t a
10 child, but the pain and the fear were familiar to him. Had he not felt it
11 himself?

12 When she fell silent, he began to speak. It was harder to converse in Weston
13 than Torra, but this young woman spoke the Weston of the Free Towns. He
14 told her of the Arkosan Voyani. Of their Matriarch, his mother; of her death.
15 Of their Matriarch, his sister. He spoke of the Serra Diora, her beauty a story,
16 a legend in and of itself; he spoke of her isolation and her bitter loss; he spoke
17 of the lute he had borrowed from one of the bards who now traveled with the
18 caravan.

19 The rains had carried it away.

20 He had promised to return it—and he understood that he *must* keep that
21 promise; the lute itself was special to the bard in a way other instruments
22 were not.

23 And then he spoke of drowning, of dying.

24 She was silent, now, caught in his voice and his story—because Adam could
25 tell stories. It was one of the ways in which he entertained the young. He did
26 not have a bard’s voice; he understood that. But in Weston it was harder, and
27 the words were simpler because they had to be.

28 “I did not die,” he added, smiling. “As you can see. I am here.” The smile
29 dimmed. “I would have died. All help—and there was help—was too late. But
30 I am healer-born. It was on that day that my powers woke. I . . . came back. I
31 was not conscious when I did. I was not breathing, and then I was.” He looked
32 at his free hand. Lifted it. It was a normal hand in all ways.

33 He told her of the healer-born, although she knew the stories. He told her
34 of Levec, both grimacing and smiling as he did. He told her of the terror of
35 being alone—made harder by far by the absence of every adult and child he
36 had ever known. He had not understood, waking alone, a grim terror of a giant
37 at his bedside, that had he remained, he might have destroyed both himself
38S and those who loved him because his power was wild and uncontrolled and his
39N desperate need to destroy the isolation itself was far too strong to be denied.



“I might have died anyway,” he continued. “But I was saved. And my kin.	01
And I learned about the powers I have. I learned how to heal, and when to heal,	02
and . . . when not to heal.”	03
“How did you reach the Houses of Healing?”	04
She was shorter than he was; he realized this as he tucked the top of her	05
head under his chin. His Onas would be so surprised when he finally made his	06
way back home: he would be taller than them.	07
“A woman,” he said quietly. “A stranger. Not kin, not family.”	08
“Who?”	09
“Her name was Evayne.”	10
	11
She was silent for long enough, Adam was afraid that he had offended her. But	12
she did not draw back or pull away, not immediately. Breeze ruffled her hair—	13
and his—and he said, “Let’s go outside. There’s sun. It’s warm.”	14
She did not answer though she did not resist as he drew her gently outside.	15
The skies above were an azure broken by tufts of clouds too slight to block sun	16
for long. There were trees, however; branches cast shadows to lessen the heat of	17
the sun. There were no insects, no birds, but the sound of moving water im-	18
plied that there was a stream, a brook, nearby.	19
The door of Evayne’s room, however, did not appear to be attached to some-	20
thing as mundane, as ordinary, as a wall. He could see the open door, and he	21
could see the room they had exited, but the door was not attached to a frame.	22
If he closed it, he wondered if it would vanish into the scenery.	23
He almost wanted to close it.	24
Jewel was here because she had been determined to take the Oracle’s test.	25
She had felt it necessary, and Adam understood why. But Jewel was a woman,	26
full-grown; she was a power. She had the full might of a clan, or its equivalent	27
in the Northern Empire, at her disposal. She wanted for nothing; not food, not	28
money, not companions. She had fought her way through demons, had sur-	29
vived assassins, had trod ancient and abandoned halls; her allies were ancient,	30
immortal, and wild.	31
Evayne had none of those things. She was older than Adam, but felt, in this	32
moment, much younger.	33
	34
He found a large, mossy rock, near the brook that passed through these lands,	35
and there, he and Evayne stopped. They were silent as they sat, adjusting their	36
positions, lost in their own thoughts. This time, it was Evayne who broke the	37
silence.	S38
“My parents live in Callenton. It’s one of the Free Towns.”	N39



01 Adam knew very little of Imperial geography, but it was irrelevant. He
02 nodded.

03 “My father was the blacksmith. I—” She hesitated, as if searching for words
04 and abandoning them unsaid. “I wasn’t their natural child.”

05 Adam said nothing, but he did not look away. He slid an arm loosely around
06 Evayne’s shoulder, prepared to remove it instantly if she tensed or in any way
07 rejected the comfort he might have offered a young child.

