

CHAPTER ONE

Averalan Armaraelas, House Terafin, 7th day of Scaral, 427 A.A.

Home is where his mother brought her clients.

He learned -- well before conscious memory started -- that those clients were important men. And that many of them didn't want to know that she had a child.

During those nights, he would hide in the closet, or sometimes in the kitchen if the lights were low, and he would hoard his words, his inexplicable child noises; it was part of hiding. Afterward, his mother would come to him and take him quietly into her bed. He never asked her about the men; she never spoke of them. But sometimes she would go out with him the next day, and buy him something special; fruits or white bread from the bakers.

He learned to love the day. And to hate the night.

She was often angry. He remembered that clearly. He learned to fear her anger more than he feared hunger or cold, but he found that silence was the best way to avoid it, and silence became a rule of life, a comfortable law.

Sometimes she would talk about her childhood. He loved those times. She spoke about her birthday, her mother, always her mother. She never spoke about her father, but that seemed natural to him; he had no father of his own. They lived like that, mother and son, their days a prelude to her evenings, his silence.

As he grew older, it was harder; harder to hide.

As he grew older, and she grew older, her youth fading beneath the glare of sun, heat, hunger, her back bent by the poverty that he understood as part of his life, she would sometimes leave for the night.

She would tuck him into bed, and tell him that she would return in the morning, and he would stay awake in the still of the night, staring at the low ceiling, until sleep snuck up on him. But he promised her that he would help her. That one day, she would live in a better place, and she would never have to spend time in the company of her men again.

He started thieving when he was six.

He was small for his age, waif-like; he could get close to people

because they ignored him. Because he was quiet.

She was angry about the theft. The first time he had given her money, she went all grey, and instead of being proud of him, as she so seldom was, her anger came up instead, like sun-rise. He knew she was angry. But she didn't hit him, and she didn't shout at him.

Instead, she left their two room home, while the light of the sun was high.

She returned before sunset, to change into the gaudy clothing she wore at night, her lips a thin line, the corners of her mouth deep with age.

"You don't have no call to go thieving," she told him, her words as tight and angry as her expression.

"But it's money, mom."

"It ain't *our* money, boy."

"But -- but -- it's better than the money you get from those men. I can get us money, mom. You don't have to see them no more."

She caught him by the shoulders, her fingers sharp as knives. "That's *my* job, boy."

"But Peg says you're just selling yourself."

"And what if I am? I'm selling what's *mine*. I'm not selling what belongs to anyone else. You understand? It's honest work. I do it because it's all I can do, but I ain't selling anything that belongs to anyone else. Where'd that money come from?"

He was smart enough not to shrug. "Some man."

"Some man? And what if that man has a little boy, like you? What if he has a bunch, eh? What if you just stole the food off their plates?"

He was silent. It had never occurred to him to wonder.

"I want you to be bigger, to be stronger. I want you to be *better* than that. You grow up, you can join the Kings' army. You can make a honest living. But they don't take no thieves, and I don't want no thieves in my house. You want to stay with me? You don't steal." She spit. "You can beg, if you want. You can sit in the streets with your hands out. But you take what they give you, you understand?"

He nodded, because nodding was safe.

And she looked as if she was going to cry. "You're the only thing in my life I've done right," she told him, touching his hair and his face with her shaking hands. "The only one. Don't break my heart. Don't make a lie out of all the work I done."

But it wasn't, in the end, his choice; it wasn't, in the end hers. That was the lie.

#

"Teller?"

He looked up. The surface of the kitchen table was as clean and polished as the counters. They were never this clean. It was a bad sign. Where was the inkwell, the messy blotters, the quills that, time and again, Jewel ATerafin destroyed?

She had packed them away. Had cleaned house. Had left. That was the plan.

She'd done everything she could to make them a home in House Terafin. They had jobs, now. They had more money than he had ever dreamed of having. They had responsibilities that they could be -- that they were -- proud of. Jewel's little den of thieves. Jay's misfits.

Because of her.

Where was she?

He didn't want to talk to Finch. He didn't want to talk to anyone. But he looked up and nodded when she called his name again. Didn't much like what he saw there. Hadn't really expected to. "What -- what's the news?"

She was so pale, so grey; he had learned to hate those colours when they resided beneath the soft peach tones of skin.

"Half The Common's been destroyed."

"We knew that."

Finch swallowed. She started to speak, but the door banged the wall behind her, and they both looked up. Angel was in the door, hands on either side of the frame as if -- as if he were trying to shore up his own weight. His hair was in full spiral, his one conceit.

Finch gave conversational ground as easily as Teller did. "Angel?"

"She wants us."

For a moment, Teller felt a wild hope, but he killed it quickly.

"Who wants us?"

"The Terafin." He turned to look at the frame six inches above his hand. "Jay was in that market, as far as anyone's been able to tell. We've got her movements down just that far."

Teller ATerafin lowered his head to the surface of the kitchen table and let it rest there, against the cool wood.

"We're supposed to help her," Angel continued. "Word's out for Arann as well. Carver's already left with Jester."

#

The gates of the Terafin Manse passed him by like a dream. He had seen them for half of his life, but every so often he would pause in front of them, to the amusement or the consternation of the House Guard, and touch their polished rails. Nothing encroached upon that brass patina, that endless shine; whole days were spent tending to their appearance, as if they were the House armour. Whole days, and more money than he and his mother would see in a month, when they had lived in the twenty-third holding, in the hundred, in the old city.

He tried not to steal. He really did try.

But there were nights that his mother came home empty handed, and her face was sallow with exhaustion and fear, her voice hoarse. He hated that fear. She would go to bed, and he would join her, and they would wake hungry and go to bed hungry until she left again.

When he was seven, those nights came more frequently. She said it was because of her teeth, because she had lost two. It was true. Her teeth, her lack of teeth, changed the way she looked. But she was his mother, and he loved her fiercely, and with a child's terror.

Those days, he would go to the streets himself -- never at night, never then. And he would spend the day begging, and if that didn't go well, he would try his hand at worse. He always lied to her, though. He always told her that he had come by the money honestly.

He thought she believed him, because she didn't beat him. He would take her out to the market. He would give her the money. She would choose the food they ate, as she always did, and they would go home.

