



Prologue

“THE MAN IS AT the service entrance. Again. Shall I send him away?”

Muriel A'Scavonne rose from her writing desk. Her hand was almost cramping; she'd been at her letters all morning, in a state of banked panic. It was not the panic caused by consideration of the recipient of this particular letter, although Healer Levec could be an unpleasant, suspicious man on the best of days.

“No. Please have him escorted to the parlor.”

“And shall I make certain the young mistress is not informed of his presence?”

That was the question, wasn't it? Muriel was certain that the old, scarred man was not good for her daughter; certainly her daughter's manners disintegrated completely when she faced him. But it was more than that.

“Yes.” This was, in some fashion, a test. Not of her servants, whom she trusted, and not of her daughter, whom she understood well, but of the very strange, inexplicable interaction between Stacia and the old soldier.

“Shall I send for the guards?”

“No. Perhaps you might send a page. Barryl, if he's free.” Barryl was a handful of years older than Stacia; although he was a servant, he was also one of the few people to whom Stacia looked for social cues. He did not mother her—he couldn't; she had a mother. But Stacia had not been blessed with siblings, and Barryl was as close, social strata aside, as she could come to having one. It was Muriel's hope that Barryl would, with decades of experience, become steward of Stacia's home in some distant future.

The future, Muriel thought bleakly, that might never arrive.

She rose, straightened her skirts, and headed toward the parlor.

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2 ♦ Michelle West

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Stacia was not the first to be struck with the sleeping sickness; nor was she the first to be ensconced in the Houses of Healing—and that had been a terrifying, bitter blow to her mother and father, the latter of whom refused to discuss it at all with his wife. But he refused to discuss anything of import, or anything emotional, and Muriel could not deny that she had been emotional.

When Healer Levec had announced that the victims laid low by that illness had fully recovered, she had been ebullient in her quiet joy. She had come to the Houses of Healing in her carriage with clothing appropriate for her daughter and had discovered that there were very few suitable rooms in which to change. They had managed. Her daughter had lost weight—all of the sleepers had—but she had become her old self, and Muriel fully intended to spoil her rotten, at least where food was concerned, until that weight returned.

She had been happy to put the fear of that sickness as far behind them both as she could. She did not speak of it. She did not ask questions. She did not allow questions to be asked by anyone. Her husband approved of this, of course; it was, to him, a sign of necessary maturity in a wife of her stature. Which, she thought, with a trace of bitterness, was a wife of *his* stature, or rather, the stature that he desired.

But in the past week, Stacia had begun to fall asleep without warning, often in the middle of the day. The first time, she had been mounted for the riding lessons she loved and demanded. Those lessons had been canceled for the foreseeable future. So, too, hope, although she tried, the first time, to keep it bright and untarnished.

She had been sleeping for days when Muriel began to write to Healer Levec.

And the old man—Colm Sanders, she thought, although she had heard his name only once—had appeared at the service entrance of the manse, with no business that would generally allow him entry. No business but Stacia.

He was weathered, sun-dark, lines etched into the parts of his face that weren't scarred; his hands were the callused, hard hands of a laborer. His hair was gray, with more white now than dark, although both persisted. His eyes were brown. He carried himself as a man who was accustomed to a certain kind of authority; she thought him a primus, or a former primus, of the Kings' armies. He had no business at all with her daughter.

But he, too, had been felled by the sleeping sickness. He, too, had lain abed in the Houses of Healing. And he, too, had awakened on that final day in which Levec had proclaimed the sleepers cured.

The only thing that connected her child with a man she would never otherwise have met was disaster. Had he not known—had he not come to her with



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| a warning—Stacia might have been out on that horse. If a fall would not kill her, it would have injured her, and he had prevented that. | 01 |
| He had come that day to tell her that Stacia would sleep. He could not be certain when, but he wanted to give her mother enough warning that Stacia would not be engaged in activities that would actively harm her if she lost consciousness. | 02 |
| And had she believed him when he first started to speak, her daughter would not have been on the horse’s back at all. As it was, the old man had caught her, racing to the stables and the corral at breakneck speed the moment he had discovered that that was where she was. The moment Muriel herself had, in growing panic, let it slip. | 03 |
| He had caught her. He had stopped her from hitting the ground. He had carried her to her room, a place he had no right to approach. And he had, at Muriel’s stiff, frightened direction, laid her in her bed and retreated. | 04 |
| This afternoon, Stacia had woken. She was, she said, hungry, and the kitchen went instantly to work. But the waking itself, while a great comfort to Muriel, could no longer dim her fears; her daughter had slept for far too long, and it was a familiar, dreaded sleep: she would not wake, no matter what was done. | 05 |
| Even her presence at the table, when it came, was duller, dimmer; her usual effervescent cheer and almost puckish demands were absent. She had looked across the dining table, to her mother, and said, “What do you do to make someone happy again?” | 06 |
| “It would depend on why they are sad. And it would depend, as well, on how you know. If you know because you are listening to gossip, you should do nothing. They have not shared their sadness with you. It is theirs, not yours, until they do.” | 07 |
| “What if I know, but I <i>didn’t</i> listen to gossip?” Stacia demanded, with a little more of her regular fire. | 08 |
| “Then it would depend on why they are sad,” Muriel answered. A place had been set for her, although she had already eaten. She did not touch the food. | 09 |
| “She had to abandon someone she loved. He’s like a brother. He’s as important as Barryl.” | 10 |
| Stacia was, at heart, a kind child. She could be; she did not have the hard choices that life sometimes forced upon others. That she would, in future, Muriel had no doubt—but she desperately wanted to protect her child from having to make any of them. | 11 |
| “Sometimes,” Muriel said, after a longer pause, “there’s nothing you can do to make someone happy. What you are describing is grief. If a mother lost her | 12 |



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01 child," she added, reaching for the nearest, the truest, of her many examples,
02 "she would be devastated. There would be nothing you could do that would
03 make her happy again. There are some sadnesses that are, at their very heart,
04 part of life."

05 "But—then she'll *never* be happy again."

06 "She will, Stacia. But not immediately, and never in the same way that she
07 was before the loss. Think, though: the grief comes because the love existed.
08 Without that love, she would feel nothing because it would mean nothing."
09 Muriel swallowed. "I think grief is natural, and I think—I think, even griev-
10 ing, that grief is better than not loving at all."

11 Stacia, at that precocious age, nodded, but she was not satisfied with the
12 answer. She was, and had always been, a child who would stick her own hand
13 into the fire to see if it burned because fire burning *other people* did not serve as
14 an adequate lesson.
15

16 Colm Sanders bowed to her when he entered the room. It was a precise, almost
17 regimental bow that lacked subtlety or finesse.

18 "Stacia is awake," Muriel said.

19 He nodded as if this was not news to him.

20 "She asked me a very strange question shortly after she woke."

21 He nodded again, but this nod was more wary.

22 "She wanted to know what she might do to make someone happy again."

23 Muriel felt the chill of winter on this summer day when Colm Sanders
24 closed his eyes. She saw a twitch of muscle at the right side of his jaw.

25 "You know why she asked."

26 He opened his eyes but did not speak.

27 "Tell me. I am her mother, I have the right to know. Is that not why you
28 came?" Her hands had balled into inappropriate fists; she unclenched them
29 with difficulty.

30 The man opened his mouth, but the answer he might have offered did not
31 come.

32 Instead, Stacia did, careening into the parlor, her skirts flapping at the
33 width of her stride. The fists Muriel had denied herself, Stacia adopted.

34 "Why are you here?" she demanded. "You're scaring my mother!"

35 "Stacia," Muriel said.

36 "He *is!* What do you want?"

