



Prologue

*24th of Henden, 427 A.A.
Terrean of Averda*

THE TREE STOOD ALONE in the moonlight. The forest with which it had once been surrounded had withered; dead trees, trunks hollowed, shed dry branches in a circle for yards. Little grass or undergrowth survived in the lee of the tree; no insects crawled along its bark; no birds nested in its slender branches. It lived, yes, but its life was almost an elegy. Where wind dared to touch it, no leaves rustled; it gave nothing back.

Nothing but illumination. Light extruded from bark that seemed, at a distance, to be composed of ice; from branches that seemed sharp and slender, like long, narrow blades. There were leaves on those branches, and in the moon's light, they looked silvered, their edges inexplicably dark. The tree cast a long shadow over silent ground.

Into that shadow two men walked. One wore robes that seemed to draw moonlight into its weave; one wore dusty, sweat-stained cloth. The latter was armed, although this unnatural clearing was utterly silent. Both men paused ten yards from the tree, scanning the ground that surrounded it.

"Can you hear it?" Meralonne asked softly, his gaze held by the Winter tree.

His companion closed his eyes. After a brief pause, he nodded.

"And?"

"Like the others, it cannot be saved. It sings of cold, of isolation, of fear. It will devour all in its attempt to appease its hunger." His breath sharpened as the mage approached the tree, one hand raised. "APhaniel—"

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“If it cannot be saved, it must be destroyed.”

Kallandras said nothing. Meralonne APhaniel habitually guarded the tone of his words, but it had been a long six days, and even he had grown weary. The bard, not the mage, whispered a benediction to the wind, and the wind intervened. It lifted the mage off the ground a moment before the earth beneath his feet broke and roots crested its surface, moving like misshapen snakes.

“APhaniel,” he said again, cajoling the mage as he might cajole the wild wind at its most reluctant, “This tree cannot be saved.”

The mage proved more truculent than elemental air; he would not be moved. Roots coiled beneath his feet, snapping at the underside of boots they couldn’t quite reach. Like the tree they sustained, they were silver, their luminescence veiled by dirt.

“APhaniel—”

The mage turned, eyes flashing, as if they were diamond in clear, sunlit sky—hard, bright, cold. And beautiful. Always that. Kallandras fell silent.

Taking a step into air, the bard cleared ground, hovering above it, weapons ready. If Meralonne was unwilling to countenance the certainty of failure, the bard was not. He remained silent; the single glance had been warning enough. Even when roots erupted in a frenzy beneath his feet, piercing the air upon which he now stood, he did not speak a word—not to the mage.

He spoke to the roots, but he spoke in the silence granted any of the bard-born; only the tree itself could hear what he said, and the answer offered was the sharp thrust of those roots toward his chest; they were hard and sharpened, like long, curved knives, and their tips glittered in the radiant light of the tree’s bark. His blades cut three, and slid off three more; he leaped up to a height that the roots couldn’t easily follow. Given time, they would; that much, he’d gleaned in the last week, working in secrecy on the borders of the Terrean.

But Meralonne had reached the tree’s trunk. The roots that Kallandras severed barely troubled the mage; they did not attempt to pierce, but rather to ensnare. He had gathered them loosely as he moved, and they pooled around his ankles, obscuring his boots, as if the tree were trying to absorb him, to make him some part of its essential self.

Meralonne did not speak. Kallandras knew why: in this place, at this time, he could no longer guard his voice; every word contained the pain of loss and the slow, steady death of hope. The mage reached out with both hands; his palms touched the ice of bark and light shone where they connected; it was bright and piercing to the eye, as the roots meant to be to the heart. The

momentary dimming of vision did not impede the bard's weapons; they were meant for this fight, and they moved almost with a will of their own.

The light that was pale and even platinum began to shift and change; what remained beneath the palms of the mage was a red-copper that pulsed. Kallandras had seen that steady transformation every time Meralonne's hands had finally touched bark; he expected no different, and was not therefore disappointed. The mage's hands stiffened, his fingers trembling in place. He whispered a word, and if the word did not carry to the bard's ears over the clash of blade against armored root, what lay beneath the utterance did.

In the clearing made by a hunger that could never be satisfied, even if the whole forest should be devoured, light broke the cover of night, falling in sharp, defined spokes. Meralonne APhaniel invoked the ancient magics of Summer as if Summer would never again be seen in this world. He turned his face away from the bard's view; he could do this much, but not more, for the tree's sudden scream of fury meant the safety of distant kinship was at an end.

Winter rose as roots thinned and sharpened at the ankles of the mage; he did not even gesture before they fell away, melting beneath the sudden heat of Summer, the scorching light of a different desert. He flinched as the tree's screams transcended rage and fury for the territory of pain. Had Kallandras not now been fighting for his life, he might have sung—but his song did not reach the heart of the tree the way the Serra Dora's once had; he had tried.

Summer flames burned; bark melted, roots withered. Only bark and root; the flames did not catch cloth or hair, and where it touched the edge of growth not yet devoured in the spread of this single tree's roots, it burned nothing—but the leaves of undergrowth leaned inward toward that light, and the flats of those leaves brightened in color, the small branches lengthening. These lesser plants lacked the sentience of the Winter tree; they could not and did not speak. Nothing in their welcome dimmed the horror and the loss of the single tree's death, and even as the tree withered, small shoots of pale, pale green could be seen in the troughs and furrows made by the passage of Winter roots.

Meralonne's hands fell to his sides; what remained of the tree was now silent. It would crumble if Kallandras touched it; it would crumble if anything did. Anything, or anyone, but Meralonne APhaniel.

"Come." He bowed head a moment; his forehead grazed what remained of standing ash. "We are almost done."

His voice was the voice of the desert.

Meralonne was wrong. The quiet, grim march across the slender and invisible border of the Terrean came to an abrupt end in an unexpected way. They heard

the sounds of fighting. Kallandras spoke softly, as was his wont, and the mage had become so taciturn in his work that words were harder to pry from him than blood. Even in their combat against these unnatural trees—and there had been many, each dissolved, in the end, by the harshest of Summer light—their conversation had dwindled to the wordless syllabus of blades, air, and fire.

Not so the combatant in the distance: he *roared*. It was a harsh, almost guttural cry, in a language unknown—but not unfamiliar—to Kallandras. The bard's blades rose in an instant, and he forced them down as he glanced at his companion; Meralonne's robes shifted as he nodded, becoming a fine, heavy mesh of something that might have been chain, had chain been light and magical. Significantly to Kallandras, he did not draw his sword; he gestured briefly, and wind played in the sweeping fall of platinum hair as he turned toward that roar and began to walk.

His stride was supple and wide; Kallandras kept pace with some difficulty. But he was grateful in some fashion for the interruption. The mage's gaze was now brighter, the line of his shoulders, straighter. He took the lead; Kallandras was content to follow. If he did not relish the possibility of combat, he prepared for it; it had become a fact of life, as necessary as breath if one wished to continue to breathe.