08 She did not. She didn’t react at all. Her focus, her intent, was on the story
09 she was, even now, attempting to convey.

10 “I was left on the doorstep of the Mother’s church. In swaddling cloth that
11 the mother-born found strange. The priests there didn’t believe I was a child
12 abandoned by one of the villagers. It’s not like the city you live in; there aren’t
13 as many people, and everyone knows everyone else. It would be hard—not
14 impossible, but very difficult—to hide a pregnancy and a childbirth.

15 “At the time, one of the Mother’s Daughters was passing through. It hap-
16 pens often, in the Free Towns. She saw the child—saw me—and saw the
17 swaddling cloth, and she decided to bespeak the Mother personally.

18 “The Mother understood why, I think. My own mother told me this today.”
19 She tensed. “Today,” she repeated, her voice softer. “This morning. My six-
20 teenth birthday,” she added, a tinge of bitterness in the depths of the words. “I
21 was the unwanted orphan, given to the blacksmith and his wife, who had no
22 children of their own to raise. Everyone knew it. Every child in the village.
23 Every child who attended the Mother’s service.”

24 Adam could not conceive of an abandoned child among his own kin. Even
25 the children who were the product of violence were taken in by their mother,
26 by the tribe. But the Voyani were not so numerous as the citizens of Averalan,
27 and perhaps the rules of the Northern Houses were different. They did not
28 appear to value blood-kin, blood ties—and they were proud of that.

29 But absent blood ties, they still built families; he thought of the den. They
30 did not share parents, but that didn’t seem to matter. They were kin, and
31 bound by ties of kinship, in the way the Voyani were bound by ties of blood.

32 Evayne shook herself. “My parents loved me,” she continued. “And I loved
33 them. Neither my mother nor my father acknowledged the truth that the rest
34 of the village knew: I wasn’t theirs. My mother didn’t birth me. My father was
35 strict, and often silent, but . . . there was a warmth to his silence, and some-
36 times, when he worked, a kind of excitement. I wanted to be a blacksmith,”
37 she added.

38S “My mother was chattier—but that wasn’t hard. She was the smith’s wife,
39N and she was held in some regard. But she tried to be friendly and helpful when



help was needed, and she was of the village. She was still treated as the blacksmith's wife after my father's death."	01
"You were of the village, as well."	02
"No, not really. I was a child from nowhere. I had no history in the village."	03
"You had your entire life!"	04
"It doesn't count. I was a stranger."	05
Adam's arm tightened; he forced it to relax.	06
"When my mother got quiet, it was bad. And she got a lot quieter in the past year. She'd look at me as if—" Evayne didn't finish the sentence.	07
Adam didn't require it, though. Her mother must have been told something by the Mother's Daughter at the time she had been found.	08
"I had friends," she said softly, after another long pause. "Not many. But—friends. Most of the villagers didn't care for me. They tolerated me for the sake of my parents, and after my father died, my mother. I tried <i>so hard</i> to be a good daughter. To be what the village wanted. But I couldn't be. I was a foreigner, an outsider."	09
Adam did not understand the village.	10
"Wylen was a year younger than me. He was also the child of people who had come to settle in the village. We started spending time together because we had that in common—but Wylen at least knew who his parents were. And Darguar. He did some of the smithing work my father had once done—but he was an outsider as well. He was respected because he could do some of the necessary work.	11
"He was missing a foot. He'd fought in the wars in the South—I don't know which ones. He wouldn't say. He told us that he'd been a soldier, that he'd lost a foot—but we stopped asking questions because he'd stop, sometimes, and just stare off into the distance, as if—as if he couldn't see us anymore.	12
"He'd come to the village. I think he wanted to farm." She shook her head.	13
"He wasn't raised to a farm, and he didn't know what he was doing. But he knew how to work in a forge. He wasn't as good as my father, but his early training was in silver and gold—very different things. He was a big bear of a man, and when he was angry, he was terrifying. He never hit us," she added quickly. She had loved this man, whoever he was. "But you just—you wanted to stay away until it passed.	14
"He was an outsider, too, but he was more accepted because of what he did."	15
She glanced up at Adam, her smile wan. "We were all outsiders, and we made our own inside."	16
She fell silent again. Adam thought she might stop and accepted that; his curiosity was not her problem. Or it shouldn't be; he was no longer four years	17
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01 old, asking questions in an innocence that would never be accepted from
02 adults.