37 "I wished to speak with your mother. I have spoken with her. I will take my
38S leave."
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| “Oh no, you don’t!” She stepped forward and caught his arm, to Muriel’s distress. | 01 02 |
| But if the man looked dangerous, his glare, when transferred to her daughter, was not frightening. “You listen to your mother. Now.” | 03 04 |
| “She’s not talking. You are.” | 05 |
| Barryl unobtrusively entered the parlor, saw what was taking place, and visibly winced. If he was older than Stacia, he was not yet fully adult. | 06 07 |
| The old man’s glare intensified. But so did her daughter’s. Muriel felt a moment of pride, although for the most part, she was embarrassed. | 08 09 |
| “I came,” the old man finally said, “to see if you were awake.” | 10 |
| Stacia did not deflate. “Of course I’m awake. You wanted to know if I remembered the dream.” | 11 12 |
| He nodded. | 13 |
| “Well, <i>I do</i> . And you do, obviously.” Although she continued to grip his sleeve, her free hand was no longer a fist. “Do the others?” | 14 15 |
| “No one was dreaming for as long as you were. Not even me.” | 16 |
| “You cheated.” | 17 |
| His brows rose. | 18 |
| “You woke yourself up.” | 19 |
| “You didn’t try.” | 20 |
| To Muriel’s surprise, Stacia looked at her feet. “. . . You wouldn’t talk to him.” | 21 22 |
| Him? | 23 |
| “And he’s going to be alone now.” | 24 |
| “He won’t, Stacia. He’ll have the—” He stopped. | 25 |
| “It doesn’t understand people,” Stacia insisted, oblivious to the presence of her mother. “It doesn’t understand us.” And Stacia, of course, felt she did. As if all people were the same, everywhere, as if being a person was a universal truth. | 26 27 28 |
| Muriel could not remember being so young, and maybe that was the kindness of memory. She doubted it. | 29 30 |
| The old man exhaled, and to Muriel’s surprise, he patted Stacia on the head. And her daughter, who famously disliked being touched by strangers, seemed to draw strength from this. Something was happening. Something that she had no part in. And her daughter was <i>a child</i> . | 31 32 33 34 |
| “Stacia,” she said, with an emphasis on the last syllable, “I’d like you to go with Barryl now. I haven’t finished speaking with Mr. Sanders.” | 35 36 |
| Stacia was mutinous. “Why do you want me to leave? He can’t have anything to say to you that I don’t already know—and better.” | 37 S38 N39 |

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01 “Stacia.”

02 Barryl interceded. Muriel didn’t hear what he said, but she wasn’t paying
03 attention; Barryl led Stacia—or perhaps, regrettably, dragged her—out of the
04 parlor. She turned to her visitor. “Please,” she said, “be seated.”

05 “I’m not dressed for your fancy chairs,” he replied, placing both of his hands
06 behind his back. As if he were a soldier, and not a guest.

07 “You know something of my daughter’s illness.”

08 “I suffer from it myself.” He obeyed a request that was not a request and
09 took his place in a chair. It was farthest from the chair she occupied.

10 “I believe I saw you when I visited Stacia at the Houses of Healing. You were
11 present on the final day, when I was told I could finally bring her—bring her
12 home.”

13 He nodded. She remembered: no one had come for him. She had asked
14 Healer Levec—boldly—if perhaps they might take those without family to
15 collect them to their homes; he had winced.

16 “Why did you come?”

17 “I was asked, specifically, to keep an eye out on Stacy. Stacia.”

18 “By who?”

19 “By a friend of both hers and mine.”

20 “This is not a person she knows when awake, is it?”

21 Silence. A beat. Colm Sanders was measuring her. Fair enough; she had been
22 measuring herself—and her worth as a mother—for months. Years. It had
23 been far, far worse when her daughter had succumbed to the illness. There had
24 been so many questions about what she could have done differently, what she’d
25 done *wrong*.

26 And when her daughter had been pronounced cured, those questions, the
27 weight of that doubt, had vanished. It was almost like being happy. But the
28 shadow of that illness had clouded her every evening, when Stacia was at last
29 asleep.

30 Would she wake? Would she wake tomorrow?

31 “It’s not over yet.”

32 “Not yet, no.”

33 “What is happening?”

34 “When we sleep, we dream.”

35 “We? You and Stacia?”

36 “Stacia and I, yes. But there are others as well. When we dream, we occa-
37 sionally dream the same dream. There, we interact—as we interacted once
38S before, in dream—with each other. The surroundings are not the same, and
39N the dreams are often nonsensical, as dreams are.

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| “Recently, that has been in the evenings, where such an event occurs naturally to all concerned. But in the past week Stacia has been dreaming far more constantly, far more consistently.” | 01 02 03 |
| “And you?” | 04 |
| “I have been dreaming with her.” | 05 |
| “She said you could wake yourself up.” | 06 |
| The hint of a dark smile touched his lips. “I was a soldier. We were often on watch; food was sparse at times, and the days and duties were not diminished for food’s lack. We learned to sleep standing up. We learned to sleep whenever we could. And we learned to wake instantly when the situation demanded it, no matter how exhausted, how sleep bound, we were. I can wake myself, yes. It’s my sleep that’s often broken. Or it was.” | 07 08 09 10 11 12 |
| “And Stacia could do this as well.” | 13 |
| “Dreams are real for her. And sometimes she considers waking an act of abandonment. She has not tried to wake.” | 14 15 |
| “You believe she could?” | 16 |
| He exhaled. “Yes. But I am also tasked with waking her if she won’t, and if I am not likewise asleep.” | 17 18 |
| “We couldn’t. We couldn’t wake her.” | 19 |
| “She will wake for me.” | 20 |
| “Why?” | 21 |
| “Because she will assume that she hears me while she dreams, and she will turn in the direction of a voice she can hear in both places. I can wake her.” | 22 23 |
| Muriel swallowed. “Do you live far from here?” | 24 |
| “I live in the twenty-fourth holding. It is not close, but it is certainly a shorter distance than many I’ve marched.” | 25 26 |
| “And if a room were prepared for you in the servants’ quarters, would you consent to remain here?” She spoke before she’d had time to think, but did not withdraw, or attempt to withdraw, the offer. If he could do what she could not do—what her husband and Barryl could not do—she wanted him <i>here</i> . At hand. Where he could wake Stacia. | 27 28 29 30 31 |
| Where he could wake Stacia, and Muriel could believe that she had some small control, some small cure, for her own fear. | 32 33 |
| He was silent for a long beat. “When I sleep,” he finally said, “I am not easily woken.” | 34 35 |
| “Except by yourself?” | 36 |
| He nodded. “If you want me here because I can wake Stacy—Stacia, I can’t guarantee that I’ll be useful to you.” | 37 S38 |
| “And you can’t wake her while you’re sleeping.” | N39 |

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01 “Not Stacia, no. She’s—” he appeared to be searching for words.

02 “Headstrong? Willful? Stubborn?”

03 At that, his face cracked the hint of a smile. “I see you do know your
04 daughter.”

05 And hers cracked a smile in response.

06 “You can wake the others when they’re dreaming?”

07 “Not always, no. But when we don’t dream the same dream, it doesn’t mat-
08 ter. Sleep is necessary for everyone; we’re no exception. But the dreamers have
09 to be willing to wake, and as I said—”

10 “Stacia isn’t.”

11 He bowed his head, his gaze hitting his hands, which rested in his lap. “I’m
12 not used to young girls. Or young boys, if it comes to that. I’m used to young
13 men and women, and I’m used to giving orders that they have to obey. Stacia’s
14 not a soldier. She’s not a green centrus.”

15 Muriel rose. She walked to the parlor windows; the curtains had been
16 drawn, and sun filtered in through the glass. They were large windows. Expens-
17 sive windows. Everything in the room was; how else could one impress import-
18 ant guests?

19 “Attitude like hers wouldn’t get her far in the army.”

20 “No. We hadn’t intended she be a soldier.”

21 “Because the army’s for poor grunts like me?”

22 Muriel exhaled. She did not turn to face him. “Partly for that reason, yes.
23 But we’ve just had the army return from the war in the South—not the first
24 war and, likely, not the last. What I want for my daughter is not the life of a
25 soldier. The privation. The lack of sleep. The lack of food. All of those, I could
26 accept, but not happily.

27 “No, it’s the killing. It’s the loss. It’s seeing your friends—your comrades, if
28 you prefer—”

29 “Friends works.”

30 “Friends, then—it’s seeing them die. It’s the killing,” she continued. “Be-
31 cause you kill, or you are killed. It’s the taking of a life. And I’d want her to
32 learn, and learn quickly, because I’d rather she kill than be killed. But I’m not
33 sure she could come home from that unscarred. You’ve seen it. You’ve survived
34 it. Would you want that for your own children?”