Through the night forest, in the light surrendered by moon in a clear, dark sky, they at last approached a clearing similar in shape and size to one they had just left. Kallandras could see the edge of living foliage as it circled fallen branches and the husks of great trunks. But there was no stillness, no silence, in its center. Each time Kallandras and Meralonne had approached such a clearing, there had been a tree of ice awaiting their arrival; what stood in this dead clearing barely resembled a tree, it was so misshapen. The earth was overturned where roots had broken free of its confinement; they rose like armored tentacles, slashing and stabbing at the only thing present that was not likewise bound in a similar fashion.

He was as tall as Meralonne APhaniel, if not as fine-boned, and his hair was ebon to the mage's platinum; his skin looked all of red in the light cast by the shield and sword he bore. Where Meralonne had touched the tree with his exposed palms, the *Kialli* did not; he slashed at its trunk. Fire gouted from the edge of blade as roots writhed and coiled. In one wide sweep of sword, they fell, but they were almost instantly replaced.

Kallandras was silent; Meralonne, silent as well, although the mage exhaled sharply. The bard glanced at him, seeking direction; in response, the mage drew sword for the first time in this long march of days. It was blue, its glow harsher than the red illumination of *Kialli* sword.

Invoke the Summer, Kallandras thought; he gave no breath to the words—he had no time. Meralonne APhaniel leaped above the circumference traced by dead foliage; he leaped above the easy reach of roots coiled like armored snakes. The sword crossed his chest as he gestured with both arms. Blue light cut a trail across the bard's vision. When it cleared, Meralonne was a yard above the ground; roots flew where they sought to attack him as he cut his way toward the heart of the moving trunk.

Kallandras whispered a benediction to air and it came; he leaped, as Meralonne had done, landing at the same height. He did not attempt to make his way to the heart of the trunk; instead he fought a rearguard action. He had no desire to strike the killing blow; if APhaniel or the *Kialli* now engaged in combat brought a ferocity of exultation to their battles, Kallandras did not. Nor had he ever. Necessity was his only guide.

Not so, these two: the *Kialli*, seeing the direction Meralonne took, roared again. Kallandras almost froze at what he heard in the demon's voice. Had he, he would have died, and if he had no desire to claim a kill as his own, he had no desire to die in this forsaken place. He leaped beyond the reach of both *Kialli* blade and piercing root, changing his trajectory in the air as he did. If the tree in this form seemed a nightmare of bestiality, it was not without its cunning.

He did not choose to alight; because he rode the currents of the wind, that choice was his to make. Air was caprice personified, but without rage, it had little malice. He landed, cut roots and parried them before vaulting into air again, losing some part of his boots in the process. Although at each stage of this isolated search he'd been forced to defend himself against the oppressive hunger of trees such as this, he had yet to see the earth erupt so violently.

Because it had, he could only peripherally observe what occurred beyond his immediate fight for survival—but the sky flashed red and blue and white and the song of swords clashing implied a sword-dance. He wanted to turn, to watch; he wanted to survive. The *Kialli* did not roar again, and Meralonne did not speak; the clashing glow of colored light grew faster, the brightness more intense, and then, in the space of a breath and a heartbeat, both were gone, and the roots that had gathered in such number stiffened, stilled.

Sheathing the weapons that had been Meralonne APhaniel's gift, Kallandras whispered his thanks to the wind and released it; he stepped upon upturned earth, between the dying roots. As if it had been struck by bladed lightning, smoke rose from the tree's trunk; bark hung in tatters, like flayed skin. Where blades had cut wood, gashes remained, but no sap flowed from the wounds.

Meralonne APhaniel's sword was no longer in his hand. He turned to the armed *Kialli*. "This is not your task," he said, his voice clear and resonant.

"No more is it yours, Illaraphaniel, and yet you are here." The smile he offered was slight and sharp; it was framed by small scratches, which surprised Kallandras. So, too, his cape, although his armor was clean and untouched. He sheathed sword in the way the mage did; it faded from view, the red, red light dimming. He surrendered shield in the same way.

"Were it not for your presence," the mage replied, "there would have been no fight."

At this, the demon laughed. It was the first laughter that Kallandras had heard in almost a week. "And are you now so old and so enfeebled that you decry the necessity of combat? You?"

Meralonne gestured; his sword returned to his hand.

The demon, however, remained unarmed. "You will need your sword in the time to come." Mirth ebbed from his voice as he spoke, light from APhaniel's hand as the blade once again vanished.

"Why did you come, Anduvin?"

The *Kialli* was silent for a long moment, studying Meralonne; at last, he shrugged. "I wished to see for myself the damage done. A road existed here, where no roads travel that were not made by mortals; it was fashioned by the roots of the Winter trees. I do not know what treachery allowed those seedlings to leave their master—but they are gone now."

"You were not aware of the plans of the Shining Court." It was not a question.

"I? No, Illaraphaniel. I am not a member of the Lord's Fist, and I spend little time in their councils, except as called." He watched as Meralonne once again sheathed sword. "She will not leave her Court, now."

"She cannot, as you know, or you would not be here." The silence that followed these words was thick and heavy, and it was the mage who broke it. "In your travels did you find one tree that might be saved?"

"Not one, and I assume from your question that you were likewise unsuccessful."

Meralonne nodded; his hands clenched into brief fists, open and shut, the externalization of heartbeat or word.

"You can go where I cannot," Anduvin said.

Silence.

Kallandras, aware of the mood of the two, hesitated. "APhaniel, you speak of the Winter Queen?"

"We speak," the mage replied, his voice shuttered, "of the Summer Queen. The Wild Hunt rode."

"I know. I witnessed some part of its passing."

"The Winter King died."

"This, I did not see."

"No. No one of us did, who are not part of her host. But the horns were sounded, the Hunt called; the Winter Queen rode."

"And the Summer Queen?"

"She is also Ariane. It has been Winter in the Hidden Court for many, many mortal lifetimes. There were those who felt that the old seasons would never turn again—but the Hunt was called. She rode. The horns were heard across the length and breadth of the hidden ways; they were heard above the howl of the Winter winds."

Anduvin lowered his head and turned away from them both.

"There is no end to Winter while the Winter King lives," the mage continued, his eyes shining silver as he lifted his face. "And the Winter King could not be found for centuries. But he was, Kallandras, and bards whose voices you will never hear if you are very, very fortunate will sing of that long wait, that long hunt, when you are dust and none remember your name.

"But when the King is dead, the seedlings must be planted."

Kallandras' eyes widened.

"Yes," Meralonne said. "These trees were rooted in the flesh of mortals, sacrificed for that purpose. But the Summer trees? They are planted in some part of the Winter King's body. And it has not happened, not yet."

Kallandras did not ask him how he knew with such certainty. He heard it in the mage's voice, and that was enough.

