

CHAPTER ONE

The Shining Palace 20th day of Misteral, 427 A. A.

Anya decided there should be rabbits.

This realization came upon her while she stood at the height of the palace wing that housed the human court. While they huddled inside, in their draping cloaks of flat, shiny fur, she stood just beyond the balcony that opened, wind, snow, or sun, into the Northern wastes, the flat of her feet against the raw stone of a dragon's swooping neck. That dragon hunched, wings arched, just past the stone rails of the wide, deep balcony, looking down its serpentine nose across the startling white of the morning snow above -- and beyond -- the city, as if in mid-breath.

The stone was cold and rough beneath the pads of her feet; she couldn't decide whether or not she liked the feeling. But even given that indecision she *knew* this was not the way dragon skin should feel. She knew the old stories; dragons should have *scales*.

And those scales should be larger than a man's arm, and smooth. Definitely smooth. This old stone thing looked more like a giant worm with wings and teeth.

She hesitated a moment.

Since she had moved the throne, Lord Ishavriel had been in a bad mood. And although he never raised his voice, and never tried to hurt her, she didn't *like* it when he was angry.

But she did have her throne, now. She could sit in it whenever she wanted, and listen to the colours that glimmered along the shadowed floors, like dangerous old friends, their voices unmuted, their brightness undimmed. She could taste their shades through the tips of her fingers -- although admittedly that was rare -- and sometimes, when she was very tired, she could speak with them.

She spoke to them now, but they were distant.

But that was shadow, and she could think about that anytime. Today she had remembered rabbits.

She usually hated memory. It was all bad. It took her back to the ugly times, before she had been taught just how special, how powerful, she was. She had considered making a spell that would stop her from remembering anything, ever -- but Lord Ishavriel had told her it was a Bad Idea, and she

had decided to trust him.

And the rabbits proved that he was right.

Today, she had been taken back to a time when colours were something she could see with eyes alone; they had no taste, no voice, no sensation. She could hear conversation as if spoken words had no smells; could touch soft fabrics, hard wood, cold metals, as if they, as they had once been, were once again devoid of taste.

And when that happened, she treasured the memory and did everything in her power to preserve it.

Everything.

She was Anya a'Cooper. There was a lot she could do.

But the stone against her bare feet was really starting to bother her, it was just so *wrong*.

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Across the grounds of the Shining Palace, from the heights of its towers to the depths of its hidden recesses, its cavernous dungeons, those creatures -- human or kin -- with a sensitivity to magic, lifted their heads in perfect unison, as if struck by the same blow, no matter how many walls, how much physical distance, separated them.

It had become thus since the Lord's ceremony; the investiture of His power into the flawed but inarguably powerful madwoman had not perturbed her in the slightest -- but it had had the effect of deepening the range of her careless, whimsical magery.

Had they not had to endure the results, and the resultant hazards, of the blending of immortal and mortal power, there were men within the walls of the Shining Palace who would have found the entire experiment fascinating. Those men now flinched; they were closest to the balcony upon which Anya had chosen to stand.

Closest to the roar that crushed conversation, stilled movement, filled silence from one end of the Shining Palace to the other.

The wall that was flimsy protection from the Northern cold cracked like thin ice and fell away from the line of the brilliant, blue sky.

Against it, for those who cared to look, stood the mad, mad mage, conversing with an angry dragon, a creature of stone and glittering scale.

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Anya, the dragon said, its voice rich with the heavy scent of newly turned earth, its words a deep, deep blue. She could feel each syllable crawling

across the backs of her hands as they furred around air that was suddenly cold; there was *magic* here. The sensations were always sharpest in the presence of magic.

She withdrew her own power without thinking, and the soles of her feet, protected until then -- because she *liked* bare feet -- from the bitter cold, now shrieked in protest. She could hear their voice like the rush of a thousand sibilant whispers.

She didn't like it when her feet spoke.

But the dragon roared again, distracting her from her pain.

"But they look so much better!" She shouted. "Everyone knows *real* dragons have scales!"

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Thus did the Lord of Night converse with the most powerful, and the least sane, of his many servants, and it must have amused him to do so, for although the outcome of such an argument could never be in doubt, the fact that it existed at all said much.

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The Terafin Manse, 20th day of Misteral, 427 A. A.

The moon was bright, the air still, the starlight lessened by the presence of thin clouds that huddled, shroud-like, before its silvered face.

A man stood alone beneath the delicate light of the Averalan night. The sea's breaking rumble was a constant rhythm, the heartbeat of the High City; it could be heard in the distance because so many other sounds were absent: the movement of people, their breath broken by laughter or the harsh, sharp bark of angry syllables; the clipped, steady pace of the horses that drew carriages and coaches from manse to manse along the isle; the heavy tread of the Kings Swords as they patrolled the High City with a vigilance not found in the Old one.

True, those sounds were of necessity distant even during the height of day, but he had become aware of them.

Had found it necessary to become aware of them; Amarais, named before her rise to power Handernesse, and then Handernesse ATerafin, had become as silent as stone. Yes, stone, Morretz thought bleakly, avoiding the other comparison that was so colloquial and inelegant.