"One day," she would tell him, "you'll laugh at all this. You'll be the Kings' best man, mark my words. You'll make me so proud of you."

If she could see him now. If she could see him -- if he could walk up to her and tell her that his name was Teller *ATerafin* -- she would be more than proud. But she was wrong about one thing: He never did learn to laugh about their life together.

#

Finch tried to keep an eye on Angel. Arann was fine; quiet, worried, but very much the House Guard he had become. Carver and Jester were already gone, and Kalliaris knew, maybe they were even being useful. But

Angel was ... Angel. The only one of the den who had refused to take the name ATerafin when it was offered. Jewel had been pissed. But Angel had been Angel. I'm your man, not hers. You become The Terafin, I'll take the name. But not until then.

Teller had been almost embarrassed at how readily he'd accepted The Terafin's offer, but it had been too late to back down; he didn't want to look as if he were following Angel's lead. None of them did. And what difference did it make? They *were* all hers.

Until now.

"Look, if the two of you can't keep up, you can meet us there, all right?"

Teller was quiet. Finch looked pained. But after another city block had passed, they let him go. Let him go. They had miles to cover.

#

When Teller was eight and change, his mother went out for the evening, as she often did. He hated that she went out at nights, because more and more often she came home exhausted and angry and frightened. Just two days previous, he had tried to convince her to let him do what he could. Beg, he'd said. Let him beg. Maybe she knew. Maybe she just didn't trust him. Maybe so many things, all incomprehensible, their lives were now so different. She had gone out, as she always did.

But by morning, she hadn't returned. Morning.

He woke and he was alone. They only had one bed. He thought, for a moment, she might be in the kitchen. But she wasn't there, and that was worse. He waited for an hour, trudging in an endless circle between the two rooms, bed and table. It felt like a day.

Footsteps came and went, but he knew the sound of hers, and hers were absent.

When the sun was high in the sky, when all trace of dawn had vanished, he left the apartment and headed through the warrens to the Mother's small church. The priests and priestesses there sometimes offered a hand to those who were sick or injured -- when it wasn't too crowded. When it wasn't winter, and the lines didn't twist round the building like a cat's tail, twitching to and fro.

He recognized the frail old woman who answered the door; she had that weary smile that all of the Mother's children had.

"My mother didn't come home last night. Did she come here?"

The woman's eyes widened slightly. And then they came down at the

brow, not narrowing exactly, but changing in every other way. "Why don't you come in and check?" She said.

And he knew that she wasn't there. He backed away from the old woman, turned and ran.

Because he didn't know where she was. He only knew where she was supposed to be. At home. With him.

His mother had always told him to stay close to home, where people knew her. Where people knew him. She had made him promise time and again, to be careful.

But at eight years old, all he knew that day was that his mother was gone, that she was somewhere else, and that he needed to find her. He needed to find her.

Averalaan, The Common, 7th day of Scaral, 427 AA

The Common. Teller had always counted the trees in The Common as he passed beneath their ancient bowers; had let his gaze drift up and up, until his chin was almost a continuous line with his neck. He'd loved them, and Jay had loved them, although neither could quite say why.

He noticed their loss first. At a distance.

"Teller?"

No one had ever asked him about his life. Not even Jay. He had never asked Finch about hers. It came to him that he did not know who any of them were outside of their life together. But some things came from that life, that outside life.

"Mother's blood," Finch whispered.

He looked. The Merchant Authority, grand old building that was a city block onto itself, had been staved in on the east side; great stone walls crumpled like the thinnest of thatch. Men toiled in the rubble, like an army of workmen, their shadows short compared to the shadow cast by the destruction.

He did not want to go there.

He did not want to search the streets of the city -- any city -- again. Not like this. Not this way.

It's not the same. He told himself this as his steps grew smaller and smaller. *I'm not a child. This is not the twenty-fifth holding.*

But he had been a child.

And he had run, from the twenty-third to the twenty-fifth, with no clear idea of when he had crossed two boundaries. He had asked questions, endless questions, talking more in those hours than he had in months. Have you seen my mother? Have you seen my mother?

On that day, he had discovered that he was an orphan. He had looked death in the face, and he had sat by its side, crying in a bewildered terror. He still woke sometimes, sweating, the cold, grey flesh of his mother's cheek beneath his hands. He had shaken her. He had shaken her body and when she hadn't responded, he'd hit her. To try to wake her, although he had never seen sleep like this. He had tried to drag her body home. He remembered that as well, because it was on the way home that he understood how helpless he was.

And it was on his way home that he had been saved by an angry angel, a stranger who inexplicably showed the kindness not even his mother had showed.

Had he been suspicious? Gods, yes.

But there was something about her narrowed eyes, her hunched shoulders, her liberal cursing, and the hair -- which hadn't changed at all, even if she'd smoothed the rough edges off everything else -- hanging in her eyes no matter how often she shoved it aside, that made her seem less auspicious than a miracle.

There was also something about the people she gave orders to that was less than angelic. He remembered Lefty best of all because it was Lefty who held the dagger. In just a few more months she would have almost all of the men and women who were Teller's family in everything but the flimsy tie of blood.

Lefty hadn't made it out of the twenty-fifth holding. Teller was certain, that day, that he probably wouldn't either -- but anything was better than dying alone in an alley of starvation or worse.

And Jewel had offered to help him take his mother home. She made Arann do most of the heavy lifting because he was the biggest, even then, and while he cried, he'd followed his steps, had lifted his mother's body, had carried her into the building that had been his home for as long as he could remember.

They put her in the bed. Teller tucked her in. And then he'd fallen over, hugging her, terrified. Hugging her. She never hugged him back; that had been the last time.

Jay'd waited for him, outside. And when it had been long enough,

she'd come back to get him. And he'd let her take him away.

Now, now he would have insisted on burying his mother.

#

Over time he had learned that Jewel *was* magic, and her magic took two forms, both of them equally precious, both intangible but unshakeable. One: she could sometimes *see* the future. It hit her in dreams, in nightmares, in moments of sudden spasm as she walked at the heart of the den -- protected on all sides by Angel, Arann, Carver and Duster -- through the city streets. And two, more precious, she was loyal; she chose her den for reasons no one ever questioned out loud, and she would *never* desert them.