"Ariane now requires two things: a Summer King and a seedling. One, even one, will suffice. But the Summer King is not chosen from her kindred; without one tree to guard and open the way, she will have no King, Kallandras, and if she reigns, she does not reign alone. Not in Summer. Without one tree—and we have salvaged none—she will know neither Winter nor Summer, and until the paths are no longer sundered from the mortal realm, she will know little freedom."

Anduvin turned to the bard, although he addressed his comment to Meralonne. "You have chosen an odd companion for this task; he seems unaware of either the history of these trees or their significance."

"It is not for his knowledge of history that I chose him; he has traveled the hidden paths, and when he speaks, the wilderness listens."

Anduvin's gaze narrowed as he continued to examine the bard. The bard waited. "He did not travel them of his own accord."

"It matters little. You are aware, as I am, that mortals may chance across

the Lattan paths and the Scarran paths without knowing the ways; you cannot likewise travel. There is no longer a path that leads from the heartlands of the South to the North, and no path to be found outside of the Green Deepings that might wend its way to the Hidden Court, if then. What the Shining Court wrought here, they wrought well.”

“Not so well as they hoped,” Anduvin replied.

Meralonne’s hair began to move in a breeze that touched nothing else. His gaze narrowed as it traveled from Anduvin’s face to some point beyond his shoulder. Kallandras moved as well.

“I did not expect to see you here in the end,” Meralonne spoke to the shadows, “when you did not arrive at the beginning.”

Into the ruins of their hope, a figure in midnight robes now stepped; like the mage’s hair, the hem of her cloak billowed at the touch of a wind that disturbed nothing else. “Well met, Meralonne,” she said. She did not lift hands to hood; it was only by the timbre of her voice that Kallandras knew her. She was not young, but not yet at the peak of her power. “Well met, Kallandras.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked to Anduvin, but she offered him no similar word of greeting, and it was not clear from that lack whether she recognized him or not.

Kallandras nodded to the woman he knew as Evayne a’Nolan.

“This is the last of the corrupted trees,” she said; there was no question in the words.

“And you failed to help us uproot them or lay them to rest.” The mage’s words were brittle.

“Were it my choice, APhaniel, I would have happily done little else—”

“But you would not have survived it. Not yet. In your prime, perhaps.” He grudged her the words and did not trouble to hide the anger he felt. She was not yet old enough not to flinch; although her expression remained hidden by folds of cloth, her mouth tightened briefly.

“My arrival, at this or any age, is not of my choosing.”

“So you say. And you have arrived now, at this moment, to accomplish what task?”

“To learn,” she replied. So saying, she walked between Meralonne and Anduvin, to reach the ruined trunk of the tree they had between them destroyed. She lifted a hand, touched it; the robes at her feet shifted again, their movements stronger. The dead bark cracked beneath her palm. “To learn and to gather.”

Meralonne spun, although Anduvin remained still.

“You were not my only master,” she continued, as she lifted a section of

wood. She took care, but it cut her palms anyway; even dead, that was the nature of this tree. “You were not even the first—but after I made the long choice to walk the hidden paths, Master APhaniel, you were the most constant of my . . . companions.” She rose, her hand bleeding. Her lips curved in what might have been a smile, if smiles could contain so much unshed pain. She lifted her palm. In the scant light, blood was the color of shadow.

Meralonne was not a man to be moved by pain. He watched Evayne, his eyes unblinking, his hands taut by his sides. He was the taller of the two, his hair long and unfettered, his gray eyes shedding light. Her eyes were still concealed by the fall of her hood; she folded her arms around the wood she now carried.

“What will you do with that?” Meralonne asked.

She did not answer.

“Evayne—”

“In truth, I do not yet know. I haven’t seen what it becomes.”

“And you will not look.”

“No. Not here.” She glanced around what remained of dead foliage, her head stopping briefly in the direction of the *Kialli* lord. “What is the year?”

“It is the year four hundred and twenty-seven,” Kallandras replied, for it was clear Meralonne would not. “I believe it is the evening of the twenty-fourth day of Henden.”

She stilled. Even her robes lost their habitual, constant, rustle. “So late,” she finally said, in a whisper. “So close, now.” She turned in place, careful to take no step forward or back. It was to Kallandras she now spoke.

He thought her all of thirty, although perhaps she was younger; her voice gave him much, but pain, loss, or fear was not a property of any specific year in a single person’s life, and Evayne was no exception. But he saw that she wore no rings, and had she, he would have seen them; he himself wore one.

“If it is Henden of four hundred and twenty-seven, the first battle has come to pass; it is over. You have won.”

“It is not,” he replied gravely, and without deliberation, “my war.”

“It is, in the end, the only war; it will devour our lives, Kallandras, and we will give them—willing or no—to see it to its conclusion.” Her grip tightened, as if she now held a doll and not the detritus of a tree that would have blindly devoured the whole of her life had it been able to touch her. “But I will tell you what I know of the year and the time.” She swallowed; the line of her shoulders shifted.

“What the Lord of the Shining Court intended failed; the South is not yet under his dominion.”

Anduvin stirred, turned; he lifted one hand. Kallandras bent knees, and they stood thus for a long breath—but neither man drew weapon.

“What of it?” Meralonne asked. Of the three, he was the only one to draw something from his robes—but it was a pipe, not a sword. He then cursed—in Weston—and to Kallandras’ surprise, Evayne laughed. It was not unkind; it carried, rather, astonishment and rue.

“You have no leaf?”

A platinum brow rose. “I have, as you have no surmised, no leaf.”

“I—I have some.”

He pursed lips, losing, for a moment, the perfect line of unassailable distance. “It is no doubt stale.”

“It is.”

“And you have taken to the pipe after subjecting me to all of your impertinent lectures about its dubious virtues?”

“Ah, no, Master APhaniel. I have kept it because you never listened to any one of those pleas.”

His eyes rounded; Kallandras thought it subterfuge until he heard the mage’s voice. “You have carried this leaf across unknown centuries for *my* use?” He was genuinely surprised. “You have wasted the considerable gift of your birth and your talent to comfort an old man in his dotage?”

She snorted. “I had it because you were always so foul if you wanted your pipe and it was denied you. I have never been in one place long enough to set it aside.” She was lying. “And you will never, ever be in your dotage.”

“Then it has not been many years since I last saw you in the Tower.”

“No.”

“Very well. I will take the stale leaf with as much gratitude as I can muster.” He held out a hand; she reached into the folds of her robe and removed a small pouch. “One cannot always see the ties that bind us,” he said, as he began to fill his pipe, “but even I would not have guessed at this one.”

Smoke rose in the air like a slender thread.

“There is no path between the Northern Wastes and the Terrean of Averda,” Evayne began. “But the trees planted here for just that purpose pulled the hidden paths and knit them together in such a way as to create one. It was meant,” she continued, “to last.”

He glanced at the dead trunk. “And now?”

“You have destroyed those unnatural moorings. If the demons travel from the Wastes to the Dominion of Annagar, they cannot travel in number; not even the *Kialli* are guaranteed to find their way through the paths that are hidden. They were not,” she added, “meant for the use of the dead. In the

Winter, the *Kialli* can travel with impunity; the Winter was always the season of their Lord. But in the Summer? It will be much, much simpler to hold those roads against such a passage.”