The Terafin was careful, during the hours of day, to tend her House and the affairs of her House as if nothing troubled her. As if she had had no warning of her impending death; as if death itself was the distant eventuality

it would be for the rest of her House. But in the evenings she allowed the full weight of that knowledge to descend upon her, and shrouded by it, protected by it, she sought the solace of the Terafin Shrine -- although judging by her expression, both before and after, it was meagre solace indeed.

He waited. He found it increasingly difficult to wait at a distance, although he had always waited here, at the edge of this path, for the Lord he had chosen to serve so many years ago. That service now counted for more than half of his life.

Amarais.

She would die. She had accepted it with a peculiar, angry grace that Morretz himself had failed to achieve. He hid it; he hid it well. But his days were absorbed by the question of her survival; his mornings -- when he had ascertained for himself that a simple thing like the morning meal would not kill her -- began, and often ended, with Devon ATerafin.

Devon, who understood the routines of assassination better than any other member of the House, up to and probably including the man -- or woman -- who would in the end successfully employ them against The Terafin. He had to. He served the Lord of the Compact as a member of his Astari, and he protected the Twin Kings.

The Terafin had not, of course, specifically told Morretz to keep his peace -- and his silence -- in this affair.

Nor should she have had to. In all things, Morretz of the guild of the domicis was her loyal servant. Hers, not House Terafin's. He had spent the better part of a decade using the two -- The Terafin, House Terafin -- as synonyms. That was gone; what remained was a bitter, simmering resentment, for it was the latter that would destroy the former, and she would offer herself up to it with a willing, terrible grace.

The privilege of power.

He was surprised when she returned to him early, for he had sat this vigil night after night for almost a month, and he knew the hour of its ending almost as intimately as he did the minute of its commencing.

"Morretz," she said quietly.

He bowed, waiting until she stepped off the path before he spoke. Or intending to wait. But she stood, her feet to one side of the line that divided the tended stone walk from the inner recess of the garden, waiting his acknowledgement.

"Terafin," he said at last. He looked up, the grace of the movement

marred by the hesitance, subtle and deep, with which he met her gaze.

She was standing in the shadows between the contained light of two glass lamps, and as he lifted his chin, she smiled. It was a weary expression, which did not alarm him, but it was also unusually gentle, which did.

"Terafin --"

She lifted a hand. "I am not yet finished for the evening, but before I am, I must ask a favour."

He waited.

Her smile lessened, ebbing from the familiar terrain of her face as if it were tide. "Please summon the men and women who serve Jewel ATerafin."

"Summon them?"

"Yes. I will meet them here."

"Terafin --"

"Don't ask," she said quietly.

He bowed, but he did not move. They both knew that the only time men and women were summoned to this place was to give their oaths of service to the House, and even then, it was rare for any but the Chosen to be so called. "Did the House demand their presence?"

"No."

He looked at her face; she had chosen to stand where the shadows -- in a garden where light was scattered in artful abundance -- were strongest. Funny, that.

"What will you do?" She asked him, as the silence stretched.

He chose -- as he rarely chose -- to misunderstand her. "My pardon, Terafin, I will fetch the den."

But she raised a hand before he could retreat, and the movement, as subtle as command could be to one who understood it, held him fast. "Morretz, when your service here is ended what will you do?"

He could not speak, although he understood that he could serve her best at this moment by offering her the words she asked for. *And what of me?* He thought, bitter now, the words so foreign they were almost another language. *What of my needs?*

It was so wrong.

And yet, beneath the weight of hers, beneath the years of the service he had willingly undertaken, his needs had been met. Until now.

She had always accepted his silences before. But he knew that she must want companionship very badly, for she did not choose to do so now.

"Will you return to the Guild? Will you teach? Will you return to the home that you have never once spoken of in your years in my service? Or will you choose to take another master? There are few who would not value your service, given what you have built here."

"Terafin." The familiar syllables smoothed the anger out of his voice, although it was there, it was suddenly present. He wondered if she understood how deeply she had just insulted him, and decided that she was Amara; she *must*, and she had chosen to do so deliberately.

"I will never seek another Master, no matter what the outcome of this current situation is. I am done with power. I am done with the hopes --" He stopped, then, seeing, for a moment, not the glorious evening gardens of House Terafin, but the enclosed classrooms of the Guild of the Domicis.

I will serve a lord I admire.

That had been the right answer; it was the right answer now. But no one had asked him -- not himself, especially not himself -- what he would do when that service ended. He had made it his life, having found a Lord he admired and respected, to serve her, strengthen her, provide her with the support she required that she might meet the goals she held aloft for his quiet inspection.

She was silent as he returned to the present. But he did not think the silence would last; it had a curious unfinished quality to it that spoke of the hovering presence of unshed words.

"Amara."

"Morretz."

"I ... cannot speak of your death."

He thought that would silence her, for she herself had never once spoken of it. It had become impossible not to know that she expected it, but he had waited, in a strained silence he had thought -- until this moment -- was devoid of hope.

He knew, now, that he had accomplished only the unenviable task of lying to himself. He had had hope, and she meant, this eve, to deprive him of even that.

"If you accepted it, Morretz, you would speak of it. You would speak of it because you would know -- as *I* know, and I have accepted -- that my death may mean the end of all that we have built together. The heir that I chose is gone; the South has taken her, the war -- a war that is larger in every way than my House, but only slightly -- has devoured her energy, her time, her attention.