35 “I don’t want it for anyone’s children.”

36 She felt a twinge of guilt, but not nearly enough to swamp worry, fear. No,
37 she didn’t want that for *any* child. “What is happening in the dreaming? What
38S little Stacy is willing to tell me is confusing at best. I can’t tell if her words are
39N

the words of a dreaming child or a daydreaming child.” Her face was turned toward the window, as if she were a plant in need of sunlight.

It was a long while before he answered. This was a man she couldn’t force words from.

“You are aware of the events on the day of the victory parade?”

She froze. Sunlight lost warmth. She turned toward him, her back to the window, her shoulders curving inward as if to ward off physical blows. He was watching her. Waiting. She nodded. *What does this have to do with my daughter?* The words would not come.

“That was a skirmish. If we won, we won because of one woman and, even then, only because she chose to take the fight to her own turf.”

Muriel had not heard this.

“War will come. Not a skirmish, but a battle—and it will come here. To Averalaan. Even to the Isle. I don’t know if you were there. I don’t know if you saw the demon. I’ve seen the demon.” He exhaled. “So has Stacy.”

She didn’t even correct his use of the diminutive. She was frozen; the only things she could see in this room were Colm Sanders and the shroud of her own fear. She managed to keep control of her expression.

After a moment, he nodded. “That demon will come here again. But he won’t come alone. And in the end, it is not that demon that threatens us. He is almost irrelevant. You’ve perhaps heard the phrase: *When the Sleepers wake?*”

She nodded, almost confused.

“The Sleepers are waking. It’s why the sleeping sickness could exist in the first place. The Terafin intervened, and we woke. But she can’t prevent the Sleepers from waking. The gods can’t. The Kings can’t.”

“But they rode—they rode with Moorelas—”

“Yes. And they failed. They betrayed him. This was their punishment. They don’t like mortals, much. They certainly won’t like us. And we’ll be here, in great number, in lands they might consider in need of cleansing. These are the lands which their ancient enemies ruled.”

“How do you know this?”

“I sleep. I dream.”

“Stacia—”

“Sleeps. Dreams. Do you understand?”

She shook her head. What Colm Sanders might have said next was lost to the furious entrance of her child. Her Stacia. At any other time, she might have

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01 been horrified at what Stacia did next—she stormed toward Muriel’s visitor
02 and kicked his shin.

03 “You’re making my mother cry!”

04 “She is not crying,” the old man said, unperturbed by Stacia’s display.

05 Stacia wheeled toward her mother, who was not, as Colm Sanders had said,
06 crying. Proved wrong, Stacia did not admit defeat. She did not, however,
07 choose to kick him again. A movement caught Muriel’s attention; Barryl was
08 in the doorway, almost frozen there by Stacia’s behavior. Ah, no, Muriel
09 thought. Frozen by fear of his mistress’ reaction to that behavior.

10 “You’re scaring her.”

11 “Yes, because she’s no fool.” His tone implied that Stacia could learn some-
12 thing from her mother. “And it’s not me that’s scaring her, it’s you.”

13 She did turn toward her mother then.

14 Muriel had never encouraged public displays of affection; she had been
15 taught just how unseemly they were. But she opened her arms, wordless, and
16 when Stacia met her gaze, she ran across the room and wrapped her own arms
17 around her mother’s waist.

18 “Don’t be scared,” she said, her voice muffled, the small vibrations of mov-
19 ing mouth against body a comfort. “Don’t be. She’ll save you.”

20 “It’s not myself that I worry for.”

21 Stacia said nothing, only tightened her hold on her mother. After a moment,
22 her muffled voice could be heard—but just barely. “I don’t want anything bad
23 to happen to you.”

24 “I don’t care—”

25 “Your mother would die for you,” Colm Sanders said. “She would die to
26 save you.”

27 Stacia pulled back and turned to look at the soldier. “I don’t *want* her to die.
28 I don’t want her to die to save *me*.”

29 “And you think she’d want you to die to save her?”

30 “If she knows—if she knows that she’d die to save me, then she *knows how*
31 *I feel!*”

32 “And you know how she feels, because you don’t want that.”

33 “But she *can’t*. She can’t do it anyway.”

34 Muriel put a hand on Stacia’s shoulder; her daughter wheeled. She was
35 flushed, angry, defiant—and beneath that, beneath all of that, afraid. “I would
36 like Mr. Sanders to stay with us.”

37 “What, here?”

38S “In the manor.”

39N “Why?”

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| “Because whatever it is you’re facing, he’s facing as well. And I would like— | 01 |
| in some small way—to help.” | 02 |
| “He doesn’t need help. He gets really mad if you even try.” | 03 |
| “Would it be acceptable,” her mother continued, as if Stacia had not spoken, | 04 |
| “to you? I won’t offer if you don’t want him here.” She had, of course, already | 05 |
| offered. | 06 |
| Stacia frowned. “Can he bring his swords?” | 07 |
| “Pardon?” | 08 |
| “Well, he knows how to fight.” | 09 |
| “Stacia, we have guards.” | 10 |
| “They won’t be as good as him. Besides—he sleeps almost as much as I do.” | 11 |
| “Is that true, Mr. Sanders?” | 12 |
| “Yes.” | 13 |
| Muriel inhaled. Exhaled. Loosened the white-knuckled hand on her daugh- | 14 |
| ter’s shoulder. “Do you sleep as much as Stacia because my daughter refuses to | 15 |
| wake up?” | 16 |
| Silence. In it, she could hear Stacia’s displeasure, although her daughter was | 17 |
| well-mannered enough—barely—not to put it into words. | 18 |
| The visitor watched her daughter. Whatever he saw in her face made him | 19 |
| smile. “Yes. I’m a suspicious, cynical old man. Your daughter is none of those | 20 |
| things.” | 21 |
| “But he doesn’t <i>need</i> to live here to do that! And I’m not a baby!” | 22 |
| No. No, she wasn’t. <i>You will always be my baby.</i> | 23 |
| “If you’re not, you might consider acting like the adult your mother clearly | 24 |
| is,” the soldier snapped. | 25 |
| Stacia shrieked. So much for well-mannered. Or any manners, really. But | 26 |
| the soldier was not a lady of the manor, worried for her daughter and aware of | 27 |
| her station; he was, however, clearly familiar with Stacia. Stacia wrenched her- | 28 |
| self free from her mother and once again marched toward the visitor. | 29 |
| “Fine! You can stay—but it’s <i>my</i> house, and you have to listen <i>to me!</i> ” Before | 30 |
| Mr. Sanders could reply, her daughter stormed out of the parlor and into | 31 |
| Barryl. | 32 |
| “She’s a handful,” Mr. Sanders said, when both Stacia and Barryl were out | 33 |
| of earshot. “But she believes in heroes. In stories. She’s got a big heart. I’m not | 34 |
| sure this is a good idea,” he added, as he pushed himself out of his chair. | 35 |
| “You do sleep because she’s sleeping.” This time, there was no question in | 36 |
| the words. | 37 |
| “I find your daughter frustrating. Very frustrating,” he replied. “But for all | S38 |
| that she’s a handful, she’s precious. She reminds bitter old men like me of the | N39 |

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01 reason we fight. I have to go home to get my things.” He hesitated. “She’ll be
02 upset if there are no swords.”

03 “Bring the swords, by all means. You can’t use them when you’re sleeping,
04 and—given everything—it will be one less thing that upsets her.”

05 She wanted to ask him many things, then—but she was afraid of the an-
06 swers. Later, she would. Later she might tell him just how much she was forced
07 to trust him, against all reason, all experience.

08 And later, she would find that bitter trust her only comfort.
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Chapter One

*6th day of Lattan, 408 A.A.
Terafin Manse, Averalaaan Aramarelas*

JEWEL MARKESS ATERAFIN WOKE to familiar walls in the morning. She did not appreciate the room in the West Wing her ascension had forced her to vacate because she could barely breathe. Shadow was lying across her chest. Finch was awake and glaring at the great cat, who appeared to be sleeping.