“And there will be no Summer?” was the soft, soft question that followed. It came from Anduvin, not Meralonne.

She hesitated. “Understand that the roads were meant to contain and cage those who would not—or could not—leave these lands when the Covenant came into being; it is upon those roads, and no other, that the gods and their offspring might walk without losing their way.”

“I understand the Covenant and its cost far better than one who is merely mortal,” Anduvin replied; his voice was Winter ice. The *Kialli* were famed for their pride—for those who knew of them at all—with reason.

“And the hidden ways?” was her soft rejoinder. “Then I will not bore you.”

“Bore me in his stead,” Meralonne told her; the words, however, were soft and shorn of impatience.

“They have been broken in subtle ways. I am not immortal, but I have walked the roads—in both Winter and in the Summer that is long, long past.”

“How subtle?” the mage said, when she fell silent. He gestured the embers of his pipe into a brighter orange and once again lifted pipe to lips.

As if his action was at once both comfort and irritation, she continued. “The containment is cracked. The mortal world seeps into the hidden and the wild; the hidden and the wild will seep, in return, into mortal lands.” One sharp breath left her lips, and when she spoke again, she spoke with urgency. “I have not seen it all, APhaniel. I have looked, and I have not seen it all—but the war you fought here was not the end; it was only barely the beginning.”

“What have you seen?” His voice was the mage’s voice; the brief anger that had informed it was gone.

She swallowed. “The firstborn,” she replied; the word barely carried. “In the North, in the Empire, in *Averalaan Aramarelas*, the oldest who have lived on those paths are . . . waking. If you cannot hear them now, you will hear them soon.”

The mage’s eyes were like silver in sunlight. “Many, many things sleep beneath that city; the city itself is not unaware of the things that are buried.” His eyes narrowed; smoke drifted in rings from his lips.

“One of the eldest has already begun to move, APhaniel.”

“In Averalaan?” The question was sharper, harder.

Cloth brushed cloth as she nodded.

“It is hard to believe that the gods would allow it, if they were aware of it

at all; there are ancient things the city protects, and we cannot afford them to waken. I will speak with Sigurne.”

“Meralonne—”

“The worst of the battle here is at an end, tonight. We have had one victory and one defeat—and the defeat is subtle, Evayne; the Annagarians will barely countenance it as a loss.” He glanced at what remained of the last of the trees. “Indeed, for them it might be simple boon; they have never seen the Summer Queen, and their brief experience of the Winter was not to their liking.”

“Return to the North,” she told him. To the bard’s surprise, he nodded gravely.

She turned to Kallandras. He waited; he did not speak.

After an awkward pause, she did. “How old will I become, while I walk this path?” She could not quite guard her voice; he heard the fear and the weariness that informed her words.

“I do not know,” was his grave reply. He spoke softly and without anger because he now could; in his youth, he had not been capable of that much kindness. No one had injured him as gravely as Evayne a’Nolan in her youth. But he was farther from that youth than she herself, this eve; he could afford this small act of generosity.

She lifted her hands and finally pulled her hood from its peak, exposing her face and the entirety of her expression. He studied her face, as she intended.

“Twenty years.”

“. . . Twenty more years.” The words were an echo of his, but they had a different texture, a different meaning. She closed her violet eyes, lifted one hand to briefly touch the pendant that hung around her neck.

“It will not hurt you as much in two decades.”

Her eyes opened, rounding. “Will I forget?” she asked. She made no attempt to hide what she felt; even the two silent witnesses could easily grasp her apprehension. “Will I forget what drove me to walk this path at the beginning?”

“I do not know; you have not—yet—spoken to me of your motivations.” He lifted one hand. “I can only guess, Evayne, and it is a guess based in part on the woman you will become; she has seen much, perhaps more than even I.”

“And that guess?”

“No. You will not forget. But you will come to understand the broader imperative, and perhaps that imperative will weigh as much as your personal reasons in the end.”

She lifted hood to face again. “I must leave,” she told them.

Kallandras nodded, accustomed by now to the unpredictable nature of both her arrivals and her departures. She took one step forward and vanished.

Only when she was gone—and he was certain of her absence—did Anduvin turn to Meralonne. “Illaraphaniel, will you seek her?” He did not speak of Evayne.

“Not yet,” was the mage’s quiet reply. Smoke, like small ghosts, wreathed his face. “If I find her Court, what have I to offer? She will not be moved by anything now. Your Lord planned well, when he planned this.”

“If he is to have purchase upon this plain, she numbers among the most dangerous of his foes.” The *Kialli* lifted his head, turning away. “You will be in want of a shield.”

“I will.”

“Take me with you.”

“Your Lord will not be pleased if—”

“You refer to my Queen?”

“Your Queen, then. I do not think she will countenance such a journey.”

“Oh? She is mortal yet, Illaraphaniel; I do not think she will care. She lives with the mortals, on the edges of their Court and not in its center; power is not her concern.” His tone made clear that he thought it should be. “The mortals are not so enamored of our kind that they seek us out; she does not—she has not—summoned me since the eve of battle.”

“And you think she will not?”

Anduvin nodded. “Take me with you,” he said again, and then added, “and if you can lead me to the Queen in the dawn of her Summer, I will make you a shield that even the gods themselves could not break.”

“You might not survive the finding of that Court.”

“I am aware of the risk.”

“Even in Summer, the wrath of Ariane is unpredictable; it is wild, Anduvin. It knows no bounds. She will feel the death of each of the trees we could not save—”

“And she will be grateful, Illaraphaniel.”

“You are so certain?”

“I play no games this eve; I am certain.”

Meralonne smiled; it was a slender lift of lips, and it was cold. “Very well. I will consider your offer, Swordsmith.”

Anduvin bowed. “Then I will take my leave.”

“Where will you go?”

“To the North, APhaniel. It is why the stranger appeared; she meant to give warning. I will go North.”

“Then I will tell you one thing, and perhaps it will ease you. Evayne a’Nolan is mortal, as you surmised—but she is god-born.”

“Her eyes—” Anduvin’s brows rose.

“Yes. They are not golden. She was not born to a distant god; she is of this plain, as is her father.”

“She is—”

“She is kin, in that fashion, to the Queen of the Hidden Court. They are half sisters. It is possible that that robed stranger can more easily traverse the paths that will lead to the Summer Court. Remember it; I am certain you will see her again. It is not her way to give advice—to appear at all—without exacting a price.”

“The advice was not given to me; I am therefore little concerned at its price.”

“Remember that,” was the grave reply. “For it may be, in the end, that her words were meant for you. If you go to the heart of your enemy’s stronghold, you will undoubtedly see her again; she may—or may not—recognize you. Have a care, Swordsmith.”

“Save your concern for those who require it.”

“If you do not live, you will craft no shield for me.”

“Do not insult me.”