"You would speak of it because you would desire a plan, some course of action, that would protect what we value more than we value life."

"Seers have been wrong in the past."

"Perhaps; I will not argue with you. It is not of the past that we speak, it is of the future, and of the future, there is little doubt. What she saw, she saw; in its fashion, it will come to pass."

As if she wielded the sword of Terafin, her words were sharp and terrible. He lifted a hand. They passed through it.

"You are astute, Terafin. I cannot accept what you accept."

"If acceptance is beyond you, can you find it in yourself to forego anger? I have no intention of walking easily to death; it will come from a quarter that I cannot now foresee. I abjure no responsibility; anything that I *can* prevent will be prevented." Her smile was the wolf's smile, lean and powerful. "Let them work for my death. Let them outmaneuver me, outthink me, outplay me." But the smile was a ghost; it passed. "Accept that there are things I cannot do."

And here was the crux of the matter. Here, at last. This woman, this slender, beautiful woman -- yes, beautiful, more now than as an unformed, grave youth -- was *The Terafin*. She had never failed at anything she had set her mind to -- not even when that thing was the governing of the most powerful House in the Empire. Against odds far greater than this, she had won her seat, had survived the House War that had decimated the ranks of the House Guards, divided all.

Fight this! Fight it, you can only be killed if you choose to surrender!

As if she could hear the words he could not say, she glanced away.

"Tell me that you are not tired, Amara. Tell me."

She was silent a moment. At last, she said, "Bring the den."

He wanted to shout at her then; wanted to grab her by the arms and shake her -- as if by doing so he could force her to feel what he now felt, measure for measure. *You are Amara, you are the woman I chose to give my life to -- you have failed at nothing in your life, will you surrender now?*

But he was domicis; and if what he had undertaken with such profound hope so many years ago had become an almost unbearable burden, he bore it still.

He bowed stiffly and offered to her his silent obedience.

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Finch woke.

There was no light in her room, but she wasn't Jay; she found the

darkness of the sleeping House peaceful. Whatever fears clung to her from the past that had shaped them both found its hold diminished, not strengthened, when the lights dimmed and faded. Had nights in the twenty-fifth holding been bad? Yes. But the days had been worse, for Finch. At night there were shadows, places made of moonlight and starlight in which someone slender and quiet could hide. Day forgave little.

She therefore needed no Avandar to stand by the foot of her bed, light in hand or cupped palm, as guardian against nightmares that might follow the waning of the day; indeed, had she been offered such a sentry, she would have found it hard to sleep, for she desired the simple stillness of a completely private place; she found in it a freedom from the responsibilities of the waking day.

Teller envied her for that; it was in the darkness that he, like Jay, lay awake, thinking with precision and clarity, about everything that had gone -- or could go -- wrong, and an hour might pass while he lay, immobile, waiting for something as elusive as sleep.

Not Finch. Covers tucked to chin -- the one night foible she shared with almost every one of her denkin -- she could listen to the quiet sounds of the House.

Those noises differed from season to season, and she had grown to know them all, in the quiet and safety of this building, this gift from a merciful god. A merciful god, and Jay.

Jay.

Even in safety, there were barbs.

The House Guards were on patrol.

She heard them, heavy steps almost in unison, in the doors beyond the wing. Since Alea's death, Guards such as these -- perhaps these; at this time of night, she was uncertain who patrolled -- had crossed one end of the manse to the other, in groups of no less than eight; Torvan himself saw to the composition of these small squads to assure that the loyalty of these men was, if not unquestioned, than at least not uniform.

They all serve The Terafin, she'd said, naïve then and no doubt naïve now.

Yes, he'd said, voice soft, gaze on a spot she couldn't see clearly, no matter how close it seemed to be. *But they know that an heir has to be chosen, and they know -- all of them -- that they've never been Chosen, not by the reigning Terafin. If they choose to support one of the contenders for the title, if they choose wisely, they're in at the ground, and they have a chance at promotion they'd never see here.*

You think they'd -- they'd attack her?

The Terafin? No. Never. But each other? They owe no loyalty to any other Lord.
Well, she'd asked. Funny, how little comfort answers offered.

The month of Misteral was often heavy with rain, damp and cool compared to the rest of the year. This month was slightly different; rain threatened to fall, but the clouds that carried it were shunted to one side of the city -- or the other -- by the gusts of salt-laden wind. Nevertheless, sailing merchants that came to make their reports, and take their rest, at House Terafin, could be heard cursing the weather with seasonal fervour.

They drank, Finch thought, nose wrinkling, too much. But when they weren't falling down drunk, or unpleasantly drunk, they had the best stories to tell; tales of lands far to the South, to the North, or -- almost impossible to believe -- to the East, beyond the ocean that stretched across the horizon without break.

Often in Misteral, Corvil and Henden -- Corvil was worst -- they spent time in the city, bound to land; they visited their families, their Lords and their bankers, and they allowed themselves to be wheedled out of a good story. Finch, small for her size and gentle in manner, had become inordinately good at wheedling.

But this Misteral the merchant voices of House Terafin were notably strained or silent; the merchants stayed away from the manse unless they were drunk or commanded to do otherwise. She didn't blame them. If she'd had a choice, she'd've been anywhere else.

But Kalliaris had already frowned, fickle Goddess.