03 She had not finished.

04 “Last night—late last night—I had a visitor.” Her hands became fists. She
05 drew her knees tightly into her chest, dropping her chin; hair obscured her
06 face. “It was my sixteenth birthday.” She buried her face briefly. “Three visi-
07 tors,” she added. “For my birthday.”

08 “The first was a man I had never seen before. Never seen but knew. He told
09 me—he told me he was grateful to see that I had survived to be sixteen. He
10 said he was my father. My real father.

11 “But my *real* father was the man who found me and raised me. My *real* fa-
12 ther was the man who loved me. Who died. I didn’t want to listen to him—I
13 was angry. I—it was late, I’d been sleeping.”

14 There was no need to make excuses now, no need to explain—but she did.
15 To Adam, her words made sense, but the Voyani were never completely safe on
16 the open road. One didn’t always know, in times of violence, who one’s father
17 was. One knew one’s mother. And one’s tribe.

18 “He asked me to go with him. He seemed to expect that I would; that he’d
19 tell me he was my real father and I’d follow him, deserting my mother. I
20 said . . . no. I said . . . a lot more, but it all meant no. He just bowed and told
21 me he would come again.”

22 “I thought—” She shook her head. “I woke. I was awake. I’ve always had
23 trouble with sleep. It’s the dreams,” she added quietly. “Or nightmares. I went
24 to check on my mother, who’s never had trouble with sleep. She was there. She
25 was sleeping. But she stirred because I’d checked, and she woke. And I don’t
26 know what she knew—but she knew something was wrong. Even in the lamp-
27 light, she was so pale.

28 “She was afraid. She was afraid I would leave her.” Silence, the sound of
29 swallowing, of unsaid words. “I asked her what was happening.

30 “She asked me why I was awake. I answered—but . . . she knew something.
31 It was something she’d never told me.” She swallowed again. “I—” she fell si-
32 lent, curling further in on herself.

33 Adam understood. “We say things,” Adam said softly, “in anger. But anger
34 is not our only truth. She is your mother. She understands.”

35 “She knew,” Evayne said, to her knees. “She knew that someone would come
36 for me on my sixteenth birthday.” Evayne exhaled. “She wouldn’t have taken
37 me. Wouldn’t have raised me. He—he wanted to come back when I was
38S twelve, and my mother said—my mother said that twelve was too young. If he
39N



meant to take me back at twelve, he could find some other woman to parent.	01
She said my dad never intended to give me up at all.	02
“But—sixteen seemed old enough to my mother, when I was a babe in arms. Until I turned fifteen. And then it seemed too young. She wanted a child. They both did. And he told her—”	03
“He?”	04
“The man who claimed to be my real father. He told her that I was—” She laughed, bitterly, derisively, “the hope of the world. The hope upon which all others depended. My mother asked him why someone so important was to be left to a blacksmith and his wife in the Free Towns. She didn’t believe him.	05
“But if she’d told me, I wouldn’t have believed him, either.”	06
“He answered,” Adam said, certain, although it was a guess.	07
Evayne was crying now; the sound was in all the syllables, changing their weight and breaking them in different places. “He said—” She stopped, started again. “She said he said it was because they would love me. What I needed—”	08
But the words were lost again. When they resumed, they were low. “He’d been told that they would love me and protect me better than anyone else, anywhere. All he needed for me was that.	09
“And he told them that the choice—to stay or to leave—would be mine, in the end. That he would come to me at the start of my sixteenth year.”	10
“I think my parents believed that if it was my choice, I would never leave them.” And then, she wept anew.	11
“Your second visitor was the Oracle?” He asked the question only when she had stilled and her tears had stopped. He had no doubt they would start again. <i>They would love you</i> , he thought. That was what her parent had desired. And they had. Love begets love.	12
It seemed cruel to Adam. He understood that Evayne would have to surrender all of that love. All of the life she had built. He had seen her before and was certain he would see her again—but she would never be this girl again. She would be a young woman, and an old woman, and the ages in between, who had faced and passed the Oracle’s test. She would learn the arts of the Sword’s Edge; she would walk in dark and fell places. She would face demons, and worse.	13
She would be what her father had intended her to be—but she would know, always, what she had lost. What she had chosen to give up.	14
“The Oracle came next,” Evayne said, confirming what seemed obvious to Adam. “She came when my mother had left the room—and time stopped around or seemed to stop around—her. I dropped a cup. It didn’t land.	15
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01 “She expected me to go with her. She had come to take me someplace. To
02 test me. To—” She shook her head. “She thought I had made my decision.”