Meralonne laughed, and after a moment, Anduvin joined him. They looked young, then. Bright and gleaming, like new blades.

24th of Henden 427 A.A.

Avantari, Averalan Aramarelas

It was not unusual for Devon ATerafin, a senior member of the Royal Trade Commission, to work late. It was, however, unusual at this time of year. The offices were all but empty; the lack of discussion, argument, pleading, and the occasional loud spate of cursing made the silence almost disturbing.

It was not disturbing to Devon. Gregori, his aide, had remained in the office, occupied with the filing, which was both necessary and tedious enough none but the junior members of the Commission were required to do it.

Neither man was particularly surprised when the door opened; they were alert, but unalarmed.

Devon, however, was surprised to see the woman who entered the room: Birgide Viranyi. Her expression was shuttered, but that wasn’t surprising; so

was Devon's. He rose. "Apologies," he said, "but the Royal Trade Commission is closed for the day."

She entered the office, closing the door at her back. "Yes."

Silence. Gregori left the stacks of letters and moved to the books; in any given day, ledgers and references were taken from the multiple shelves that held them—and their return to those shelves was, like the rest of the filing, the employ of junior commissioners. He began to shelve books.

Only when a majority of those volumes were in place did he turn; he nodded once to Devon.

"Why are you here?"

"I wish to speak with Duvvari," she replied. She was stiff, but the mention of the Lord of the Compact

often had that effect on the men and women who served under him.

Gregori and Devon exchanged a glance.

Birgide was a compact woman of medium height. Her hair was shorter than either Gregori's or Devon's, and her scars therefore more visible. Her eyes were sharp, a clear gray that was often disconcerting when she failed to blink, as she did now. "I have only just arrived from the Western Kingdoms, but I could see, as I made my way to *Avantari*, the trees that grow on the Terafin grounds. I heard the rumors as I traveled, but it is seldom that rumor contains so much truth."

"Did Duvvari summon you from your post?"

"No. I do not imagine he will be overjoyed; he is not a man who appreciates initiative."

"Is that so?"

Birgide grimaced. Duvvari's disembodied voice sounded clipped and unmused. No door—no obvious door—had opened; Devon was almost certain that Duvvari arrived at the exact moment Birgide had.

"It is, as you well know," she replied.

"Initiative and abandonment of duties are not, surely, synonymous?" He stepped into the room from the farthest reach of the office.

Devon tensed. Birgide did not. Gregori continued to work. Gregori very seldom spoke when Duvvari was present—and of late, his silences were the norm.

"Report," the Lord of the Compact said.

Devon considered returning to his chair, and decided against it. He was angry. "Four men wearing the armor of the Terafin House Guard attempted to assassinate the Terafin this morning. This is the second assassination attempt she has survived."

"They failed."

“Yes.”

“The manner of their failure?”

“The Terafin moved.”

“Moved.”

“She threw herself forward and somersaulted across the hardwood, narrowly avoiding two swords.”

“There were four men present.”

Devon nodded. The nod was controlled. “None of the four survived. One of her cats was on escort duty. I believe he killed two before they could draw swords.” He glanced at his cuffs, as if searching for ink stains. His hands were remarkably steady. “I was to be informed before any move was made against the Terafin.”

Duvari said nothing.

“We have lost two tasters in the kitchen,” Devon continued.

“The Terafin is aware of this?”

“They were not poisoned.”

The Lord of the Compact stepped toward Devon; Devon stood his ground. Birgide idly crossed the room and took Devon’s chair. “I would be a better choice if you chose poison,” she said reasonably.

If Devon could have ejected her from the office, he would have. Birgide, however, was not his immediate concern—although that might change in an instant. She, as Devon and Gregori, was *Astari*.

“You are crossing a dangerous line, Duvari,” he said, without preamble.

“As are you,” Duvari replied.

“No. I owe my loyalty to the *Kings*, and the Kings have remained utterly silent on the matter of the Terafin’s disposition.”

“There is no proof that the assassination attempt was connected to the Kings.”

“No. But two of the four were yours.”

Duvari did not deny it. “And the tasters?”

“They are not dead.”

The lift of a dark brow changed the contours of the Lord of the Compact’s face. “You are compromised,” he said softly. “You understand what must be done, and you hesitate.”

“Until the Kings command otherwise, I owe my service to the Terafin. They have *not* commanded, Duvari.”

“That is not what I mean, and you know it. You allowed them to survive.”

“The Terafin would have taken their deaths very personally, and I could not have offered any reason for those deaths that would have eased her.”

“And so you protect her from me.”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand what she has done?”

“Yes.”

“And can you honestly tell me that she does not constitute the biggest threat to the Crowns that the Empire has yet seen?”

“Yes. We survived the Henden of 410. She is not the danger that we faced then.”

“No. No, in my considered opinion, she is far worse. I want her neutralized.”

“And I will kill her myself when the Kings give that command.”

“She has not yet chosen to subject herself to the judgment of the Kings.”

“The Kings have not yet made their decision.”

“Have you informed her of the extent of the architectural changes within *Avantari*?”

“No. She is aware of the obvious changes: the floors and the structural pillars. She is not a threat to the Kings.”

“You are not impartial.”

Nor was Duvari. Which was irrelevant. “Should the Kings decide that she is to be removed, I will kill her.”

Duvari did not acknowledge the words. Instead he said, “The Exalted are highly concerned. It is clear that the gods believe the Terafin is a danger.”

“To the Kings?”

“Their concern is not the Kings. They feel she is a danger to the Empire. I will grant that they feel the danger she poses is unintentional, but the Lord of Wisdom believes she should be removed—if that is indeed possible.”

“And the Lord of Wisdom is *not* the Kings. The gods do not rule here. The previous assassin was demonic in nature.”

“I am aware of that.”

“If the demons want her dead—”

Duvari lifted a hand. “The Kings have taken that into consideration. They are willing—barely—to wait. I infer, from the words of the Exalted of Cormaris that time, should we wish to remove the Terafin, is of the essence. She does not yet understand the power she wields.”

“No more do the gods!”

“They understand it better than the magi or the Kings,” Duvari said, voice the cold of ice. “And she *will* grow to understand it. She altered the architecture of the Kings’ Palace without once leaving her own backyard. She did so without obvious intent.”

“She saved the lives of the—”

“I *understand* what she did. Were it not for that, the Kings would have made the only wise decision immediately upon arriving in the Palace.”

Birgide cleared her throat, and the two men turned. Duvvari was unmused. “I wish an introduction to the Terafin Master Gardener.”

“I did not summon you from the Western Kingdoms. Nor did I request your expertise at this time. If you hope to infiltrate the Terafin manse, you have now made that clear to Devon ATerafin.”

She smiled. “I am aware of Devon. There is no way of gaining entrance to the House that would avoid his detection. I have not been briefed about the architectural changes, but such a briefing was obviously not considered germane.

“But I may be of assistance. I may be necessary.”