Not while she lived.

He had been so terrified, that first year, and the second, that she would die like his mother had. That had been his nightmare, before he had become the keeper of hers: Of wandering in terror through the city streets, searching for her the morning after she hadn't come home on time. Searching, and afraid -- gods, paralysed now -- of what would end that search.

When had he gotten so complacent? When had he let go of that fear until it wasn't even a distant nightmare?

He should have known better.

He felt the tears start down his cheeks and he was so numb with dread he didn't realize what they were until Finch touched them gently, and wiped them away.

#

"Teller. Finch." The Terafin was dressed in the plainest of robes; those robes were lined with dust and splinters. She was comfortable on horseback; she had been here for the better part of an hour, searching as if she were the least of the members of House Terafin, and not its Lord.

But Teller understood it the moment he saw her face. She needed to do something.

"Angel and Arann are to the west. Carver and Jester are just up ahead, near the permanent stalls. Near where they stood. Bodies are being brought to the west end of the Merchant Authority; there are healers there in number. Morretz is there. Daine is with him. So far no one has unearthed Jewel. Join Daine if you like. Join the others if you feel that you're better used in the search.

"And if you discover anything -- let me know immediately. That's all."

"Terafin," they said, speaking -- and bowing -- in unison.

#

There were *so many* bodies.

To his left, men and women were grunting under the weight of stone and wood. Fabric, stretched between poles, awaited whatever it was they could retrieve from beneath that burden. They didn't judge the condition of whatever it was they found. They left that to the healers.

But in some cases, it was impossible not to know death.

He looked across what had been the beginning of The Common's circle. The ground was broken now, like dry, old loaves.

At a distance, across the fissures made by split earth and ruptured stone, he could see the royal blue of the highest ranking Kings Swords. He could not tell what their relative ranks were, but years ago, rank would have meant nothing: they served the Kings. Their job, he thought bitterly, being to protect the people who had money and means from those who didn't.

The momentary resentment surprised him; it was so old, he had thought it buried by the present. Destroyed.

The rubble. The wood. The bodies.

But so many things were coming back to him. The feel of stones like this beneath his feet, the harsh, painful dryness that grew in the walls of his throat, the bitter, bitter cold. Even then he had had the wits to take what little of value his mother owned; a dagger, a knife, some handful of coins. He had never intended to desert the room he had shared with his mother.

Death changed all plans.

Jay.

The Kings Swords were not here on their own; they did not venture out of *Avantari* in these numbers and these uniforms unless they accompanied a member of the royal family. From where he stood, he could not see which member, but he was fairly certain it would be the Princess of the blood, Mirialyn ACormaris. The Kings themselves rarely left the isle; the Queens only slightly more often, and usually to functions that involved the powerful guilds or the churches. Ah, yes. There she was. She wore armour, although the day was warm; her visor was up, her face exposed. The horse beneath her moved carefully over the rubble of broken street, upturned cobblestone, soft dirt. He had never much liked horses.

"Carver, *shut up.*" He was brought back to himself by the sharp crack of Finch's high voice.

Here and there, Arann, Angel or Carver stopped to lend arm and back

to the lifting of heavy stone; they worked in silence at the side of the Magisterial guards, as if they were part of the Terafin House Guard. Once, they would have run from them, and with reason; the Magisterial guards were not paid to smile cheerfully at hungry thieves.

The other Houses had sent small contingents to represent their interests -- or their concerns, if one was not being cynical -- but only one House had lost one of its governing council in the inexplicable attack on the market.

Years ago, fifteen -- more -- on a Henden as dark as any story could make it, demons had dwelled beneath the city of Averalaaan, in the tangled web of tunnels and ancient passages at the heart of the old city. The fear their presence evoked had nearly broken the city's spirit. Then, he thought, the princess had ridden, in the Queen's party; so had Commander Sivari. They had drawn swords; they had taken arms; they had spoken against an enemy that could be seen by no one, and felt by all. Songs were still sung of that ride; fiercely, passionately, tearfully. Teller sang them. How could he not? He had been alive in that Henden; he had heard the demonic voices. He had *seen* the demons in the flesh.

Princess Mirialyn ACormaris presided, as she had then, over ruins. The city had seen its demons, and it knew, it knew now, that they had returned. He wondered, idly, if the magi were clever enough to make political use of the fear. The old woman who ruled the Order was, to listen to Jay talk.

Jay.

He did not run. He felt no need to run. He knew that whatever there was to be found would be found here. And he wasn't alone here; he was a man of means, surrounded by his den, with a House name to back him up. But, as if he had run the same frenzied run as he had the day he became an orphan, his throat was constricted and dry; breath came with difficulty.

The men led by Mirialyn ACormaris pulled a body from beneath the fallen slats of what had been a permanent stall in the Common. Stalls such as these were handed down from parent to child; they were rare and highly prized, although from the wreckage it would not be clear why to a casual observer. Wood had splintered, cloth had torn, both acts revealing colour the sun seldom saw: pale, unstained wood grain, unfaded burgundy.

Other things caught and held his attention. Not the stall itself, but the flag pole that had made its presence known from a distance: metal, not wood, the pole looked as if it had been crumpled, like so much cloth or paper.

He turned again, this time to the centre of The Common. Men and women worked there who wore the robes and the emblems of the Order of Knowledge. He did not choose to approach them closely enough to see if they were mageborn; where the magi were concerned, sanity, and therefore safety, was always in question -- and besides, they were busy. They stood, some dozen or so -- fourteen, he thought, as he counted more precisely -- in a loose circle. They did not touch each other, but they were clearly connected in purpose.

And that purpose: a tree.

Funny, that so many people lay dead or broken, and yet the magi were consumed by this: Giants had fallen.

Teller watched, as he always did, struggling to find words that made sense. Jewel had named him because he spoke so rarely. He could not explain why, and if he understood it now -- at two decades remove, the knowledge served little purpose. It had become his habit to think before speaking, and he could not be hurried through either thought or speech, but when he did speak, his words were always measured, always calm, and always to a purpose. He did not curse or swear; did not vent rage or frustration in useless arguments or fights. He had learned that at his size it was worse than pointless. Instead, he observed, hidden, as unseen as he could make himself, and he bound his thoughts with words, when words would come. Sometimes they came quickly. Today, they would be a long time in arriving.