Finch missed the merchants' voice the most; they could often be heard late into the night, mingled with the songs of hapless young bards who'd been dragged into the gardens or the Halls. Merchants often did that, in *any* House, finding the open space, the acoustical heights, of the stately, fixed buildings irresistible in comparison to the vessels that were their true kingdoms.

No song, tonight. Or rather, no harp, no lute, no raised voice.

She heard owl cries instead; hunting songs, primitive and plain. Too primitive for the tended and controlled gardens, the clipped hedges, the flowers arranged into whimsical, well-ordered patterns that hinted at wilderness without ever being touched by it. She had learned the names of basic edible weeds and plants as a child in the twenty-fifth holding, and none of those graced the gardens. She had never learned the names of the plants, although she knew the tree names: Oak and Ash, Yew and Rood. She couldn't always tell which tree and which name coincided, but had learned to gloss over ignorance on the rare occasions she was forced to

entertain someone who wished to walk the gardens.

And she found comfort in those nameless trees at night; they housed the wild birds, their sleeping children still wary of the hands and the intentions of men. Did it matter that some of those birds were birds of prey?

It had, once.

Now, they were simply what they were.

She listened as she lay in bed, palms curled round the edge of blanket, thinking: *I never hear the mice.*

Morbidly, she wondered if mice screamed when they were caught by the birds whose cries and calls she did hear.

Jay, she thought. Are we still mice? After all this time, do you think we've really learned how to be anything else? Come home, damn it. Come home.

But Jay was a continent away.

And Finch was here.

Thinking about mice. Finding an absurd comfort in the fact that these small furred creatures -- and the red kits, the dwarf rabbits -- inconvenient in every possible way to the House and annoying to the gardener if they chose to nest in the wrong places (and they did), persisted; they existed no matter how well coiffed and tended the natural world around them became. Lived, no matter how hunted they were by the birds whose cry she could hear, when their own dying voices were silent, always silent.

Perhaps because she needed that reminder now, she lay awake for longer than she usually did. She couldn't say why, but she wasn't surprised when she heard the knock at the door, even though she wasn't consciously aware of the sound of anyone in the hall beyond it. Not consciously.

She knew it was Ellerson.

Funny, that he could be here for so little time and have already worked his way down into an awareness that owed more to instinct than intellect.

She rose quickly, shedding blanket and reverie, and opened the door; the hinges had time to squeak a faint protest.

He carried no light; the wall sconces did that for him. Jewel had ordered them set with magestones -- and once the rest of the den had gotten over the *cost*, they accepted this daily evidence of magery as easily as they accepted all her other orders.

She blinked; light from the hall reached her eyes, wakening vision, returning the sense that the world was possessed of and by colour.

"You had best dress," he told her quietly, his voice the essence of gravity.

"Dress well or dress?" she asked, but without much hope.

"The Terafin has sent for you."

She heard another creak down the hall; saw Teller's slender face peer out from the gap between door and frame. "Finch?"

She nodded. "There's trouble. Get dressed. Dress well."

"It is not necessary to assume there's trouble, as you call it," Ellerson told her, his minute frown as familiar as the tone of his voice, the stiff line of his shoulder.

"At this time of night? This is trouble. Teller, get the others too."

"All of them?"

"All of them. But don't bother arguing with Angel about his clothing."

"What about Arann?"

"Him too."

"But he's got patrol in two hours."

"Him too."

Teller nodded. His head disappeared and reappeared so quickly Finch wondered if he'd even bothered to change out of his clothing before going to bed.

"Ellerson?" He said, looking past her.

Ellerson nodded.

"Do you know what's wrong?"

"I am domicis," the old man replied.

"Why is she doing this to us?" Finch said, between clenched teeth. Her jaw was sore with it -- it was an expression she'd learned, over the years, from watching Jay.

"ATerafin --"

"Someone's going to notice this. If we report to her in the day, when everyone else does, they can take note of it, but they can't prove anything significant has happened. But *this* -- Kalliaris must have been frowning for weeks. Doesn't she know that they're all watching us?"

He didn't ask her who 'they' were. Didn't need to. Instead he said, "You are not the only people being watched." The tone of his voice was critical enough that it would have stemmed the flow of words if those words hadn't been riding on so much fear.

"No -- we're the only *insignificant* people being watched." She hadn't meant to sound so bitter; she almost never did. Shame warred with fear, and

fear won. "Gods, this is so easy for *them*. They've got money, they've got experience, they've got friends in all the right places -- they've even got the House Guards all carved up between them, and she isn't dead yet! They've got everything."

"Finch," Ellerson said, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

She looked up at him, eyes wide, the difference in their height startling to her. Had she shrunk?

"ATerafin," he added, when he was certain of her attention. "Do you truly believe you are without your support? Captain Torvan of the Chosen visits only one of the Terafin House Council on a regular basis."

"Jay," she said at last. "But Jay's not here."

His grim silence was reproof enough. She was silent for a moment. But when she spoke, her voice was level. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "You're right of course. But I --"

His hand, where it rested on her shoulder, tightened a moment. She met his eyes.

Was surprised to see his smile. "No one who has responsibilities that they take seriously is completely without fear. No one. But I have never met a man -- or a woman -- who can meet those responsibilities well when fear rules them. Jewel ATerafin trusted -- and trusts -- you. If you cannot trust your own judgement in this, trust hers.