He wasn't. Jewel attempted to push him off. In the halls beyond her closed door, she could hear movement, discussion, minor commotion; nothing in the tone—the words being too muffled to catch—implied disaster. Or at least not the disaster she had been facing recently. She glanced at Finch.

"Permits," Finch said, grimacing. "It's almost the start of the King's Challenge." Her hair, which had always been straight, wasn't the mass of tangle and snarls that Jewel's was. "Don't you dare feel guilty."

"I hate the paperwork of the festival season."

"Of course you do; you're reasonable. It's better than an angry House Council session."

Jewel grimaced again.

Finch held up one hand. "I'd take both for the rest of my natural life if we could dispense with evil gods, demons, and immortals who consider us vermin. I can't do anything about them. You can." Unspoken, but clear in her expression and her tone, was the wish that she could—because then she could help.

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14 ♦ Michelle West

01 What Finch didn't say out loud, Jewel couldn't respond to, not in words.
02 She rose.

03 "Do you want me to call—"

04 "No. I'm not technically here yet, and I don't think I'm going to be inter-
05 acting with people as The Terafin." Jewel exhaled. "We need to go back to the
06 castle."

07 Finch nodded.

08 ". . . if, in fact, it still exists *as* a castle."

09

10 Jewel dressed as a traveling merchant, in slightly cleaner variants of the cloth-
11 ing she'd arrived wearing. She woke Adam; although he was better rested, he
12 was still tired. "You can stay with Ariel for the day," she told him. "We're just
13 going to look at my new rooms."

14 "He will go," Shadow said, before Adam could reply. "We will *all* go." Paus-
15 ing, he glanced at Finch and Teller. "All the *important* people. You can stay *here*."

16 "Shianne needs rest," Adam told the cat. "And Lord Celleriant must teach
17 his people the Matriarch's laws."

18 Shadow hissed. He then told Adam just how stupid he thought Adam was.
19 Or, rather, described the new lows to which Adam had sunk.

20

21 Unimportant people were comprised of those who had remained in the Terafin
22 manse while Jewel had stepped onto the path created by the Oracle. Jewel,
23 however, made it clear to Shadow that they were important to *her*. While she
24 knew better than to be irritated by the cats, it was early morning, and she was
25 still emotionally unbalanced. And as she had no intention of leaving immedi-
26 ately, they deserved—and would get—rest.

27 Shadow was not pleased. Loudly.

28 Finch and Teller, as regent and right-kin, had a functional need and right to
29 know. Jester wanted, in his own words, to sleep through it and wake up after
30 all the fuss had been dealt with, although he was up and dressed and restless.
31 Jewel thought it likely that what he wanted to avoid was the current argument
32 that Finch had started while dressing for the day and had continued as they
33 spilled into the halls.

34 "I'm saying I'll stay *with* her. I'm not asking you to risk anyone else—"

35 "And I'm saying it's not safe for you to stay in whatever the hells my rooms
36 might end up being if I sleep with indigestion."

37 "You want her. She's going to be our den-kin, same as Duster. But she can't
38S be den-kin if we're not with her. I'm not telling you that we *all* have to move—
39N but I'll move. I can handle it."



“Finch—it’s *not safe* in the wilderness. That’s why the House Mage is on permanent contract—he can survive it. The rest of us can’t.”

“It’ll *be* safe if I’m with Calliastra.”

And that’s what it came down to, wasn’t it? Would it be safe? The wilderness and the creatures it produced weren’t the only threats the den had faced. They weren’t the biggest threats, by far. Finch had always been safe with Duster. Finch and Lander. But Calliastra didn’t have Duster’s history with them.

“You wouldn’t have tried to keep her,” Finch continued, voice softening. It was a trick that she had learned from somewhere—but where, Jewel wasn’t quite certain. Everything about her tone implied that she was relenting, surrendering. The words themselves, however, showed that she hadn’t budged. “If you didn’t know it was safe for the rest of us. If something happens, she’ll be here, and I don’t think random demons are going to get past her.”

“That is true,” Calliastra said, appearing not far away from the discussion, as if she was stepping out of shadows cast by magelights. She looked down a perfect nose at Finch. “But I have no reason to protect you.”

Finch glanced at the darknessborn woman. “No. Neither did Duster.” She turned more fully to face Calliastra. “Duster was the toughest of us; she was the most dangerous. None of us could give her orders, and none of us tried. She’d listen to Jay.”

“Jay is a bird, in Weston?”

Jewel exhaled. “And Jewel is a cut, polished rock. I preferred the bird.”

“Could you not perhaps have chosen an entirely different name?”

“Not and forced my parents to use it, no. Jay was the diminutive as far as my Oma was concerned, and the rest of the family fell in line.” *Na’jay*. A child’s name. A name she had never called herself, but a name it had always been a comfort to hear. Anyone who had used it was gone. Jay was the closest she could come. She did not feel up to explaining this to Calliastra. Not now, and maybe not ever.

She might have returned to the forest immediately had it not been for Calliastra—but Calliastra could not stay in the West Wing. If she was to be at home in the Terafin manse, it was here, beyond the doors that still separated The Terafin’s personal chambers from the interior of the manse. Wherever that here had currently become.

The mist-laden stretch of path remained unchanged from the previous day; the waterfall was also present. The skies remained blue, not the amethyst they had been when the forest had been a library, with trees that had bookcases and shelves instead of branches.

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01 Those books were in theory on the inside of the castle Jewel had not yet
 02 examined; Ellerson's arrival—and the brief, sharp hope that Carver was with
 03 him—had interrupted the apprehensive examination of what was, in theory,
 04 Jewel's new home. Teller's concern, on that first trek, had been the library and
 05 its many books.

06 Judging from his expression, it was still his concern, but he said nothing
 07 while Finch and Jewel continued their discussion. They spoke more quietly
 08 because Calliastra had joined them, and it was difficult to treat Calliastra as a
 09 third person, if not downright suicidal. He did say something when
 10 Snow stepped on his foot, but Jewel thought, judging tone as the words were
 11 too soft to catch, that he was apologizing to the white cat for his obvious
 12 neglect.

13 Shadow was bored. Snow was less bored with Teller's attention. Night was,
 14 for the moment, absent, but not in trouble—had he been, Snow, envious of the
 15 lack of boredom, would have been with him.

17 The contents of the Terafin library were not what they had been before Jay had
 18 become Terafin. Teller knew that it was larger, the books older, some of the
 19 contents forbidden by magisterial law. The volumes contained in Amara's
 20 Handernes A Terafin's library still existed, but they shared space with vol-
 21 umes that might once have been part of an earlier Terafin's library—in the
 22 time of the Blood Barons, when demons were considered the only reliable
 23 guards.

24 This castle reminded Teller of that ancient history.

25 Snow snorted. "It is not *ancient*," he told Teller. He rarely called Teller
 26 stupid.

27 "What do you see," Teller asked, "when you look at the fountain?" The
 28 fountain was the first thing that could be seen when the gates opened. Al-
 29 though all eyes were upon it, they did not see the same thing; the differences
 30 could be dramatic.

31 Snow glanced at Shadow. Both of the cats disliked water on principle. They
 32 had therefore avoided the fountain which now seemed the centerpiece of this
 33 new building's front causeway.

34 "We *don't*," Shadow replied. "There is nothing to *see*." The sibilant turned
 35 the last word into an extended hiss.

36 Calliastra said, "It is clearly not only the mortals who are obtuse." Which
 37 caused predictable outrage. The outrage seemed to dim the importance of the
 38S fountain to Calliastra, and she turned toward Jay as they all turned toward her,
 39N sooner or later.

Quietly, Jay said, “Library.”

Teller was happy to go. He was happy because he could see Jay’s face in that fountain—made strange, made majestic, made hard and cold as stone. Not even in anger—and she had had a temper, especially in her youth—had she appeared thus. No, only The Terafin had, and when she had, it was always bad.

Jay was The Terafin now.

Jay had never wanted to be The Terafin. She had respected, even revered, Amara’s Handernesse A Terafin enough that, she had promised to take up the mantle so that her predecessor might know a moment of peace. She kept her promises. She always had.