Those trees had stood in the heart of The Common since before the founding of Averalan.

"Angel, for the Mother's sake, can't you be more careful!"

Angel's reply, half grunt, half spoken word, would have earned him a swat to the head, but Finch didn't have Jay's temper. She frowned. "I *know* it's heavy, but you're supposed to be helping the victims, not adding to them!"

Like Teller, she was slight of build and slender; they didn't expect her to be of much help. So she fluttered; he watched; they bore witness in their own way.

"Teller?"

He lifted his head, and as he did, strands of simple brown hair parted like a curtain. He did not, in principle, like long hair -- but during his convalescence, it had grown, and Finch had been too busy to nag him to have it cut. So had Jay.

Jay.

"Teller?"

Turning, he saw that one of the Terafin Chosen was navigating broken ground; here, the damage had been concentrated in the earth. He nodded at one of the two Captains who between them commanded The Terafin's Chosen. Wondered briefly if his face was as expressionless as Torvan's. He doubted it. "I've come from the west," he said quietly.

Teller waited.

"There's no sign of her."

He exhaled. Spoke a safer name. "Avandar?"

"None." The Captain of the Chosen turned away, hiding his expression by exposing his profile. Not a look that Teller liked, it was so unusual.

"What happened?"

"You know as much as we do. There were either magi or demons present in large numbers in The Common itself; they attacked a large group of people and destroyed just over a third of the market in the process. There is some evidence of struggle; some evidence that resistance occurred before the magi were summoned. But that resistance ... crumpled. The attackers were eventually destroyed by the council of the magi."

"But Jay --"

Torvan turned to face him. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"She was here."

"But --"

"There are a lot of dead, Teller. We've ... questioned the Magisterial guards; guards were apparently in The Common during the battle."

"And?"

"There were no survivors in either the first or the second group to arrive here."

Not hard to believe. Not hard at all.

"Witnesses outside of The Common place her close to the center of ... the attack."

"You think they were trying to kill her."

"We know they've tried before."

But never like this.

And the last time, he thought, they had sent only one creature. One creature, and Angel and Jay had ended up in the infirmary, bleeding to death while The Terafin and Alowan argued about which of the two was worth saving. He looked away.

"We'd like your help," Torvan said, quietly.

"Help?"

"There are other witnesses."

#

"Yes, yes sir," the young boy said, obviously flushed with excitement at the importance of his story, but just as obviously intimidated by the arms, armour and size of those who questioned, "There was fire."

"Fire?"

"In the sky."

"And the --"

"They were demons. My grandma said so. Demons."

"There were many?"

He held up his right hand, extending his fingers. Then he held up his left hand. Teller knew the boy couldn't count, but that didn't mean he was stupid.

"What were they doing?"

"I don't know. They killed all the magisterians, though."

The old woman with two hands on his shoulder frowned; the boy winced as her nails bit into his collar bone. "Uh, the magisterial guards."

"How?"

"I think," the old woman said, her face frozen into a harsh series of lines that could not be mistaken for permission, "that that can be best determined by the magi."

The House Guard started to speak, and the old woman added, "they're still looking for his mother. My daughter." Her voice made ice seem warm.

Teller very deliberately stepped on the man's foot.

"How did the demons die?" He asked the boy, while the House Guard reined in the frayed temper of a long day without answers.

"The magi came," the boy replied. "On the wind." And he looked up, up again, as if between sun and cloud, between cloud and ground, they flew there still, circling the city.

#

One mage did.

It had been a risk that he had not wished to publicly acknowledge to summon the wind. To ride it, to summon the air and to give it commands that it followed was more than a skill; it was an act of seduction; it took a delicate act of balance, an intuitive understanding of the bargaining done by men of power that could not be separated from the elemental ability itself. He could cajole the wind with the whisper of its own voice; could stand at the edge of its storm before he earned a place in its eye, watching as it destroyed at its leisure. He could promise it many, many things -- but making such a promise to a wild element was not a matter of words and contract, not a matter of human law with its labyrinthine clauses, its ifs and ands, its laughable penalties. The price was written in blood, paid in blood. Old laws.

Aiee, one considered the cost carefully when one summoned the past. Carefully. Delicately.

The wind's voice was a roar; he could literally hear nothing else.

To summon the wind as if it were a kept, tame creature -- to demand that it carry not only himself, but the cadre of the elite who had been trained to fight, and to fight creatures such as the kin -- was entirely different. It required not bargain, but force.

He was powerful enough that he could force the element to his bidding, but not so powerful that he could escape its wrath. Costly. Costly, these acts of desperation. Beneath his feet, blind to his flight, the beneficiaries of that desperation crawled across the broken surface of earth, excavating by slow degree the bodies of their dead. He was not a master of the intricacies of life; had he been, he would never have survived the great wars of his youth. But he knew enough to know that the men and women who toiled would find little worth their time and their worry beneath the bodies of the great trees and small buildings that lay broken.

He felt the loss of the trees keenly. Men passed on to some majestic hall and some hidden destiny at the whim of Mandaros when they died. But the trees that had existed for millennia -- the last of their kind, although only the Order of Knowledge seemed to have a deeper appreciation of this fact -- had been reduced to mere sap and wood; they represented a true loss, a profound loss.

Still, the arrival of his mages had been timely. Over half of the trees had been untroubled by the battle that had raged across the less contested grounds; of the fallen, there was some hope that the knowledge of the magi might save or heal some few. The Common would be scarred by the loss, its

voice stilled. But in time, the fallen would be forgotten.

In time. He stopped the wind from doing anything more harmful than tearing at the wide hand-shaped leaves.

As he brushed the edge of branches, as he cajoled the angry wind, he felt a change in the composition of the men and woman who toiled below; he looked down.