"Or mine, if it is of value. I admit that I was hesitant to return here. I am retired. I have ... enjoyed my retirement immensely. But having begun, I remember what being a *domicis* means, to me, and I am honoured to serve your den."

"And how long will you stay? How long this time?"

"I will stay," he told her gently, "until I am no longer needed. Come. The others are waiting."

She looked up then. Everyone -- except for Carver -- was standing, silent, in the wake of his words. She wondered how much they'd heard. Carver joined them, struggling to get his elbows free of the neck of a shirt he was too lazy to unbutton.

"Ellerson?"

"Yes?"

"Who delivered the message?"

And a familiar figure stepped out of shadows that Finch *knew* weren't natural -- Jay had paid a lot of money to see to that.

"Morretz?"

He stared at her a moment, as if appraising her, but his expression gave none of the result of that appraisal away.

"I did, ATerafin. I understand your fear. I understand your caution. I am here to make certain that -- in as much as it can be -- your passage to the shrine remains undetected by any of the would-be rulers of this House."

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They had talked to Morretz. To Torvan. To Arrendas. They had spoken with Devon, and with Gabriel; they had become, in all things, Jay's substitutes. They had learned, clumsily, but with a determination that desperation underscored, to navigate the byways of the powerful, dancing carefully along the edge of the increasing hostilities between the four men and women who desired what only the den knew Jay already had -- the legitimacy of The Terafin's choice.

Those hostilities had left the injured, the broken, and occasionally the dead, as evidence of what happened when too much ambition met with too much ambition. Had it been up to Finch, not a one of the four would now have the Terafin name behind them.

But The Terafin did not condescend to notice what could not be ignored. It hurt Finch, inexplicably, to see that, to accept it for what it was.

She shook herself.

Since they had understood the full meaning of Jewel ATerafin's vision, since they had realized that The Terafin was to die before Jay's return, they had not spoken with The Terafin. They had listened to her, when she had come to tell them of the demon attack in The Common; they had listened to her again, when she had finally decided that the personal investigation -- the sifting through rubble, the tending to the injured -- would be brought to a close. But they had not been required to speak; had not been required to meet her gaze and acknowledge their understanding.

Until tonight.

It was funny.

Finch was easily the smallest, physically, of Jay's den. How a bunch of grown men could huddle *behind* her wasn't clear -- but they were all trying exactly that, with the single exception of Teller. If Finch had loved him before Jay left -- and she had, she always had -- she had never understood why he was obviously the most valued member of the den. It had stung, sometimes; still did, when she was feeling low enough to pick at it.

But she understood it now. Silent, he was still present, and when she

reached the shrine of Terafin and hesitated a moment at the rounding curve of low, stone steps, he smiled at her briefly, squeezed her hand, and stepped forward.

The sound of his step against smoky, marbled stone brought her back to herself; she looked up, past his back -- he'd left room for her at his side -- to see the woman who waited for them.

The woman who ruled them all.

There was light, in this place. It perched in torches against the pillars that supported the domed ceiling. Someone had thought to fashion those torches into the shapes of birds, works of brass whose wings, from tip to tip, were polished and gleaming beneath the fires they carried. No magestones here; no even light; one of the groundskeepers or the gardeners must have carried oil, glass, and cloth when they came to this place; someone must have brought stools and ladders, rags; someone must have taken the time to light these lamps, and to gutter them, and to clean the residue of their burning from the backs of the creatures that held them.

And not just once, but over and over, each act deliberate and ephemeral.

Although she had always liked magestones, it seemed fitting that such effort and laborious care be offered here, beneath this simple dome, yet above the grass that surrounded the flat, rising steps. What time could not take from the stones mages made, it would take from the lamps, from the oil, from the labour of men -- and the labour of men would again be called. And if the men who performed this maintenance were different, the fire didn't care.

"ATerafin," The Terafin said.

Finch nodded quietly; her nervousness deserted her as she cast one last glance at the fire that flickered in natural lamp.

She climbed the steps to join Teller, who waited for her in silence. When the Terafin did not speak, Finch turned and gestured wordlessly for the others to follow; only Angel lingered upon the path enclosed on either side by lamp, grass, pillar.

"Angel never accepted the House name," The Terafin said softly. There was a hint of question in the words.

"No. And he blackened Carver's eye when Carver did." Realization of whom she was speaking to followed -- rather than preceded -- the words; her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth for just a moment.

But the Terafin's response was an unguarded smile. "He didn't wish to compromise his integrity by swearing an oath to serve the House when his

loyalty was simply to one of its members?"

"Something like that."

"And if she ruled the House?"

Teller stiffened; Finch caught the sudden lack of movement -- startling even though Teller was not the most animated of people -- with the small part of her attention that wasn't focused on The Terafin.

Ellerson, she thought, *why aren't you here?* She wasn't up to a protracted conversation with arguably the most powerful woman in the Empire. Or at least not a politic, intelligent one.

Teller came to her rescue.

"If she ruled the House he wouldn't need to accept the name; she already owns everything he's willing to give away. Angel's never been one for empty gesture."

"No," The Terafin replied. "And the rest of you?"

He shrugged, although his expression was completely serious. "For the rest of us, it wasn't empty. Jay wanted the name, and because she wanted it, we wanted it. Except for Angel. And Arann," he added, almost grudgingly.