Devon did not argue. He did not point out that both he and Gregori were ATerafin; nor did he claim that they could easily assassinate the Terafin although, were she any other head of a House, he might have.

“What, exactly, do you desire of House Terafin?”

“I am a botanist, Duvvari. I wish to study her grounds, her trees, and her rumored forest. Not more, not less.”

“I will consider it.” He turned his attention to Devon. “Do not cross me.”

“If you wish me to revoke the Terafin name, only ask. I serve the Kings, Duvvari. I do not believe that the Terafin’s death is in their best interests.”

“You are not impartial. What you feel is immaterial.”

18th of Henden, 427 A.A.

Araven Estates, Averalan Aramarelas

Hectore of Araven hated no color on earth so much as black.

This had not always been the case; in his feckless, brash youth he barely noticed it, and in his errant first attempt at adulthood, he had considered it a bold fashion statement. Now? It was a public emblem of loss: Black, white, and gold—but black, in this case, the predominant color. His daughter wore mourning white, as the mother, although she wore a black veil; her husband, the white and black; the whole of the Household Staff the Borden Estate in the seventeenth holding employed were likewise attired.

Even Hugh, the oldest of Rachele’s children, was somber and colorless as he stood beside his parents in the long hall that led to the single, modest public gallery, and from there, to the grounds in which Sharann, Hectore’s

beloved grandchild, would be laid to rest. Rachele, the youngest of his daughters, had been coddled, according to Hectore's wife and his many friends; she had not learned that life was a constant test. It was not success that defined a man or a woman—it was their grace and their continued ability to maneuver in the face of inevitable failure. His daughter held her head high, but even through the veil her swollen lips and eyes could be seen.

She had shed nothing but tears for weeks now. She had traveled, when she could bear it, to the Houses of Healing at Hectore's side; she had sat by her youngest child's bed, and dribbled water and broth into her daughter's mouth. She had watched—as Hectore had watched—as Sharann dwindled in weight; at seven years of age, she had weighed well under thirty pounds in the last few days of her life.

She had woken four times on her own, and a handful of times with intervention, but she had eaten so little; toward the end, when she woke, her eyes were dull and she could barely remember how to speak. Hectore had visited daily, absent the usual merchant emergencies; he resented each and every one of them bitterly, now.

Sharann was not the only person to die of the sleeping sickness, as it was colloquially called in hushed whispers throughout the hundred holdings; she was not even the only child. But she was the only one whose death Hectore of Araven took personally.

He hugged his daughter tightly and wordlessly; after a few seconds, she wrapped her arms around his neck and the whole of her body trembled. He didn't much care that other visitants were waiting to speak a few words to the bereaved; they could damn well wait. He didn't care about their time, their convenience, or their much smaller sense of loss. There were only two things he cared about today: his daughter and his grandson. He went to his grandson after he forced himself to relinquish his hold on his daughter.

"Hugh," he said, offering the boy an open hand. Hugh, mindful of his father, took the hand; mindful of his mother, he stepped closer to his grandfather. He was, in Hectore's opinion, just a shade too young to fully understand what death meant. He was not, however, too young to understand his mother's pain. He was, in Hectore's admittedly biased opinion, a good child. "You'll have to take care of my daughter," he said, bending in, speaking softly as if attempting to conspire.

"Da takes care of her," was the quiet reply. "She doesn't want my help."

He glanced at Rachele and then back to his grandson. "She doesn't know how to ask, yet. She doesn't know that she wants help. It's not that her world is over—but she'll never see Sharann again, and that's hard."

And you'll never see her again either, but that's not quite real to you yet. He took his leave of his family, and accompanied by Andrei, made his way out to the gardens. "Well?"

Andrei glanced at the grounds. They were almost impeccable, and they were certainly larger than the grounds Hectore's gardeners maintained; Borden was situated in the hundred, and Araven's main house, upon the Isle. Land on the Isle was at a premium.

"There are no easy answers. There are no answers within the Order of Knowledge that my sources were willing to divulge; the Exalted are involved." He paused and added, "The *Astari* are involved."

Hectore rolled his eyes. "I have no designs upon the Kings; they were not materially involved in my grandchild's death."

"No."

"But I feel that something was, Andrei, and I will know what it is."

"Patris Araven—"

"Do not sling titles at me; there are no eavesdroppers." Hectore's hand was cupped firmly around a stone of silence, in his pocket for just such a conversation. "Had you met me before I was required to depart, things would be simpler. My daughter will be in tears for the whole of this wretched day, and I would be there to offer her comfort."

"Your daughter accepts the death, Hectore."

"She's no other choice."

"She has." Andrei raised a brow.

"Give me the information you've managed to obtain."

Andrei nodded. "It is, as I suggested, scant. It is therefore not reliable."

"But?"

"Hectore—"

"Out with it."

"It involves House Terafin."

House Terafin. First among The Ten, although not by such a wide margin now as it had once enjoyed. Hectore had some dealings with Terafin, although to be fair, he had dealings with all of The Ten in one form or the other. His merchant holdings were not small, and they were not passive. He frowned. "House Terafin. It's where the healer boy lives."

"It is."

"Andrei, your expression could sour wine."

"The boy is not, as you well know, the most significant aspect of Terafin at the moment. You attended the previous Terafin's funeral."

Hectore nodded, lifting a hand to his chin as he began to stroll past the

violets. He found them a little on the pale side, but Rachele had always preferred what she called “soft” colors. “I did. It was interesting, and not the norm for such affairs.”

“Did you note the young woman?”

Hectore nodded. He didn’t need to ask which young woman Andrei referred to; from the moment he was granted entry into the grounds and the outdoor reception, there had only *been* one woman of note. She wore a dress that Hectore could still remember if he paused to close his eyes: a thing that suggested all possible variants of the shade white, mixed with gold and the delicate black of mourning. It had not been particularly daring—and yet, it had. “Jewel ATerafin. She is Terafin now.”

The dress, oddly enough, had seemed more significant than the very large, very white winged cat that had sat, like a statue—a talkative one—by her side. Hectore knew he had seen the creature—but his memory would not conjure a concrete image; the woman in the dress, however, haunted his vision, like an afterimage burned there by unwary sight of the sun.

“Yes. In the weeks since she was acclaimed, she has survived no less than four attempts on her life.”

Hectore shrugged. House succession was always a tricky affair, especially if the House was one of The Ten.

“Not all of her assassins were reputed to be human.”

This, Hectore had not heard. “Why did you not inform me of this fact earlier?”

“It was barely possible to ascertain that it was, indeed, fact. The stories that have sprung up around that girl almost beggar the imagination—and a rational man would assume most lacked substance.”

“You, of course, being the definition of rational.”

“Indeed.”

“Andrei, I cannot run my life without you. You are aware of this, even if your modesty forbids open acknowledgment of that fact. If you do not, however, speak plainly, I will strangle you and consign myself to a life absent your competence.”

“The stories are true.”

“Pardon?”

“The stories are true, Hectore. She owns giant, winged cats—”

“If I recall correctly, the cats are not suitable as either guards or servants; far too cheeky.”