03 This seemed impossible to Adam. The Oracle saw everything that had hap-
04 pened, and everything that might. Or so he had been told, and he believed it.
05 But the Oracle was ancient, inhuman; lies told to mortals would be trivialities,
06 things of little note, as all things that lacked consequences became.

07 “But she—she pulled out her *heart*, and she—she offered to let me look
08 at it.”

09 “Did you?”

10 Evayne shook her head. Swallowed. There were more tears. “She told me
11 that she had tried, and she bowed, and she walked through a wall. And then
12 the cup landed, and my mother heard it and came running. And I told her—I
13 told her I didn’t *want* to leave. I didn’t want—it would have been different.
14 Maybe it would have been different if my father was still alive. They had no
15 other children. They—” She shook herself. “But he’s dead. I’m all she had.

16 “I think she was happy. Sometimes, with my mother, it’s hard to tell. We
17 went back to sleep.”

18 Her back was shaking. Her shoulders. Her head was bowed; she was speak-
19 ing to her knees. Or not speaking, for three long breaths. “And then they
20 came.”

21 Adam stiffened.

22 “I woke—there was so much noise. I could hear things breaking—wood,
23 glass—I could hear people screaming. I—I told my mother to stay in the
24 house. She told me to stay with her, but—I knew. I *knew*. I made her promise.
25 That was the only smart thing I did. I made her promise, and I promised her
26 that I would survive, I would be careful—

27 “Have you ever seen a demon?”

28 “Yes,” Adam said softly.

29 She startled, looked up; her face was a tear streaked red mess.

30 “It is why we are here, in the Oracle’s home. I told you—the Matriarch of
31 Terafin seeks to take—has taken—the Oracle’s test.”

32 “Did she survive it?”

33 “Yes, although she sleeps.”

34 “Is she sane?”

35 “She is Matriarch,” Adam replied, as if that were an answer. To Adam, it
36 was. Matriarchs saw more than the rest of their clan. They saw farther. They
37 made decisions based on things that none of their kin could see. And it broke
38S them, in small ways. He was certain that Jewel would break, too. His role—if
39N he discounted the healing which no other clan member possessed—was to stop



the small cracks from being huge fissures. That had been his role in Arkosa, as well.

But Evayne, he thought, would carry a burden far heavier than Jewel’s in the end. Heavier, lonelier. Shadow believed that Jewel would fall if she did not have her den—and Adam understood this. No one survived long without kin, without family. If her den was not bound by ties of blood, it merely proved that blood was irrelevant.

Evayne would have no kin.

He could not tell her this, but he did not need to. If she was here, she was beginning to understand it. What had his mother said? *You cannot prevent pain. You should not cause it, but you cannot prevent it. Pain is our forge, Adam. It breaks us, or it makes us stronger—and we have need of strength.*

Adam did not believe this to be true, except in one regard. He could not prevent pain because life had pain. But life had joy as well. And joy was strength, too.

“Demons came. To Callenton. They brought fire and death with them. If they hadn’t—” She almost raised her hands to her ears, as if the echoes of screaming were still too loud, too visceral. “I ran to Wylen’s. He was alive. He was terrified because he’s not stupid—but he was alive. He asked about Darguar, but his father dragged him off, toward the Mother’s church. He tried to take me with him—Wylen did—but I had to find Darguar.” She swallowed.

“I met him on the road to my house. He had a sword in hand, a shield over his back; he was wearing a dented helm. We’d always wanted to see him in armor—but not like this. Not like this.” Her voice dropped. “He was angry that I was alone, but relieved to see me. And he intended to gather up the people who could fight. He meant to go to the Town Hall. I told him not to. Not there.

“He didn’t argue. I don’t know if that meant that he understood—but I knew it would be bad. They’d die. They’d be too close together, and the demons would go to where the people were.

“There were no god-born priests in our village. No mage-born researchers. There were no soldiers, and the armed men were caravan guards. That’s it. That’s all we had. I don’t know why—” she swallowed. “I don’t know why the demons came to Callenton.” She looked to Adam as if he could provide answers. He couldn’t.

“When was this?” he asked softly.

“Today.”

He hesitated and then said, “What was the date? Does Callenton use the Weston calendar?”

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01 “It was the eighth of Wittan.”

02 “The year?”

03 “431.”

04 Three years from now, Adam thought. In three short years, the demons
05 would be so bold they could sweep through a single mortal village without
06 fear. He wondered, then, what Averalaan would look like. Would there be
07 demons there as well? Ah, no. The demons already hunted the streets of that
08 enormous city. But not openly. Not like this.