She headed up the stairs, stopping at the grand, closed doors of her castle. The doors did not magically open. Carver did not—as Ellerson had the day before—open them from the inside, either. Ellerson’s report made that a daydream, but it was a daydream with roots in pain and hope. Hard to shake, ever.

Avandar moved to join the Chosen at the height of the stairs, and they stepped back, a human wall between door and Terafin. Her domicis spoke; he gestured. The door did not open for him. Jay’s impatience was felt; she had expected neither the Chosen nor the domicis to succeed.

She disliked the necessity of waiting until they had tried, but accepted it, her expression pinched, until Avandar also surrendered. It took the domicis much longer than it had the Chosen, and Teller wasn’t entirely certain this wasn’t deliberate. Avandar would give his life to protect Jay—but Teller suspected the cats would, as well, if it came to that. It didn’t mean the cats were more tractable or obedient.

Jay stepped up to examine the door. After a brief pause and a quiet curse, she thumped it with the side of her fist. “It’s just like me,” she said, “to somehow create a castle I can’t even enter.”

Teller watched the doors. He watched Jay. The sound of water falling did not draw his gaze to the fountain; there, the statue was cold and hard; it seemed to know nothing of struggle. Jay in life was not that person, had never been that person.

She’d made this castle. She’d made it without knowledge, without intent. It had come to her the way the forest had come to her—and every creature in that forest had come as well, liege to her Lord. But here, she was like any other member of their den; she was frustrated and stymied by the wilderness.

The wilderness, he thought, that was within her, part of her, inseparable from the woman she had, over half her life, become.

“You are not *listening*,” Shadow brought his left front paw down, narrowly

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01 missing Jay's foot. He didn't miss the flat of the stairs, though; they cracked,
02 the fissure spreading slowly as if it were liquid.

03 Jay glared at him.

04 "Why are you so *stupid*? Can't you *hear* it, *stupid* girl?"

05 Snow hissed laughter, which didn't help Shadow's mood any.

06 "It is speaking your *name*. *Ansssssssss*wer it, or we will die of *boredom*!"

07 "It is *hers*," Snow told his brother. "We will die of boredom *anyway*."

08 Shadow had no response to this. He took an ill-tempered swipe at Jay's leg.

09 Jay, however, straightened her shoulders, lifting her chin. Her lashes became
10 a dark fan as she closed her eyes, brown to the auburn of her hair. She lifted
11 her hands to shoulder height, turning her palms toward sunlight. Her expres-
12 sion was calm. No, not calm exactly. Absent fear, frustration, worry. Blank.

13 She looked like the statue that he would not look at, but rendered in flesh,
14 not stone.

15 Without thought, without intent, he ran up the stairs toward her, pushing
16 through the Chosen who allowed him to pass unhindered. He caught Jay by
17 the shoulder—the right shoulder.

18 Finch joined him, her hand across the left.

19 "Jay," Teller said. "Jay. Jay, you're with us. You're with us. We're here." As if
20 it needed to be said.

21 Jay blinked rapidly as the doors began to open. She didn't look toward the
22 hallway that lay beyond the doors. She turned to look at Teller, and then at
23 Finch, exhaling as she did. She shook her head, as if to clear it, and then pushed
24 stray curls out of her eyes.

25 She signed. *Thanks*.

26

27 Shadow pushed his way past them and into what appeared to be a great hall.
28 "*Boring*," he said, over his shoulder.

29 "I *told* you." Snow entered next; Jay dropped a hand to the white cat's head,
30 stalling him for long enough that Shadow's tail was not a target of easy oppor-
31 tunity before she lifted it. Snow then followed his brother into the great hall,
32 of which he disapproved. Loudly.

33 "Is that wise?" Finch asked, when they were out of earshot.

34 "Probably, given what occasionally made its way into the previous iteration
35 of the library. It's going to be hard for things to drop from the sky—" She
36 stopped. It wasn't the creatures from the sky that had taken Carver.

37 The Chosen followed the cats, and Avandar followed the Chosen. The hall
38S didn't swallow them.

39N "Are you worried?" Calliastra asked.



“She is *always* worried,” the previously absent Night replied. 01
 “I didn’t ask you. I can’t imagine wanting your opinion.” 02
 Jay dropped a hand to the top of the black cat’s head. 03
 “Why *me?*” Night asked. “*She* started it!” 04
 “Sometimes I require you to be the better man.” 05
 “Men are *stupid!*” Night stormed into the main hall, cursing and spitting. 06

They walked in silence. This hall was older than the Terafin manse, at least in 07
 architectural style; it was both grander and colder. The predominant colors 08
 were gray, with hints of Terafin blue that added no visual warmth. Weapons 09
 lined the walls, and only as they passed beneath the arch in the distance did 10
 that change. 11
 12

The Terafin library no longer rested on shelves that had sprouted from the 13
 trunks of standing trees. The unreality of that transformed library had given 14
 way to a less fanciful, impossible space: the shelves were of hardwood, the 15
 floors, rug-covered stone. The rugs were blue. There were windows that 16
 allowed natural light to enter the room on all sides; the windows were tall, the 17
 glass clear. 18
 19

The ceilings were equal in height to the ceilings in the great hall, but this 20
 was because there appeared to be three levels of shelving, which hugged the 21
 walls that were not possessed of windows. Or perhaps four levels. Ladders 22
 rested against rails. Teller had twice visited the royal libraries. He had once 23
 visited the great library in the Order of Knowledge, the personal collections 24
 being entirely off-limits if one did not have access to the collector. A cursory 25
 glance strongly implied that neither would be the equal of this one. 26

A cursory glance was all he had time for; he did not imagine that many 27
 would be allowed to make a more thorough comparison. The Terafin no longer 28
 knew for certain the contents of her library, and in the reformation of the prior 29
 collection, volumes that could not be possessed legally had been found, lying 30
 closed on a library table. 31

Teller did lift a random book or two within easy reach, more to check for 32
 dampness or damage than for the contents. Books, however, were always diffi- 33
 cult objects; the second caught and held his attention. 34

He was surprised to see Calliastra’s shadow darken the page and did not 35
 wonder, as he lifted his head, that he knew it for hers; there was, about her, 36
 a darkness that spoke of danger, of desire. It reminded him of Kiriell, but Kiriell’s 37
 darkness had been death. Just death. 38

He wondered, not for the first time, what Kiriell was doing. Kiriell had come N39



01 to the den with Jay, just as Calliastra had, but Kiriell had not remained. He
02 wondered what Calliastra would make of Kiriell, or perhaps what Kiriell would
03 make of Calliastra, but knew better than to ask.

04 Snow, however, said, "What are you *looking* at?" and bumped the underside
05 of the book with his head. Teller was accustomed to tightening his grip—on
06 anything—when the cats were underfoot; the book did not fall. He would have
07 been upset had it, because it was old, the pages brittle, the colors of the
08 illustrations—a separate, painted page, faded and slightly uneven.

09 "Where," Calliastra said softly, "did you find this book?"

10 Teller waved at the shelf at which he'd stopped although he did not take his
11 eyes from the illustration. In the scant time between opening the book and
12 looking at the page, the colors had deepened. He wasn't certain what he was
13 looking at. He had thought it a dawn or a sunset at first, because the colors
14 that remained on the page had suggested one or the other.

15 As he watched, the colors resolved themselves, hardening into something
16 that looked much more like fire than a distant start or end of day. The edges
17 of what might have been sun were orange, red; the blue that surrounded the
18 whole was indeed sky.

19 "Do you recognize what this is?" Teller asked. "Snow?"

20 Snow hissed. It was not the laughter hiss. Shadow snickered. No one who
21 might be able to answer the question answered it now. Calliastra said, "Let me
22 see the book."

23 Teller passed it to her. He was not surprised to see the book change physical
24 shape as it came into contact with her hands; it grew larger, the covers darker,
25 the words pressed into the binding clearer. The book in the godchild's hands
26 would no longer fit the shelf from which it had been taken.

27 Relieved of his precious burden, he turned to Jay; Jay's eyes were wide,
28 shadowed, as she looked past Calliastra to the open page. Teller could no longer
29 see it.

30 "Do you recognize it?" Teller asked Calliastra.