"Arann." She found him easily on the crowded flat of the floor that encircled the altar by which she stood. Her expression shifted, a subtle motion of lines, a narrowing of eyes, a compression of lips. She nodded slightly as she met his eyes, and he came -- albeit awkwardly -- toward her.

He did what they had failed to do; knelt before her feet, bowed his head.

Finch was suddenly aware of the sword that hung by his side -- had to be; it scraped against the surface of marbled stone like fingers against board. No one else wore one. Carver and Angel had taken lessons, but the weaponsmaster Jay had sent them *all* to had chosen instead to focus on the skills he felt they did have: long daggers, short daggers, thrown weapons.

But Arann had joined the House Guards almost right from the start. Jay had hated it. Had been proud of it, and had hated it.

And he knew. Funny, it had hardly bothered him at all when she'd been here. But Finch knew him well enough; he'd gone to his knees tonight, but it was the first time in years that old split loyalties chafed at him.

The Terafin knew it as well.

She'd known Arann for a handful of years as a polite, but respectful half-stranger, but she could also see what Finch, who was almost blood-kin, could see -- and no less clearly. That, Finch thought without rancour, was why she was The Terafin.

Arann rose as The Terafin gestured.

"Well," she aid, "Are you hers or are you mine?"

He was not a wordsmith.

But he was not a coward either; the fear of being forced, after so many years, to choose was more terrible than the event itself. He squared his shoulders, shedding weight in the process.

"Both."

"Is that a suitable reply?"

"It's the only one I have, Terafin."

"I ... see." The woman who ruled stepped into back; her hands touched the pale, cold surface of stone as if she might draw strength from the Terafin altar. It cut across the heart of the shrine, forgotten by the den until he moment she chose to remind them of its existence by this simple gesture.

"You both serve the House," he continued, for if she touched the altar with the flat of her palms, she did not look away.

"I rule the House," she said, the words cool.

"You serve the House best *by* ruling it. And Jay served the House best by serving *you*."

"And how will she serve the House when I am dead?"

Arann didn't flinch. Finch did. And because she did, she missed the expression on his face.

"By ruling it," he said quietly. "By ruling it because in the end you've left her no other choice."

"I?"

"You know who seeks power. You've seen them. You've seen what they're willing to do to gain it. But --"

"It is not easy to remove the powerful from their positions. I would weaken Terafin immeasurably if I were to attempt such an extraction."

"You weaken it," he said, "by your willingness to leave that task to others."

"Do I?" She turned away. Gazed into the night sky in the distance, broken by the outline of the grand, the glorious, House. "Arann, how many of the four who now desire the title will survive the struggle to gain it?"

His silence was her answer; it was an honest silence. She waited, gaze still upon her home, her life's work. And then she turned her back upon it, to look once again at the handful of men and women who were Jay's.

"I believe that two will not survive. Two will. And those two -- whoever

they are -- will lend their strength and their expertise to the House."

"While they circle like vultures."

"No. They will accept their defeat. They play the edges of a game that could easily destroy what they desire. The Kings have turned a blind eye toward the struggles of the House -- of any of the Houses -- when there is a question of succession. Such small wars serve their purpose in a fashion. While such ambition is turned towards one of the Ten, it cannot be turned toward the Thrones."

"Only the god-born rule the Empire."

"Indeed, that is true. Now. But remember your history; before the god-born, who ruled?"

It was Teller who said, quietly, "The Blood Barons."

Henden cast its long, long shadow. Even the mention of the demon kin was somehow less threatening than the mention of the men who had made the Empire their battleground for so long all of its traditions and festivals still spoke of the scars.

"B-but -- But that was before the god-born. The Twin Kings can't be unseated now."

Her smile was bitter. "Why do you say that, Arann?"

"Because -- they're the children of *god*."

"They are not, except by cunning and the consensus of the ruled, more powerful than the magi. They are not more powerful than the talent-born. On a whim, the former bardmaster of Senniel college could have forced them to dance to any tune she desired to call. They are not, as the scions of gods, among the most powerful of their kind and -- in case it has escaped your notice, and it probably has -- they pay for the immortal blood that burns in their veins; their lives are measured in shortened years.

"And you forget, god-born or no, had the first of the Twin Kings not been the children of Veralaan, had they not possessed the blood of the 'rightful' ruler of these lands, they would have received no aid; the Ten would not have joined them in their crusade. The Ten were not god-born," she added softly, "but they believed, then, that blood mattered more than achievement. Or that it was part of achievement; I confess that I do not understand the niceties of those ancient beliefs, having benefited in a fashion from their demise." Her smile was brief and plain.

"You expect much, Arann, from the god-born; they are, after all, mortal. But I digress; the Ten serve a purpose in many, many ways. The ambitious and the powerful are drawn to the Houses like moths to flame. Some

achieve greatness within their confines; others achieve merely death. The Kings reign above, and beneath us, the rest of the Empire unfolds. We are suspended in a manner of our choosing. We take a risk; we bear the cost."

"But not alone," Teller told her quietly.

She raised a brow. She had not addressed Teller directly.

"You called us; we came. Jay's never called us here, and she comes all the time."

"You are perceptive; I expect no less. Do you know who you will be, if you survive this war, Teller ATerafin?"