09 He apologized for interrupting her, and she once again found the threads of
10 a story that was far too new to be comfortable, if it would ever be comfortable.
11 “They were killing people. They were killing people slowly. They weren’t
12 afraid of us, of any of us. Darguar told me to go home—or to go somewhere
13 safe. As if anywhere was safe. But he—he gave me something before he left. I
14 don’t know why—he had a birthday present for me.”

15 “It was your birthday.”

16 “Yes—but why would he even think of carrying it then?”

17 “I don’t know. Maybe he intended to give it to you when the demons at-
18 tacked. It wasn’t large.” He thought of the box she had carried in her hands,
19 set aside on the table in the room she would occupy for the next small while.
20 Thought, again, of the Oracle.

21 “There was nothing we could do,” she continued. “Except die. Some people
22 tried to flee the village; I think they were caught well before they’d managed
23 to find the road. It was dark.”

24 She swallowed. “I knew. I knew this was why he’d come. I knew this is what
25 the Oracle wanted me to see. I called my—the person who said he was my
26 father.

27 “He came. I asked him to help. I begged him to help. Because he *could*. He
28 could hear me, he could appear *out of nowhere* when I called him. He—I knew
29 he could.”

30 “He wouldn’t.”

31 “No. He said I had to do it. *Me*. I could do what he asked, or I could die.
32 And everyone I knew and loved—or hated, it made no difference—would
33 die with me. And if I waited—if I wasted more time—those people *would* die,
34 because . . . because what I’d seen once, I couldn’t change. What happened
35 remained fixed.

36 “It made no sense. No, it *should* have made no sense. But I understood it.
37 Wylen was alive. Darguar was alive. But if they died, they’d be dead no matter
38S what I did. The Oracle came out of nowhere to stand beside him, and this
39N time—this time, I went with her.”



“You didn’t look at her heart?”	01
“She didn’t offer. And I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to see anything else.”	02
She leaned into him, her arms still wrapped around her knees, her head bowed.	03
Adam held her, carefully, until she slept.	04
	05
“She is <i>noisy</i> ,” Snow said. Of course it was Snow. He appeared only after Adam had carried Evayne back to the bed in her room. She woke briefly, eyes wide; her lids grew heavy once she’d caught sight of him. For this reason, he did not wish to leave her side.	06
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“She is not nearly as noisy as you or your brothers,” Adam replied. “Have you come to fetch me?”	10
	11
“Fetch?”	12
“Has the Matriarch sent you to bring me back to her side?”	13
“Fetch!”	14
“If you cannot behave, go elsewhere. Now.”	15
Snow’s fur joined his ears as he turned a baleful glare on the Oracle.	16
“Make <i>me</i> .”	17
“They are not the wisest of creatures,” the Oracle said to Adam, as Snow vanished. “But you may as well take advantage of the peace and quiet. Beyond this place, Adam, there will be very, very little of it in your future.”	18
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	20
“You want me to stay with Evayne.”	21
“I cannot compel you to do so. She does not seem strong, to you.”	22
“No one is strong when stripped of kin and home. No one. She is . . . young.”	23
	24
“Yes. She is young. And precious,” she added softly. “Stay with her until she confronts what she must confront.”	25
	26
“I will have to accompany the Matriarch.”	27
“Yes. But in this place, there will be no conflict. I am not Neamis. I am not your Matriarch. I cannot compel. Or perhaps I will not. What she needs now, I cannot give her. And so, in some fashion, I have brought her here, to you.”	28
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	30
“I cannot—”	31
“You cannot give her all that she needs, no. But no single person can give another everything that they need. What you can give will make a difference—perhaps a small difference, but a difference nonetheless. Give her what you can. I will not negotiate,” she continued when Adam said nothing. “I will not bribe. What you offer has value to Evayne because it <i>is</i> offered.” She looked at Evayne, sleeping in the bed, and stretched out one arm—but she did not cross the threshold. “She feels she was given no choice. That is not true. She was given choice. None were good choices. None were happy choices.	32
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34 ♦ Michelle West

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“But they were choices, and she was free to make either. Understand that, Adam of Arkosa, for it is something your Terafin must come to understand as well. She has made a very unfortunate decision, an impulsive one.

“It is Evayne, in the end, who must see that the consequence of that single, simple decision does not destroy everything The Terafin has ever chosen to do.”