31 "Yes." The word was flat. It did not invite further questions; it slammed the
32 door on them. She did, however, turn the page, something Teller could not
33 have done. "The book is a bestiary." She closed it firmly, setting it flat on a
34 table. Until that moment, Teller had not seen the table, but he had become
35 accustomed to the warped rules of the reality of Jay's personal space, and he
36 recognized the table. It had existed in the previous Terafin's library. It had
37 existed in the remade forest of shelves and books.

38S It existed here.

39N The chairs that surrounded it were also familiar. He was surprised at how



much he wanted, or needed, the familiar in this grand space. Perhaps Jay was no different. She sat gracelessly in one of those chairs, as if the strength to walk had deserted her. To Teller's surprise, Avandar bowed to Jewel, turned to nod at the Chosen, and followed.

Jay's collapse into the chair was not, as Teller had first thought, an accident of exhaustion. She had taken a seat in front of a small stack of books. Teller did not have perfect recall, but this table and those books seemed almost unchanged, as if the whole of the landscape revolved around them. Ellerson had said, however, that The Terafin's clothing and personal effects were within the castle, so perhaps that was simple fancy, a desire to make some sense where almost none was available.

The roar that broke Jay's moment of rest was familiar to the den. Jay pushed herself out of her chair; Calliastra was already halfway across the library, pushing herself between the Chosen who had also moved into loose formation.

Finch looked at Teller, who shrugged and made to follow.

There was a bear in the hall.

It was brown, it was huge, and its mouth seemed to be composed of fangs that shouldn't have fit in its hairy, unfriendly face. The cats were discomposed; their fur had risen, and their wings were stiff and high. Shadow was tensed to leap; Snow was just tense. Night had not rushed to join his brothers, which allowed Jewel to relax. Marginally.

Jewel could not push her way past the Chosen and didn't try. She drew breath. "*Snow. Shadow.*"

Cat words had given way to guttural growls; neither bothered to look in her direction.

"He is Ellerson's guest."

The white cat began to sputter, but his fur fell.

Calliastra, not being Terafin, pushed her way between Torvan and Marave, and to their credit, they let her go. They would not have let Jewel through unless Jewel had ordered them to do so. Ruling, she thought, was complicated, unwieldy, and inconvenient.

"What are *you* doing *here*?" Calliastra demanded.

The bear turned instantly at the sound of her voice, but almost everyone in the hall did, even Shadow, whose fur was still high. Snow, however, affected nonchalance and strolled across the library floor, nose in the air, until he reached Jewel's side. Jewel dropped a hand to his head without a second thought, or perhaps even a first one. She was staring at the bear. And at the godchild.

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01 “What are *you* doing here?” the bear countered.

02 “I was *invited*.”

03 “I was invited.”

04 “I was invited by the Lord of these lands.”

05 The bear did not condescend to reply. From this, Jewel understood instantly
06 that he had extended his own invitation, and Ellerson had agreed. She was not
07 offended; Ellerson was like kin, and this was his home. The bear could not be
08 more trouble than the cats.

09 Snow hissed.

10 “Did I say that out loud?” she asked, shifting her hand to scratch gently
11 behind his ears.

12 “We could be *much* more trouble.”

13 “It wasn’t a challenge, Snow. Shadow, come here.”

14 Shadow ignored her. He ignored Calliastra. He ignored everything but the
15 bear. “Where is *he*?”

16 “He is sleeping,” the bear growled, his voice softening, the rumble that
17 underscored his syllables fading. He began to shrink until he was no bigger
18 than a dog of intermediate size and parentage, although his shape changed; his
19 body became rounder, his ears more pointed, his tail bushy; his eyes were
20 ringed with dark fur and his snout was pointed, a bit like a fox’s. “But he was
21 almost awake.”

22 Shadow hissed. There was no amusement in it.

23 “Did they wake him?”

24 “Almost. Almost, but the boy quiets the earth now.”

25 The creature turned toward her, seeing past the Chosen, Calliastra, and
26 Shadow. Seeing, Jewel thought, past walls and rooms, past anything else that
27 formed the heart of The Terafin’s current chambers. The creature ambled to-
28 ward her.

29 “Let him pass,” she said.

30 Torvan stiffened, but Marave immediately turned to the side; she did not
31 sheathe her weapon. It was the weapon that caught the creature’s attention,
32 caused fur to change the shape of his face as his large eyes rounded. He did
33 not, however, talk to Marave, the Chosen being mere guards.

34 “They are dreaming here. Here, where the mortals dwell.”

35 Calliastra’s frown was edged enough to cut. “And you know this how?”

36 “Are you not Calliastra?” the creature countered. “Can you not *bear* them
37 beneath your feet?”

38S “I hear nothing over your screeching, irritating voice.” As Shadow hissed

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| laughter, she added, “Or yours.” To Jewel, she finished. “What will you do with him?” The tone in her question made it clear what her own preferences were. | 01 |
| “I’ll send him to the forest,” Jewel replied. “I think he must be kin to the eldest there.” | 02 |
| “Oh?” | 03 |
| “The trees in my lands are awake. They take different forms when they choose to speak with us at all, but one is a golden fox.” | 04 |
| “Golden?” the creature said, tilting his head. | 05 |
| “It’s the color of his fur. However, while you are in my domain, you will cause no harm without my permission. You will not torment the mortals you happen across, and you will not cause more damage to my abode.” | 06 |
| The creature seemed seriously offended at the latter, and Jewel had to struggle not to think of him as a cat. Well, as one of her cats. | 07 |
| “You should let us <i>eat</i> him,” Snow suggested. | 08 |
| “Try.” | 09 |
| “Snow, please.” | 10 |
| Snow hissed, and not with amusement. “What is <i>his</i> name, hmmm?” | 11 |
| The Terafin, the Lord of the lands, the Sen of a nonexistent city, exhaled. “My manners are not what they should be. I am Jewel Markess ATerafin. This is Finch, this is Teller, this is Adam. Calliastra and my cats, you apparently know.” | 12 |
| “And the others?” | 13 |
| “The captain of my oathguard, and one of my Chosen.” She finished and waited. After a longer pause, she said, “And you must be Anakton.” | 14 |
| Calliastra was the first to respond. She laughed. It was not particularly kind; she reminded Jewel viscerally of Duster. She was the only person to laugh. The name meant nothing to Jewel; it clearly meant nothing to Finch, Adam, or Teller, either. But she felt, rather than saw, the stiffening of her personal domicis, and when she glanced to the side and back, she saw that his expression was rigidly neutral. | 15 |
| “Why is that funny?” the creature now demanded of the godchild. | 16 |
| “You are, currently, a large, silver-furred weasel.” | 17 |
| He instantly bristled. To Jewel’s eye, he did not resemble a weasel. He resembled a badly put together fox, with odd feet. On first sight, however, he had been a bear. Jewel, who tended to use the names she was given, had named her cats in order to lessen their bickering. Had she been asked to name the creature, she might have called him Silver, for just as good a reason. | 18 |
| “It is like your clothing—which is deplorable, by the way. I might be a | 19 |
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24 ♦ Michelle West

01 large, dirt-brown bear. I might be a midnight steed, with wolflike fangs. I
02 might be many things.” One of which was angry. “I might even choose to look
03 like *you*.”

04 “You could not.”

05 “Might I remind you about my rules regarding destruction? You are, at the
06 moment, a guest here. Guests can be asked to leave.”

07 “Can they?”

08 “Or made to leave, if it comes to that.”

09 “She is Sen,” Calliastra said. She had settled on bored rather than annoyed
10 or angry, and her voice was almost a drawl.

11 “She is not. Not yet. But the castle speaks her name.” He glared at Shadow
12 but spoke to Jewel. “Have I permission to enter your wilderness?”

13 Jewel nodded.

14 To Calliastra, Jewel said, “Come. Let’s find you a room. There are probably
15 a lot of them. I’d warn you that closets are dangerous, but I don’t actually
16 think they are for you.”

17
18 “You don’t look happy,” Jester said, leaning against a tree and examining his
19 fingernails for inappropriate dirt.

20 “You don’t look awake.”

21 “And you have eyes in the back of your head now?”

22 “They’re not really required,” Birgide replied, but she did turn, the hint of
23 a smile at play across her otherwise severe face. “You have no idea how angry
24 Duvvari would be with me.”