His smile was slight. "Teller ATerafin." And sweet.

"Of that, I have no doubt," the Terafin replied. Her voice deepened a moment, her expression shifting in the light as she turned again. "Survive," she whispered. "Haerrad saw clearly when he came to you."

Teller nodded.

"When I was younger -- much, much younger -- I felt that friends were a weakness. Had I the choice, I would have gathered men like Duvvari around me, and no others."

Duvvari, Lord of the Compact, was perhaps the coldest man Finch had ever met. He had come, on a handful of occasions, to speak with The Terafin -- or Jay -- and everything about him made her want to flinch. Or run.

She would really have to learn how to school her expression.

"Yes, I understand Finch. But a man like Duvvari is very, very hard to kill. Of all the men in the Empire, if I could choose one who would survive the world's end, the coming of the second Hell, the return of the Firstborn -- it would be Duvvari."

"Only the good die young," Finch muttered.

"Perhaps. It doesn't matter; he chooses his cause and he never wavers. It was important to me that my compatriots not die. Important that their deaths in no way be laid at my feet." Her arms bent; her hands supported her weight. "It's been so long, I had forgotten how visceral that desire could be."

Finch knew, then. "Until Alea," she whispered.

"Until Alea." The Terafin bowed her head. "Alea was the closest thing to a child the Lord of a House is generally permitted. I was fond of her -- and I am fond of few. But I was proud of her as well; she was worthy of respect."

"Morretz will never forgive me," she added quietly. "In my youth, I would have sought vengeance; I would have offered death for her death; I

would have destroyed even the House I valued in order to achieve that end, and have peace.

"But I am not young, not as I was then. The things that burn me merely scar; they light no spark; they fan no useful flame. And peace is not to be gained by a simple death. Or a complicated one."

"Why will Morretz --"

Teller shook his head, sharply, and Finch shut up. It was as close to command as Teller got.

"I have asked you here for a reason," the Terafin said. She drew breath, gained height; the line of her shoulders straightened.

"You want our oaths."

"Yes."

"You want more than our oaths."

"Yes."

"We don't have a lot more to give you."

"Teller ATerafin," the Terafin said, bowing slightly, "I would never ask you to join the Chosen; you are a foot too short, and several inches too slender. But you have the temperament, if not the build. Finch, likewise." She looked away again. And then back. "Arann," she said, speaking for the first time to the only member of the den who had chosen to pledge allegiance to her House, and therefore indirectly, to her.

"Terafin."

For the first time that evening -- and Finch would remember this for the rest of her life, no matter how short or how long that might be -- The Terafin pulled aside the great cloak she wore. The cloak itself was fine, but weathered, and it sat too low on her shoulders, too close to the ground. Finch might have paid more attention to it, but it was a simple curtain over an unexpected window, and what lay beyond the window held all of her attention the moment she glimpsed it.

The scabbard.

The sword.

Justice.

She raised her hands to her mouth.

"Who do you serve, Arann ATerafin?"

He was, Finch thought, white as the altar at his Lord's back. But he must have had some colour left, because he got even paler when the sword left its sheath.

He knelt. Raised his face to meet her unyielding gaze.

"You," he said, so softly that Finch wasn't certain she'd heard it.

"Good. And do you trust me, Arann?"

"Yes." Louder.

"Will you trust my words above the words of all others?"

"Yes."

"Will you know which words are mine when all words come to you clothed in deceit and lies?"

He was silent. Finch wasn't surprised; she would have been. He lowered his face a moment, to look at the ground between her feet.

"To be one of The Chosen is not to be a mindless servant, not to be a fine swordsman; it is not a simple act of loyalty, although perhaps to the eyes of outsiders, loyalty defines the Chosen. You must know *me*, must understand *me*, must decide for yourself when an order you are told is from me is nonetheless not mine. Do you understand? You must, with loyalty and knowledge as a guide, be true in ways that I cannot foresee when I ask you to make this oath and accept the weight of this responsibility.

"Not all who are asked accept. And many of the men and woman -- Alayra, for one, and Arrendas -- asked for three days grace in which to consider what I have just said. But forgive me; I do not have three days to give you. You must decide, as I have, on this eve."

He raised his face again. "Do you trust me, Terafin?"

The corner of her lips turned up slightly in a grudging smile. "A fair question."

"Do you believe that I am capable of what you've asked?"

"A second fair question. Why do you ask?"

"The timing," he said.

The Terafin's brow rose; the smile left her lips. She nodded slowly.

"You want me among the Chosen."

"Yes."

"Because of Jay."

"I would not weaken the Chosen," she told him, her voice cool. "You are loyal to me if you stand among them. You make your vow, and take your rank, from my hands and mine alone."

"Tell me why," Arann said. "Tell us."

She touched his forehead with the tip of her blade. Her hand was

absolutely steady; it had to be. Finch could tell, by the sudden stillness of Arann's face, that there was no distance between skin and steel.

"Jewel ATerafin came to the House at a time that might be considered inauspicious by a lesser Lord." No humility at all in the words -- but Finch didn't mind; they were true. "And proved her value and her worth to my House from the day she arrived.

"Her worth was never in question; yours -- all of yours -- was. I knew that she took responsibility for you, and I admired that in a girl of her age and her background; I was willing to take you on to observe how she handled the transition from poverty to power.