Sigurne Mellifas, leader of the Council of the magi, had stepped foot upon The Common's ground. She rarely deigned to display her power, and when she did it was so often offered as an act of mercy, not an act of war. She was frail, but not fragile; she played upon the weaknesses that age had given her, making them subtle strengths. He knew the games she played, but he was not above being bound by them. Although the person did not exist for whom Meralonne would give his life, he acknowledged with a grimace that he would give much to protect hers.

Just as there was not much she would not give to protect what she had chosen to dedicate her life to. It was complicated. At first, he had thought her like other magi, but colder. Of the magi, she faced death, even painful and violent death, with a calm unperturbed by human pain or suffering. Just as he himself might. But they were not kindred spirits. She accepted what she could not change; she made plans to change what she could; she wasted no energy -- none at all -- on the grey area between the two that tormented lesser people.

Yet she did not give her heart to the magi. He knew -- although she had never said as much, and he doubted she would, even when questioned by Mandaros himself -- that she had taken the helm of the Council of the Magi to guide and control them, not to protect them.

It was these, these broken and helpless mortals, these talentless, visionless men and women, that she had made her life's responsibility.

She had never approved of his warriors. She had never approved of the tactics he had used to train them. She had nearly disbanded them three times when injuries had been, in her words, *unacceptable*. As if they played boys' games.

She was right, of course; they were games. His own students could not see it; he did not choose to enlighten them. Instead he filled their head with glorious nonsense, all the more powerful for the truth it contained: that they were the men who would stand between the *kialli* and the city when the *kialli* at last showed themselves; that their lives were the lives that would shield and protect what the Twin Kings, over the centuries, had struggled to build.

A just society.

A free society.

His laughter was taken by wind. Sigurne, watching, had said nothing at all. But she had in the end given him leave to let his students prove their worth in the only way that mattered: against the enemy they had been trained, since a dark Hendon many years ago, to fight.

Being old put him at a disadvantage.

There was a bitter, fierce joy that lingered at the edges of his awareness; he had met his chosen enemy; had named him; had defeated him. As promised, that name was committed to perfect memory, as was the struggle itself.

But into the enjoyment of the battle had entered something that he had never thought would hamper him.

He had watched these callow, and often useless, students make mistakes and die for them, and he felt their deaths as if they were the physical blow his enemy had tried, unsuccessfully, to land. It came, a rawness and a regret that had never marred his composure on the field of battle. The wind sensed weakness, of course; he would have, in his youth, when all he understood was power.

Sigurne, he thought, with a bitter envy, what life shaped you, that you can be so cold in your failing years?

He could not afford to land while any of that weakness governed him, or the damage done by demon and magelings would pale in comparison to the damage done by the wind.

But he *wanted* to land. He wanted to go to the fallen, his fallen, and honour them. He wanted to see their faces, and commit them to the same memory that now held the details of his combat and his victory.

#

The Terafin was absolutely silent.

One step from her side, close enough at any time that he could reach out and touch her, could -- had she been a different woman -- offer her physical comfort, was her domicis, Morretz. He carried one thing for her; a simple, heavy cloak, proof against the sea wind and the inclement weather.

She almost never wore it; it had a value that only history could give an item. She would ask for it soon. The lights that mages had cast were dimming; the lamps that guards carried, flickering. The noises in The Common were night noises. Many weaknesses were forgiven in the darkness. He had thought in his youth that he had found a woman without

weakness; he had learned with the passage of time that the ability to reveal weakness -- for a woman of Amara's stature -- took a different form of strength. She understood the demands of her rank. She waited; he waited, watching in protective silence.

From a bitterly cold sunrise -- surprisingly cold, given the geography -- to a cool, star-broken nightfall, The Terafin watched her Chosen work at the side of Jewel's den. Noting the difference in armour, in arms, in the deference they were trained to give: The Chosen were perfect, and the den, hand-picked in no less careful a way given the circumstances in which it had formed, far less polished. But she saw the potential in them. They were terrified. They worked through it, hid it. Served.

He knew what she observed by her expression. She knew, for instance, that when Captain Torvan A Terafin approached her and knelt beneath the rising face of the narrow moon, he would report failure. She knew that the Council of the Magi, represented by Sigurne Mellifas, would likewise offer no comfort, but she offered words to the woman who wore the quartered moon. To her Chosen she had offered a grim silence, no more.

"Were they hunting your girl?"

"I had hoped that the council of Magi would offer an answer to that question."

"We are not all-seeing, Terafin. We labor under an understanding of the demon kin that is very little improved since the last time we were forced to deal with their presence in the streets of Averalan."

"A motion was made, or so rumour would have it, that the forbidden arts be once again a subject of study within the Order. It was defeated by a narrow and forceful margin."

"You have, as always, impeccable sources, Terafin. Enough so that you will refrain from insulting my intelligence; you know the vote carried and the head of council exercised her right of refusal."

"You credit me with better sources than I have," The Terafin said quietly. "I was not aware of the rule in council that allowed the head of council such a veto."

Sigurne Mellifas was frail; her skin was the color of light on water. Hard to imagine a woman such as this could successfully veto the decision of the most powerful members of the Order of Knowledge. Until she smiled, the amusement mixed with momentary appraisal. "We are both too blunt, Terafin."

"Indeed. Perhaps because we can be."

"You haven't the excuse of age and ill-temper."

"Nor have you, although as any ruler does, you choose the excuse that's expedient."

"The excuse, yes, but not the veto it seems."

The Terafin was silent. At last, she said, "I would know when to trust my own and when to have them watched. But I am not a mage; my sense of the expedient, where magical study is concerned, would be tempered by ignorance."

Morretz' brow rose a fraction; fell again before either woman could notice the ripple of expression. *You trust this woman, Amaraia.*

Silence. "I don't know whether or not they were hunting, as you call her, my girl," The Terafin said quietly. "But I would have to guess, without further investigation, that hunting or no, they found her."

"Oh?"

"Terafin has ways of contacting its ranking members during a crisis." As was proper, she offered no further comment.

"I see. I will, if you desire his aid, offer member APhaniel the choice of service to your House. I believe he has already served your House in some capacity." She knew, of course, what capacity he had served in, and when; the only detail she was unlikely to know was the amount of money that had exchanged hands, although Morretz would not have been surprised if she did.