25 “Because of the new guests?”

26 “No. Because although it is impossible for me to be unaware when you
27 approach me, I am willing to expose my back to you.”

28 “Ah. I thought you were just being condescending.” He grinned, and the
29 slight smile deepened into something that resembled genuine amusement. It
30 helped, because her eyes were blood-red. He came to stand by her side. “Am I
31 interrupting anything?”

32 “Yes.”

33 “Am I interrupting anything important?”

34 “It is a small wonder to me that The Terafin has not strangled you.”

35 “And not simply removed the House Name?”

36 “She would strangle you first.”

37 “True. She’s been busy. You’re not happy about our guests.”

38S “The elders are not entirely happy about the guests. The majority are Lord
39N Celleriant’s people, yes?”



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| Jester hesitated; Birgide marked it. | 01 |
| “Celleriant,” he finally said, “is like the Chosen, but with less humor. He’s not one of us, but he is The Terafin’s. He would die defending her.” | 02 |
| “Not happily.” | 03 |
| “Probably not. But they wouldn’t.” | 04 |
| “Have you spoken with them?” | 05 |
| Jester shook his head. “You’re watching Shianne.” | 06 |
| “Yes.” | 07 |
| “You think she’s dangerous?” | 08 |
| “Or possibly in danger. If the influx of Lord Celleriant’s people has unsettled the forest, it is her presence that has truly alarmed it. I think it not impossible that were she here as anything but The Terafin’s personal guest, the elders would try to kill her.” | 09 |
| “That . . . would not be good.” | 10 |
| “No,” Birgide agreed. “But I confess I did not expect the animosity. To my eyes,” eyes that had been altered by the forest itself, “she is a pregnant, mortal woman. What they see, I do not, and cannot, see. But you did not come here to discuss my discomfort.” | 11 |
| “Actually, I did. I wanted your impression of the Arianni—that’s what they’re called by the lesser races, apparently.” | 12 |
| “You wanted, or Haval wanted?” | 13 |
| He grinned again. Birgide was suspicious by nature, which meant there was no fear, no condescension, in that suspicion. “Both, actually. And if I’m being honest—” | 14 |
| “Don’t put yourself out on my behalf.” | 15 |
| “—Haval is occupied by Jarven. If the forest considers Shianne the threat, Haval is more concerned with Jarven.” Jester shrugged. “Jay’s not happy about Jarven.” | 16 |
| “No; she doesn’t trust him. It gives us all hope.” | 17 |
| And at that, he laughed. “I also wanted to hear what you thought about the other significant guest.” | 18 |
| “Which one?” | 19 |
| “Calliastra,” he said, but he said it uneasily. Too much was changing, too quickly. He was not Warden, as Birgide was, but he could almost feel the tension in the forest as a pressure, a growing weight. | 20 |
| “The elders do not seem to be concerned about Calliastra, one way or the other. They do not believe she poses—or can pose—a threat to The Terafin.” | 21 |
| “Never say that where Calliastra can hear you.” | 22 |
| “Oh?” | 23 |





01 “Trust me on this.”

02 “Do you wish to speak with the guests?”

03 “I had hoped to discreetly observe them, but I found you first.”

04 “The forest is being defensive,” she replied. “I am Warden; the forest cannot
05 protect me if I am to fulfill my duties. But you are important to The Terafin
06 in a way that I am not.” She said this without apparent unhappiness; it was
07 observation, nothing more. “It is possible Haval could reach them; I do not
08 think anyone who is otherwise not accompanied by The Terafin herself will.”

09 Jester exhaled.

10 “That was what you wanted to know, wasn’t it?”

11 “It was.”

12 Birgide paused as if listening to something inaudible to Jester’s ears. “It
13 wasn’t the only thing.”

14 “No. I’d say you’re wasted here, but actually, I don’t think you are. Where
15 is the House Mage?”

16 Her frown deepened. “I do not interfere with the House Mage; his duties
17 and mine overlap, but we perform them independently.”

18 “Can you find him?”

19 “Can the Chosen not summon him?”

20 “I wasn’t sent to ask the Chosen; I was asked to ask you.”

21 “Because Haval is occupied.”

22 “Yes. Personally, I would leap at any task or chore that got me away from
23 Jarven. Haval, however, thought to send me.”

24 Birgide was silent. “He thought it necessary?” she said at last.

25 Jester nodded, uneasily aware that he could have asked this question two
26 weeks ago and she would have answered without hesitation. Possibly without
27 thought. “What’s happening with Meralonne? I thought he might be with the
28 Arianni or with Shianne.”

29 “There will come a time when Meralonne is no longer welcome in the forest,
30 in Terafin, or perhaps even within the city itself. The elders discuss him fre-
31 quently, but only when they are near the tree of fire—and they are not partic-
32 ularly fond of that tree, although it doesn’t burn them.”

33 “When?” Jester asked.

34 “I’m not certain. I’ve asked the elders. I’ve asked the trees. They are not
35 afraid of Meralonne; when they speak of him, they do not speak of betrayal.
36 They are worried for Terafin, but they are not worried for the woman who rules
37 the House. I would say they are almost . . . excited.”

38S “Is Meralonne with Celleriant’s people?”

39N “No.”



“Then where, Birgide?”

“I am uncertain; he is not in one place.” Silence. “I believe, however, you will find him in the heart of The Terafin’s personal space.”

“You believe.”

Her silence was the silence of thought, of deliberation, as if she were picking a path made of words in a landscape that was only barely stable enough to support their weight. “Would you trust yourself with The Terafin’s power?”

This was not what he’d expected. “Hells, no.”

Birgide seemed slightly surprised.

“I’ve got a much fouler temper, and I don’t give a rat’s ass about anyone but us. No one cared about us except us when we had no money and no position. I’d trust her with power because she *did* see us. We’d’ve died, without her. She rescued me from a brothel—but she didn’t come *for* me. She came for someone else, and she didn’t want to leave any of us behind.” He shrugged, uncomfortable and irritated. “I’d trust her with power because when she had power—and it was nothing compared to what we have now—she pulled us up with her.

“Me? I’d let most of the city burn.”

Birgide bowed her head again. “What she has to be, she isn’t. The choice is hers, but she hasn’t evaluated it, won’t face it, won’t look at it. She will,” Birgide added. “But Haval is very concerned.”

“You’ve discussed this with Haval?”

“It wasn’t necessary. Inasmuch as a man of Haval’s nature can, he views The Terafin as a daughter. Were it not for his wife’s obvious affection for The Terafin, I am not certain he would have. He is far more like Jarven or Duvari than any of you.”

“Except for the wife part.”

“Except for Hannerle, yes. It is a huge exception. It is a defining exception. But absent his wife, he would be as terrifying as Jarven or Duvari, and as scrupulous.”

“And he thinks that I have the potential to be Jarven or Duvari?”

“No.”

“He just believes I’m callous enough to be a close second.”

“He believes you well-situated and observant enough; he does not believe your sense of self-worth is derived from social scruples. He will use you, yes, because you consent to be used; his focus is turned toward Jewel and her survival, as is yours. The survival of the rest of the city is, I feel, ancillary to his concerns—or would be, if the city were not where his wife lives. And you have once again broken my attempt at analogy.

“Your Jewel, your Terafin, is not what she must become if you are all to

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01 survive. But if she becomes what she must become—and no, I don’t know
 02 what that is; the trees speak of it in a hush, and the cats themselves mutter—
 03 she will not *be* your Jewel. Can you accept that?”

04 “Can she do what must be done if she doesn’t become something other or
 05 different?”

06 “I do not know.”

07 And that, Jester thought, was a half-truth. “Is Haval in the forest?”

08 “He has returned, albeit briefly, to the manse.”

09 “Then why don’t I speak to Haval? It’s not like I care what he thinks of me.”
 10 He had taken less than a step when Birgide’s voice caught him, almost as if it
 11 were a snare.

12 “And you care what I think?”

13 Jester did not look back. He did, however, answer. “You’re not den.”

14 She accepted that. That was the thing about Birgide: she accepted every-
 15 thing. As if people were distant mountains, arboreal trees, raging oceans:
 16 things she could witness but could neither control nor own. And perhaps be-
 17 cause she did, he spoke again, his back toward her because he *could* turn his
 18 back to her without fear.