Andrei did not roll his eyes, but this clearly took effort. “—she rides a large, white stag that appears—and disappears at whim.”

“Her whim?”

“Apparently so. She is served by someone the magi deem an immortal—a Hunter.”

“Hunter?”

“The Wild Hunt.”

“Andrei—please. I know you do not drink when you are on duty.”

Andrei inspected the roses; he liked them. Hectore did not care for roses, or any flowers that came with thorns. “It is said she stopped the rains on the first day of the Terafin’s funeral—and that, Hectore, you must believe.”

Hectore shrugged.

“But she did more—and this is *not* rumored, for reasons which will become obvious. She altered the structure of *Avantari*.”

“Impossible.” Hectore’s eyes narrowed as he turned to confront his most loyal and most necessary servant. What he saw in Andrei’s face stemmed the tide of his careless words, and left him only with the careful ones. Andrei was not—and had never been—a fool; his was a skepticism and cynicism that even Hectore found difficult at times. Hectore was not certain what it would take to convince Andrei of the truth of a rumor of that magnitude—but clearly, Andrei believed it.

“Were any of the assassins sent against her *Astari*?”

“Hectore, that is beneath you.”

“I am serious, Andrei. If what you have just said is true in any measure, the Kings cannot afford to let the girl live.”

“And yet, she does.”

“Why, in your opinion?”

Andrei’s silence took on a different quality as he considered the man he had served for much of his life. “She is,” he finally said, “The Terafin. The death of a reigning member of The Ten is always destabilizing. The fact that her predecessor’s death occurred at the hands of a demon adds to the danger. Recent attacks on the current Terafin are also demonic, which makes clear that the demons consider her a primary—possibly *the* primary—threat.

“It can safely be assumed that what demons want and what the Kings want are not the same.”

Hectore had made the Araven fortunes by relying on a mixture of instinct and natural shrewdness. And by, admittedly, a certain brash arrogance and a willingness to take risks to get what he wanted. The problem with many of his opponents was that their definition of what Hectore wanted was so parochial and so narrow. Many of the visitants to this particular funeral were such men—and women. They were here to show their devotion to Araven and its

merchant trading wealth. They would not believe that Hectore was distraught over the death of a granddaughter, as he had so many of them.

They would certainly never believe that Hectore might choose to take this one death personally.

“You are not telling me what you know, Andrei.”

“I am telling you what I know.”

“You are not telling me all of it. I will have the rest. I will have it now.”

Andrei, to Hectore’s surprise, hesitated. “It has been very, very difficult,” he finally said.

“It is unlike you to offer excuses in place of information.”

“It is very like you to be so impatient.”

“This is *important* to me, Andrei.”

“Understood. When we attended The Terafin’s funeral, I saw Jewel ATerafin when you were briefly presented to the House Council. She was—as you have rightfully pointed out—daring in both her choice of dress and her choice of colors; she made a statement without opening her mouth. So much so,” he continued, after a long pause, “that I did not recognize her.”

“You would have little reason to do so.”

Andrei smiled. “You would think that, yes. You would be wrong in this particular case. She is not someone I have seen often; I have, in fact, seen her on only one occasion in the past.”

“The recent past?”

“No, Patris. It was almost two decades ago.”

Hectore frowned. “You did not meet the girl in my company.”

“No. You were not directly involved.”

Hectore’s eyes narrowed. “I am involved in almost any action of note you might take; if I am not *present*, I am nonetheless affected. Where did you meet her?”

“In the Common.”

Hectore waited. His lack of patience, his fury at his granddaughter’s senseless, lingering death, were balanced—barely—by a growing curiosity. Curiosity and a faint suspicion that was hardening as he watched Andrei’s expression. *Do you think to save me pain?* Yes. Yes, he did. Hectore was not certain what might cause more sorrow on a day when he was forced, against all prior effort, to finally acknowledge Sharann’s death.

But he could guess, if he thought for a moment like a rational man. At times like this, rationality was highly overrated, but it had its uses. “Ara-rath.”

Andrei did not seem surprised to hear the name, although it had been well

over a decade since it had been spoken between them. “Yes, Hectore. I met her in an evening, in the Common, while attempting to watch over your godson.”

“How was she significant?” That she was, Hectore no longer doubted.

“He did not mention her name in my presence, but it did not matter; it was clear to me that Ararath had become as invested in her welfare as you were in his. Perhaps more. She arrived in the Common in order to protect him.”

“Two decades ago? She couldn’t have been more than a child.”

Andrei nodded. “A child,” he said, “who saved your godson’s life; I do not think I would have arrived in time, otherwise.”

Hectore’s brows rose. “You?”

“Even so.”

“How could a child save Ararath’s life? Was he unarmed?”

“He was not. But what he faced, Hectore, should have killed him, in my opinion.”

“You killed his assailant.”

“There was more than one, and yes. It is why I am aware of how unusual the young lady in question must be.”

Hectore’s eyes narrowed. He examined Rachele’s roses, eyeing their thorns with suspicion. The flowers, however, were a lovely color. “You have not answered my question.”

“It is a difficult question to answer. But it is my suspicion that the child was—and is—seer-born.”

Hectore bent his face over the roses which were still in bud. They were sweetly scented, but at this stage in their growth, the scent was not cloying, not overwhelming. He had heard that one or two enterprising Master Gardeners had managed to create roses which grew no thorns, and he was interested in seeing such flowers, because he was somewhat skeptical of the claim. “You never mentioned this.”

“Ararath would have died.”

“You said that much.”

“Ah, pardon; you misinterpreted. He would have attempted to silence me, Hectore. You were as fond of Ararath as you were of any of your own children, and there are some things you would not forgive, even of me. I made it clear that I would speak no word of her ability or her existence. I thought her mage-born, at first.”

“I cannot believe that Ararath would have been suicidal enough to attempt to harm *you*.”

“Men are not always wise where their children are concerned.”

“Indeed, they are not. Nor their grandchildren.” Especially not their grandchildren. Children were always so fraught with difficulties; they were rebellious, angry, sullen, in their turn—and a parent must tolerate all of these things with a modicum of grace, weathering the worst of the storm until it passed. Grandchildren, however? Those storms were their parents’ problem. Not his. The affection was unadulterated by the daily realities of life.

“Ararath’s young charge eventually wound up in House Terafin. That cannot have been an accident.”

Andrei addressed the first sentence, not the second, not immediately. “She did. She went to House Terafin on the day that an assassin also visited the manse. The rumors—and these are more easily accessed—are that she proved her value to the House by saving The Terafin’s life the day she first arrived at the front gates. She is admired by the House servants, with a few notable exceptions. Do you know that she was given a permanent residence in the Terafin manse from that first day?”

“I obviously knew no such thing.”

“I believe she is seer-born,” Andrei said again. “I think Ararath knew it. And if it will bring you any peace, I think Ararath sent her to his estranged sister at House Terafin, and his estranged sister accepted her.”