"I believe that Meralonne APhaniel has pledged service to the Crowns in the South."

"True. And you think that the two -- your girl and the South -- are unconnected?"

"A good point."

"Would you know if she was dead?"

"I am considering the purchase price of such an enchantment in future, but understand me; I would not waste your time with questions if I already knew their answers. We have too much to do to waste each other's time with such subtle tests of knowledge or power."

Sigurne smiled. "You chastise me, and I accept it; you have no idea how envious most members of the Order would be." The smile vanished. "I have trusted my instinct for all of my adult life; I do not think Jewel ATerafin is dead."

"No?"

"No.

The Terafin was silent a moment, and then she offered the unexpected: a smile.

"Let me clarify that. I do not believe that she died *here*."

The smile froze and then vanished, like northern ice sublimating. "Please explain," she said softly, in a tone of voice that belied the possibility that the two terse words were a request.

"You are familiar with translocation?" Sigurne unexpectedly turned and began to walk to the West. The Terafin fell in step by her side; Morretz fell in behind them.

"I am unfamiliar with most of the magi's arts, but if you mean the passage from one place to another as if nothing existed between the two points, yes. I am also aware that perhaps a handful of the mage-born will ever attain the power necessary to cast this spell; the attempt would kill them."

"Indeed. I am not one with that power. Meralonne, as I suspect you know, is. Your Jewel ATerafin was with someone who cast the spell."

"You know this?"

"We deduce it. Power is always a personal trait. How it is used is also personal. You are not the Terafin your predecessor was, and your heir -- should one ever be chosen -- will not be the woman you are. Power makes its mark.

"Here, Terafin, power has left its mark."

Morretz came to stand beside the woman whose service had become his life's work. The slight narrowing of her eyes told him all he needed to know -- but he was certain that Sigurne knew it as well; she was frustrated with the superficiality of her knowledge. "I see nothing."

"No. I doubt that even Jewel would see it, and her natural sight is unrivalled. But a spell was cast here of power sufficient to move two men.

"And we do not recognize its signature."

Clearly this was a significant statement. To save his lord from the appearance of ignorance, Morretz spoke. "Is this unusual?"

Sigurne's gaze brushed his face. "That we cannot identify with ease a mage of that power? I should leave that for you to deduce, young man. But think on this: Why have there been no sorcerer kings, no blood barons, in the last three centuries? It is certainly not because the magi have become pure and untainted over the course of time.

"You have spent time within the Order's walls; you are bound by the laws that bind us. You know that the paradigm of each mage's magic is unique.

"So, too, is evidence of its use. Those who understand people enough to want a particular type of power *also* have a clear understanding of cause and effect. If they wish to misuse power, or to seek it by the unfortunate...losses...of others, they must do it by conventional methods." Her expression clouded a moment. "There are, of course, many conventional ways of gaining power -- but the use of one's own power in the commission of a crime is only done by the young or the foolish."

"Or the desperate," The Terafin said softly.

"Or the desperate."

"We believe that Jewel ATerafin left here injured, but we don't believe that she left dead."

Injured.

"Many of my mages have been trained to deal with minutiae. There is blood on the ground, here and here."

"There's blood everywhere."

"Yes, but within the circle of the power's signature there appears to be only one person's. There were no people here; or rather, there were no bodies."

"Inconclusive."

"Yes. But hopeful. We will pursue this, Terafin, to the best of our abilities."

"You have my gratitude."

The older woman caught the younger woman's hands; spoke three words, all of which were empty of resonant sound.

Morretz could not hear what was being said. Not that this magically induced inability bothered him. The domicis were trained to notice everything, and something as simple as the absence of sound did not hamper their observation.

Sigurne said, simply, "I want more than your gratitude. I think it's obvious now what you intended for her; you are present."

The Terafin said nothing.

"If this was an assassination attempt, it is clear that someone has a vested interest in having a ... different ruler for Terafin in future."

Again, The Terafin said nothing; Morretz had to stop himself from

speaking by force of habit. There were many things spoken about in the presence of The Terafin, but one of them was not, by implication, her death. Not unless she broached the subject first, and she did not do this with strangers.

But...he was not supposed to hear the words, and an interruption of that nature would be awkward. Amarais did not forgive that type of awkwardness easily. As long as he did not break the illusion of deafness, she ignored the fact that all information accrued to him; he stepped around her so that he might also be privy to her response.

"It is not advantageous for the leader of a House such as mine to be obvious," The Terafin replied.

"Understood, Terafin, although I fear that your intent is already understood; you are hampered both by the fact that you cannot tolerate stupidity and that you believe cunning serves the interests of your House well." She raised a frail hand. "It has served your House well."

The Terafin said nothing.

"If it is possible, we will find your girl. I believe that she is of interest to the Crowns as well."

"Oh?"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, that would be the Lord of the Compact."

The Terafin's eyes narrowed slightly.

Sigurne bowed politely. "And it would be best not to continue this conversation in silence. That very rude young man has a sensitivity to the use of magic that extends for miles."

"Indeed."

The older woman did not so much as lift a hand. But they turned to face Duvvari, and stood shoulder to shoulder while he walked with a cool purpose toward them: The lord of House Terafin and the leader of the Order of Knowledge.

Morretz, on the other hand, looked for the Kings. Duvvari seldom left the grounds of *Avantari*; when he did, it was as the Lord of the Compact, and he travelled in the company of kings, in the shadows they cast, the most feared of their protectors. With justification.

Mages served the Kings. The Swords did. The Ten did.

But there was about Duvvari the certain sense that he would, without blinking, slowly torture his own children in order to fulfil that obligation. He would certainly torture anyone else's.

If the laws did not bind him.

Another King, another set of Kings...

But that was idle speculation; there were two Kings. While the Empire stood, there would always be two kings. There was comfort to be found in that thought until the Lord of the Compact stopped -- for just a moment -- his attention caught not by The Terafin or the woman who ruled the Order of Knowledge, but by the splinters of trees that had stood since the Empire's founding.

Funny; they were only trees, but the effect of their fall had been profound. Duvvari did not condescend to notice the bodies that were being recovered and carried away around him.