19 “You’re not den, but you could have been.”

20
 21 Haval was, as Birgide had said, in the manse. Given that he was in the act of
 22 what might pass for cleaning or tidying in a room that was covered in the
 23 detritus of his tailoring work, she was less correct about the “briefly” part.

24 He did not seem surprised to see Jester. Jester stood in the open door’s
 25 frame, as if daring Haval to leave until he moved. He was aware that were
 26 Haval determined, there would be no contest, even given the disparity in
 27 their ages.

28 “If you are determined to remain there, you might at least offer to help.”

29 “My offer to help involves creating one large pile—preferably in a
 30 fireplace—and setting it alight. I believe you raised objections to that.”

31 “Some of the materials would not burn, and the attempt might cause you
 32 difficulty. While I personally would have no qualms with this—playing with
 33 fire often has consequences, and if you survived, you would learn—Jewel
 34 would be upset. Why are you here?”

35 “I don’t like Jarven, I dislike what I see between the two of you, and I would
 36 consider war a boon if it divested the House of Jarven.”

37 “I believe that Jarven is fond of you.”

38S “Jarven could adore me, and it wouldn’t stop him from slitting my throat if
 39N I happened to be inconveniently in the way.”



“No. But prior to that, he would at least be amusing company. You’d prefer Haerrad?”

“That’s low.”

Haval smiled. “Did you come to ask about Jarven? If so, I am not inclined to answer.”

“Not really. I’m grateful that Jarven is your problem. I would love it if he became solely your problem, and he ceased to be any part of Finch’s.”

“He has saved her life at least three times in the past year. I believe she is only aware of one. Be careful what you wish for.” He exhaled. “There is a reason that I have never advised his removal. Loss of Finch would cause far more damage than Jarven’s presence. Even were Jarven to attempt to assassinate Jewel—and I hold that as an outside possibility, but a possibility nonetheless—it would not cause the damage that Finch’s death would.”

“That’s not why you keep him.”

“No. I keep him or, rather, have ignored his presence, because the cost of doing otherwise would be too high. The magical fortifications that have prevented Finch’s death would, of course, prevent Jarven’s; to circumvent his protections, one would have to be able to predict them. And even then, the only guarantee is that Jarven would then become an enemy and would remain so unless a greater advantage convinced him to disregard the unfortunate past.”

“And now?”

Haval shook his head. “I have discussed Jarven as much as I am willing to, with you.”

“And with Jay?”

“She will not ask.”

Jester considered this briefly. It was true. Without external prompting, she wouldn’t. She didn’t like Jarven, and never had, because she couldn’t trust him. But she also understood that, in some fashion, he was Finch’s. “I came to talk about The Terafin.”

This caught Haval’s attention. “The Terafin, then? Not Jay?”

Jester ignored this. “What will happen to her?”

“I am not entirely certain.”

“What do you think will happen?”

Haval stopped his packing. He turned to face Jester fully, his face expressionless, his eyes unblinking. His arms dropped to his sides; he might have been a maker-born statue—something that suggested life without containing it.

“You have, no doubt, heard the stories. You have observed Jewel with her domicis, with Lord Celleriant. You have seen the cats. None of these things are

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01 what we would have once considered normal. You have seen demons, Jester; you
02 have seen gods. You have seen someone who seems to walk through time, as if
03 time were a path that could be followed. Have you attempted to understand
04 what once happened when the gods were free to walk the mortal realm?

05 “Do you understand that, when they did walk, there was no mortal realm?”
06 Jester nodded.

07 “Jewel does. She, like you, is mortal. And she, unlike you—unlike me—is
08 talent-born. That has always been the truth by which she has lived. But if you
09 have listened to the reports of the House Mage—or, rather, if you have both-
10 ered to read them when provided the opportunity—you would understand
11 that it is not all of the truth. It is a simple window, a narrow view of only a
12 portion of the greater whole.

13 “The mage-born find their magics more powerful than they have ever been.
14 So, too, the healer-born. The world that we have known as the only world is
15 shifting and changing; things have been broken that have existed for the en-
16 tirety of our lives.

17 “Not even in the days of the Blood Barons did such a shift occur. You have
18 seen demons and you have heard the whispered name of the Lord of the Hells.
19 You have even understood, in some fashion, that the Lord of the Hells is a god,
20 and that he is here. Here, in the same world, the same reality, as Jewel. Do you
21 honestly think that we are the equal of a god? The gods once shaped whole
22 continents on a whim and destroyed them in the same fashion; they did not
23 privilege or prize life or their creations, and they certainly did not grant them
24 autonomy.

25 “And yet, we have some rudimentary autonomy. And man, as a species,
26 survived. Does it not strike you as all but impossible?”

27 Jester understood a rhetorical question when he heard one.

28 “Have you noticed that the immortals grant Jewel respect that they do not
29 offer to anyone else? They call her Sen.”

30 Silence.

31 “You were present when we went to find Jewel in what, to her, was a dream.
32 You went to the twenty-fifth holding.”

33 “Enough, Haval.”

34 “No, it is not. Because if no one else is willing to see the truth of this, we
35 will be caught in the dreams of Jewel Markess, made, remade, or vanished
36 without any conscious thought on her part. She would not willingly do so. But
37 what we dream is not what we live, and the choices we make in dreams are
38 often counter to everything we believe we stand for.” He frowned. “Surely this
39N cannot come as a surprise to you, if you have invested any thought in it at all.”



Lazy, remember? Jester started to speak the words, but they would not leave his mouth. Had he thought? No, but it was worse than that. He had avoided all such thought. The den trusted Jay. Had always trusted her. She had given them no reason, ever, to do otherwise. But Teller—Teller had been thinking. And Finch, in all probability.

“I have searched,” Haval continued. “I have had others search. The people who lived in that apartment at the time that Jewel returned there in her dreaming no longer exist. They have never existed. There are gaps that imply that existence, but even those are closing.”

Jester didn’t give a damn about anyone who wasn’t den. Jester didn’t think twice about people who had mysteriously vanished from the twenty-fifth holding. What Jester thought—the only thing he’d thought—was that if the dream were *stronger*, they could have pulled Arann, Lefty, Fisher, Lander, and—yes—even Duster, out of that apartment and into the world, where they would be alive again.

And then he had stopped thinking, because it was painful, and it led to places that were unprofitable.

“You do not care.”

“No.”

“You would let the city burn as long as your den survived.”

Jester shrugged.

“Can you say the same of Jewel? No, that is unfair. You might lie, and you are not particularly accomplished at it. Far better, however, than your Lord. She is not what you are. Were she, none of you would be at her side. Because she is who she is, your den has become what it is. In my opinion, Arann would be almost unchanged; perhaps Teller. But the rest of you have always been more flexible. It is why Finch can work with, and even admire, a man she does not trust.

“Jewel felt no ill-will for the people who vanished. She simply did not think about them at all. How much does one think about the setting of one’s dreams—or nightmares? But, in waking, she will be burdened with guilt and self-loathing, and that will quite probably destroy us.

“I am not unlike you. I care for few, but that care is absolute and unshifting. Jewel is, in the opinion of the denizens of the wilderness, our only hope. And Averalaan will be her seat.”

“That hasn’t answered my question.”

“You are not stupid. You are no longer young, except in the relative sense. I have answered your question in as much detail as I now possess. Let me be clearer. She will become what she must become; she became Terafin against her

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01 personal preference. But our ability to survive it does not depend entirely on
02 Jewel. It depends on you. It depends on the rest of the den. It depends, in some
03 small fashion, on men like me.

04 “And men like Jarven. There are things we cannot ask of her that must,
05 regardless, be asked of someone.”

06 “Anything done in her name, or done for her sake, she considers her respon-
07 sibility. Anything. It’s why she’s never asked me to do what you might ask in
08 future. If people are to become simple tools, they have no will of their own, no
09 direction, no innate morality. And if they become her tools, she’s the one to
10 blame for the work they do, not them.”

11 “Ah. Then tell me, Jester, why did she keep Duster?”

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