"But I was impressed. From the streets of the twenty-fifth holding, with very little guidance, she chose her companions, and she chose well. I will leave out the peccadilloes of the two young men; they are beneath regard, but they do not invalidate their worth.

"In time, I offered the den the House name." The Terafin smiled. But she did not lower the sword; it rested between them, like the caress of an executioner. "I did not offer it for Jewel's sake. I did not offer it as a reward for her service.

"You earned what you now bear. But you, Arann, were slightly different.

"I believed then, and I believe now, that had you not been dying when Jewel first arrived at the gates of the manse, had Jewel not bargained so harshly for your life, and had your life not required such drastic intervention to save, you would not now stand among the House Guard; you would cleave to your den.

"But you did receive injuries that would have proved fatal, and Alowan did, indeed call you back from the foothills -- or the bridge -- that leads to Mandaros' hall. I believe that Alowan has been so often been forced to heal me that his impression of me shaded yours; you saw not what the den saw, but what Alowan did. And does."

Arann did not move, for the sword still had not wavered.

I never realized The Terafin was so strong, Finch thought, knowing that she would have cut his face from forehead to nosetip about two sentences in because the sword was so damn heavy.

"What Alowan sees in me, he sees in Jewel ATerafin. What she desires for herself, and for this House, is tainted to some degree by the life that formed her -- but it is also informed by the life she has built. She has never -- and I believe she never will -- stoop to assassination to achieve her ends.

"And I will not criticize the limitations that she places upon herself; in

some ways it is by the limitations we choose to labour under that we are best judged."

It was Teller who interrupted her. Or rather, Teller who spoke when she fell silent.

"Terafin," he said, with more respect than he usually put into a name.

She shifted her gaze, but nothing else.

"You haven't answered his question. You haven't told us why."

"Do you need to hear it? Very well. If I die here before Jewel returns, the chance of her taking what *is* hers by right of succession is almost none. The Kings will not interfere if she does not petition them, and even if she does petition them, even if she carries some document, some pale piece of evidence of the truth of her words, they will be ... loathe to interfere. She may hold enough influence to sway them -- but that will destroy the House. Even if she arrives in time, if there is no support in place -- and placed there by *my* command, it will unravel.

"And I do not believe that Jewel would take the risk of opening the House up to the inspection -- and far, far worse -- the dictate of the Kings."

"But the Kings are --"

"The Kings rule the Empire. *We* rule the House."

Finch shut up.

"If she has, as her support, members of significance in the House and its affairs, if she has among her supporters, one or both of the captains of my Chosen, if she has council members, no matter how junior, the matter of the succession will not be so swiftly decided.

"I therefore wish to confer upon you -- her strongest and her most loyal supporters -- those titles that your experience will bear." She seemed to lose strength, then; her shoulders seemed to bow, at last, to some inevitable pressure, some invisible hand.

"Gabriel is my right-kin, but he may be sorely tried in this, for his bloodson is among the contenders. I am not completely ... certain what he will choose to do if I am no longer his Lord.

"Arann," she said quietly, "the sword is heavy. Choose."

He nodded; the tip of the blade scored his forehead. "As you have chosen," he said quietly. "I so choose." He held out his hand, and she laid the edge of the blade against it.

No one was surprised who could see the blood well up in his cupped palm.

She lowered the blade, but she did not sheath it.

Instead she waited until he had gained his feet.

"Teller," she said, "I would have both you and Finch join the House Council."

Just like that.

"The -- *the* House Council?" Finch knew she was sputtering. She looked up, and at the edge of the garden path, she could see Ellerson waiting alongside Morretz. She almost raised both of her hands in a wild frenzy.

"We can't give you an answer tonight," Teller said.

Finch let him speak for her. She didn't have words to speak for herself.

"Ah. You misunderstand me, Teller. What I asked of Arann cannot be commanded. It has been thus with the Terafin and the Chosen since the founding of the line. But what I ask of you and Finch is not in any way a request." She paused. "I understand your reservations. Believe that they are not as strong as mine. But you *will* join the next meeting of the Council when it convenes in three days, and you will be introduced there."

"But -- but --"

"Take Jester as your aide; you are allowed four, with pay. Take Carver and Angel as two of your guards, if you can have them present themselves decently. Speak to Torvan about the rest." She bowed her head.

"I am ... sorry... to place this burden upon you now. But Healer Levec spoke to Alowan, and Alowan spoke to me; we are certain that Jewel will return from the South.

"She will never be the leader of a den in the twenty-fifth holding again. She understood that before she left. Understand that you will never again be a den in the twenty-fifth holding. You will be the foundation upon which this House survives.

"I can afford to spare you nothing. And having decided, I must ask one further favour." She turned to Arann, Arann of the Chosen. "Arann," she said gravely, "draw your blade."

"I --"

"Draw it."

He had never witnessed the induction of the Chosen before, but even so, he knew that there was something amiss. He hesitated a moment, and then rose, hand still bleeding, and drew his blade. "I won't cut you," she said without thinking. "That is part of the ceremony, but it will wait until the ceremony."

"Then why did you cut him?"

She turned her gaze to Finch. "I have my reasons." It was as close to *shut up* as The Terafin ever got.

"Give me your sword, ATerafin."

Again he hesitated.

As if he knew what she was about to do.

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