Perhaps Morretz did because he was afraid that one of those bodies would belong to Terafin; that it would belong to Jewel ATerafin. When news of the attack in the Common had reached Amaraïs, she had stiffened slightly, her face falling into lines that could not be mistaken for a smile by a man who knew her. But when other reports filtered back, even the smile faltered.

No, Morretz, Jewel had said, I have no idea how I'm getting there. I don't have any real idea of where I'm going. But to be practical, there are a few things we'll need on the way there. Or that I'll need, anyway. Avandar can take care of himself.

And you'll find these?

Don't be so suspicious. She'd laughed. We'll be going to The Common.

For what passes for food, no doubt, Avandar had added drily.

The past was between the two domicis; would always be between them. But he had watched Avandar serve this girl for ten years and understood that the asset Amaraïs considered most precious to the house was in his keeping.

Somewhere.

"Terafin." The Lord of the Compact said. He bowed, his form perfect. She countered with a nod of the head.

"AMellifas." Sigurne tendered a bow. She understood that the game of rank was just that: a game.

His hands slid behind his back -- a position that no one was comfortable with. "The search goes poorly."

Not a question. Sometimes, when he was feeling politic, he couched his phrases as questions; sometimes -- as now -- he chose not to. No one who had any experience with the Lord of the Compact mistook any question he chose to ask as a request for information; it was an act of manners, at best.

A test, at worst.

"It depends," The Terafin replied, condescending to play the game. "We haven't found the wrong body."

"Good."

He surprised them. Morretz saw the curve of the Terafin's brow ripple slightly. Saw her eyes narrow. "You show an ... uncharacteristic interest in the affairs of one of the Houses."

His smile was knife-edge thin; his shrug was brief. "It is a ... significant House."

"It has always been significant."

"Indeed." He looked past the two woman, deliberately scanning a horizon broken by fires, damaged buildings, the trunks of splintered trees. He continued to scan the horizon as he spoke; his words were soft and Morretz had the feeling that they travelled a very short distance. "It appears that you have both chosen and lost at least one successor in the past few months."

She said nothing.

"It is not of concern. Or it was not. Within the Houses, the more difficult elements are often ... eliminated... in such a fashion. But your presence here implies that you have chosen another successor. Your prerogative, of course. The result... the result Terafin, if this is indeed connected to that choice... *is* my concern." He turned.

The Terafin's expression was set, bleak. "Understood, Lord of the Compact. In this investigation, you will of course have my full cooperation, and the full disclosure of all pertinent information."

"The decision of what is pertinent --"

"To remain mine of course, although if you desire, the option to petition the Crowns for a Royal writ of seizure or invasive use of magic is your prerogative."

"I...see. Member Mellifas?"

"You know my feelings on rogue magery, forbidden magic, and demons," Sigurne's reply was quiet. Her words were hard to catch, and the expression on her face was hard to look at; it was shorn of both the austerity and fragility of age. For a moment, she reminded Morretz of Duvvari. It was not a comfortable thought.

Less comfortable was the implication made by the head of the Astari.

"May I remind the Lord of the Compact that this is not the first

attempt on the life of Jewel ATerafin; that the first attempt occurred not because of House politics, but rather the affairs of State between the Empire and the Dominion?"

"No, Morretz," The Terafin said quietly. "You may not."

He fell silent.

"We are aware of that," Duvari replied. "We are aware that the interest in the younger ATerafin maybe be entirely because of her duties to the army that is to travel South before Winter. But as always, all options must be studied, and all information gathered.

"Terafin."

"Lord of the Compact."

He turned quietly, having offered the only warning he was likely to offer.

Sigurne Mellifas watched his back, and when it had vanished in the distance of sparse crowd and coming evening, said simply, "I trust him."

And given that the Order of Knowledge was the one institution that Duvari was more suspicious of, and less friendly toward, than the Ten, that said much.

"Morretz," the Terafin said, her voice like the Northern ocean wind, "gather her den. I think we've found everything we're going to find here."

He bowed.

#

Order of Knowledge, evening, 7th Day of Scaral, 427 A.A.

The knock was firm.

She did not wish to deal with it.

In the privacy of the largest set of personal rooms in the Order, Sigurne Mellifas could acknowledge the frailties that drove her -- but only here. She was tired; the sea made her bones ache; her feet hurt from a day spent standing or walking without break. But these were minor considerations. Major: that she was *angry*; that she was tired; that she could still sense the aura of demonic name imprinted over the Common. So many.

So much for the promises made in the darkest of years. Failure did not sit well with her.

She had seldom had to deal with it. The table beneath her hands was as fine as any table the Ten might possess; the carpets as fine; the windows were made not by Makers, although much else in the room was, but by

Artisans, a gift of the mad to the mad in the Order's early years. They were not the only thing about the room that was special, but they were the only thing about it that was unique. And only the man -- or woman -- who had the right to these rooms by their position on the council and in the First Circle could invoke the magics placed upon that glass hundreds upon hundreds of years past.

It was not well known.

But she had known of it. In the quiet of servitude, in the silence that the poor or the weak adopt in the presence of unchecked power, she had learned what she needed to know.

It had brought her here.

Sigurne did not rule the Order of Knowledge so much as shepherd it; an Order of such diverse -- and often anti-social -- men and women was an organisation that responded best to coaxing and cajoling, to flattery, and to embarrassment. Orders in council fell flat for the most part, and that was as it should be.

But outside of council, among the junior mages -- as she thought of the men and women who had not yet reached the height of their potential -- the desire for the mysterious power and austerity granted by the title, *Magi*, was a temptation. She had been such a mage once.

A temptation such as that could be manipulated; upon such thin foundations, a man -- or several -- could build factions of which they were, de facto, rulers.

Most of the men and women who played these games had been born into the patriciate. But not all; she herself had spent the earliest years of her life in a village far, far to the North. For a moment she felt an ache that had nothing to do with age. She set the memory aside.

The knock at the door broke the silence. Again.

Bitter now, she pressed her hands against the flawless flat of ancient table and levered her weight from her least comfortable chair. Messages could be sent with the use of magery; indeed, simple requests often were. But if privacy was desired, old fashioned methods were best, for the use of containing magics could be detected if one knew how to look and was willing to expend the energy and time doing so. As the first member of the *Magi*, Sigurne knew, with that same bitterness, that she was worth that time and energy. But she disliked the private because too much could be inferred from its use.

She almost ignored it.

But the windows had opened into a deep, charcoal sky, storm held in the folds of something too harsh and dark to be called clouds. There were days when she loathed the position she had risen to; days when she wished there were another mage -- any other mage -- that she trusted enough to relinquish that position to.

She seldom wasted this much of her time in futile thought and daydream, but it had been a long day.

The door opened upon a man in very fine robes, hue an indigo that was costly and fashionable, the fabric a stone-beaten silk, edged in something more durable. She recognized his face, although the lines of it had softened from angularity to a sullen roundness with the passage of time. He was a middling mage, although had he dedication and focus, he might have been Second Circle.

She wondered, idly, how long he had stood outside of her doors composing himself; the journey up the great stairs was a test of endurance for even the healthiest of the Order. Only Sigurne, or those granted permission by her, might enter these chambers in a way that did not involve the complication of flights and flights of tower stairs.

Sigurne loved the members of the Order of Knowledge who did, in fact, come seeking knowledge. But the talent-born were just that: born. No quirk of nature or fate had given them the desire for knowledge or truth -- although some did, indeed, possess it. She dreamed of the separation of the two: the magi from the seekers.

Especially when one of the more politically minded of the mageborn stood at her door.

"Your pardon, Member Mellifas," the younger man said, his bow perfect. "Member ATerafin sent me. He has information, from the House, which he has suggested would be best relayed directly."

"Relay it, then."

His brows lifted slightly, and then his cheeks paled. The man was nonplussed, and therefore blessedly silent, for a full minute. In the distance, unnatural thunder underscored that silence. Not that he could hear it.

No one could be entirely stupid and still be a member of the Order, although many members tested that idiom to its outer limit.

"My apologies, First Member."

What civility she could manage was sorely, *sorely*, tested. Although the title was technically correct, it was a title she loathed, and she did not use it by choice. Not even among the highborn and the powerful.

"Accepted."

"I've offended you."

"I'm not offended," she replied, forcing a gentleness into the words, smoothing the edges from them. That it was so much effort spoke of the weariness brought on by the day.

"Thank you. Please, let me try this again. Magi ATerafin has requested your presence. He has information -- and possibly artifacts -- taken from the Common shortly after you left, that he feels are of import to both the Order and his House."

"And he did not choose to bring them here?"

"He has seldom been an errand runner," the man replied, the careful modularity of his words giving way to a momentary sneer. It made him ugly. He worked to contain that ugliness, but it remained like a shadow across features exposed to scant light. "It would be suspicious for him to travel here."

"But not for his aide."

"No."

"Then he is fortunate indeed to have as aide a man who does not mind being known as an errand runner." She wanted to dismiss him; it was well within her rights. And it had been a long day; too long a day to end in such a way.

But there were some things which had to be done; best do them, then relax. That had been her mother's -- her long dead, oft forgotten mother's -- motto. And Sigurne had spent a lifetime struggling to live up to it. She had never yet reached that blessed point where she might relax.

And perhaps, just perhaps, she was wrong. Perhaps all was as it seemed.

"Will we --"

"We'll take the stairs," she said firmly. It was easiest. The stairs were always such a temptation.

He held the door open, and as she passed him, she smiled sadly. "It is so seldom that young mages remember anything as common as courtesy. I remember the day you arrived."

"You do?"

"Oh yes." She walked through the open door, pausing a moment in front of him. He said nothing and she continued on, brushing the door's frame with the tips of her fingers. He waited until she had passed him

before he released the door.

It slammed shut as if closing were a rejection.

Sigurne did not look back. She looked down, into a darkness that was alleviated by scant window light and the magestones that graced the order's walls and brackets in the place of torches.

The young man walked quickly, quietly, efficiently, substituting grace for awkwardness, silence for bluster, purpose for purpose. Without misstep, he centred his hands behind her back and pushed her as she made her slow descent down stairs which wound, against wall, into shadow.

And cried out in surprise when his hands passed through her bent form, the full force of his weight behind them. It had not been a gentle nudge.

She watched from the open door as panic cost him the only chance he had at halting his descent. Then, as he began to strike stair after stair on his long way down, she reached out with her signature skill and took from him the information she required: that somewhere within the Order, someone had expended the power necessary to watch her death through his servant's eyes. She hoped he now had an intimate acquaintance with the flat stone steps. Whoever he was. The signature of his power was not familiar enough that she recognized it. She knew the ATerafin's signature well; it was too much to hope that the hand behind the assassin could be implicated so easily.

She turned back to the windows in her rooms, wondering why it was that the old were assumed to have left wit behind with youth.

The tower grew silent.

She made her way to the windows again, caught in the tangle of old arguments, old politics. Numbers brushed by: three. Three men had died in the last year attempting to take her life. Possibly four if this one didn't survive his fall down the stairs. No names now came to the faces that had made themselves remarkable solely by their attempts.

But Meralonne had felled two almost as casually as he lit pipe. She smiled grimly; his dignity was such an odd thing. He could walk into a crowd of dignitaries half naked; could begin to eat when the Kings themselves had deigned to join the Magi at their feast -- before either of the Crowns had blessed the meal. He could lose himself in research or study; could, in the middle of a meeting of the greater governing body, spend four hours staring at a plant. But the moment he was required to *fight* he became all edge, all steel.

As cold in his way as Sigurne herself had become because of her youth, but much, much more obvious in his ice.

Meralonne APhaniel was by nature the most aggressive of her mages; the least trusting. She had long suspected that if not for a minimal respect for the laws that governed the country, he would have trapped his door in such a way that an unwelcome visitor never troubled him -- or anyone else -- again.

Although she would never admit it, and further, knew it would never even be suspected, she had the same urge herself.

Four.

Four men, and she knew it had only begun.

Perhaps here was a reason that these finely appointed rooms boasted banks of windows, but no doors into the outer world, no balcony -- such as Meralonne possessed -- upon which one might experience sea breeze and the momentary illusion of freedom beneath the open sky.

#