Hectore straightened. Ararath. *Did you make peace with your sister, in the end?* But no, that was not Ararath’s style. His pride had been both his strength and his downfall. “You think Jewel ATerafin is that girl of Ararath’s.”

“Yes, Hectore.”

“And she is at the center of the strangeness in House Terafin; of that there’s no doubt. Why,” he asked, his voice softening, “do you feel that the sleeping sickness is connected in some fashion with that girl?”

“I do not; nor would I have ever assumed it. But there is an undercurrent of unease within the Order of Knowledge—and not a little resentment—about The Terafin.”

“Resentment?”

“Apparently she is not interested in having her grounds overrun by desperately curious mage-born scholars.”

“Really? How selfish of her,” Hectore said, raising a brow. “I can see why the magi would therefore assume that she is the source of all evil.”

“The resentment has been heavily discouraged by the guildmaster—to no great effect. Discussion about The Terafin within the Order has also been heavily discouraged, to much greater effect. Because there are demons involved, and because the guildmaster’s policy in regards to discussion of any-

thing related to the forbidden arts is harshly enforced, there is little discussion. It is why I have had such difficulty, and why, in the end, I have no solid information to offer; the magi are willing to discuss what is known—the cats, the trees, the stag—but they fall silent very quickly when it comes to intelligent speculation and theorizing. I understand why,” he added. “Guildmaster Mellifas is as terrifying a woman as I have ever met.”

“That is unkind, Andrei.”

Andrei nodded smoothly. “For this reason, Hectore, I have been uncertain about the value of any information I might bring you with regards to The Terafin or the nature of the plague. Because it *is* of import, and because you will act in haste when your family has been harmed, it is rather more important that the information have a strong foundation in fact or truth; less would be socially irresponsible. What I have said today is, in the main, hearsay. I am not comfortable with it.”

“You are, as always, too strict in your determination of what constitutes solid information.”

“As you say.”

“I wish to speak with The Terafin.”

Andrei evinced no surprise at all.

“But, tell me one thing, Andrei. In your investigation, did you happen to discover if Adam, my healer boy, was living under the auspices of The Terafin herself?”

His servant smiled. “Indeed, Hectore. He is living in the personal apartments used by the new Terafin and her small, unusual court. She has failed to take up residence in the large apartments traditionally reserved for The Terafin’s personal use.”

“What? Why?”

“I am not certain. Adam lives in the West Wing, where The Terafin currently resides.”

“In your investigations, what is the general consensus about her ability to hold the Terafin seat?”

“I believe it would be best, in this case, to meet with her in person, if that can be arranged.”

“I am Hectore of Araven,” he replied, drawing himself up to his full height with an annoyance that was more real than feigned. “Of course it can be arranged. I will go through the Merchant Authority; I believe it’s been some time since I took tea with Jarven.”

Andrei’s smile stiffened as he bowed.

“Oh, stop. If I have forgiven him our early encounters and rivalries—or

perhaps, if he has forgiven *me*—I fail to understand why you continue to harbor such a dislike of the man. Speak to Jarven.”

“Yes, Hectore.”

The Patris Araven spoke a soft word as he touched the stone in his pocket. “And now,” he said, in an entirely different tone of voice, “I will go to my Rachele. I will offer her what comfort I can, and I will tell her that I will personally see that whoever—whatever—is responsible for our loss will *pay*.”



Chapter One

7th of Fabril, 428 A.A.
Terafin Manse, Averalan Aramarelas

THE SERVANTS WERE, as always, efficient. They moved in silence through the back halls, and with grace through the public halls, tending to their daily duties with the starched exactitude the Master of the Household Staff expected. But if one knew them well—and living in the Terafin manse for half one's life allowed opportunity for plenty of observation—it was clear they were excited. There was an expectant air to their work.

Some of that work involved the rooms occupied by The Terafin, although at the moment they were empty on what Gabriel ATerafin referred to as a technicality. Everyone else referred to it as “Jewel being difficult.”

Jewel found the transition from member of the House Council to Head of the House to be daunting. She'd expected daunting. She'd worked herself out of hours of sleep while staring at the ceiling in the room she'd occupied since she'd first set foot in the manse thinking about how to deal with the Kings, their *Astari*, and the mages who served them. She had, thanks to the unsuccessful assassins, managed to avoid *Avantari* and its many Courts since she had been acclaimed, but the time for such avoidance was rapidly drawing to a close.

Speculation about the intentions of the Kings—and the Lord of the Compact—was dire; given the constant press of emergencies that now constituted her life, Jewel avoided those discussions whenever possible.

She'd had less luck avoiding the bards of the bardic colleges, because at this point in her early tenure she had two in residence. They were young enough not to be master bards, and nervous enough—when they thought no one was looking—to be careful, but they were *also* charming bastards. They reported to Solran Marten, the Bardmaster of Senniel College. She, as anyone with the ability to form half a thought knew, reported to either the Kings, or the Queens if the Kings were otherwise occupied.

The Exalted were also uneasy with the newest in the line of Terafin rulers. The Guildmaster of the Order of Knowledge had likewise expressed reservations. Hannerle was, at the moment, asleep in the West Wing, but when she wasn't, her room was a silent battleground of anger, guilt, and fear. Haval could hide it all, of course; Hannerle couldn't.

But again, all of these were things she'd expected.

What was unexpected was the sudden diffidence shown her by every servant in the manse. Every single one. Even Merry. Oh, she knew they'd always stretched all the rules of etiquette when they worked in the West Wing, making allowances—as Merry called them—any time the Master of the Household Staff was absent.

Since the day Jewel had left the Council Hall as The Terafin—with only two abstentions in the vote, those being Haerrad's and Rymark's—the servants had been uniformly perfect in all of their interactions. They replied with actions, and only spoke if words were utterly necessary; they no longer smiled, nodded or—gods forbid—laughed. They looked at Jewel only if she gave them a direct order, but absent that order, they looked through her or past her. It didn't matter whether or not the intimidating Master of the Household Staff was even present.

Jewel felt like a ghost in her own home.

You are not Jewel Markess ATerafin, the Winter King said. He could; he was at a distance somewhere in the wild garden. *You are now an office; you are the reason House Terafin exists; its leader and its rule. It is not an office you made, Jewel. It existed before you, and it will exist when you die. The fact that you fill it lends color, personality, and direction to that office—but it is not you, and it is not entirely yours. They understand, even if you do not, the respect that office must be given if the House is to endure.*

She didn't bother to answer. Instead, flanked by six of the Chosen—and Avandar, who stood closer to her than her own shadow at high bloody noon—she examined the library's shelves. She had always loved this library, with its long, empty tables and its high, high ceilings which nonetheless let in light, be it sun or moon. But she had come to realize in the past few weeks that part

of what she had loved about it was the quiet, steady presence of Amara. Paying her predecessor the final respects that were her due and her right hadn't laid the sense of loss to rest.

She should be used to it. She'd done this before.

"Terafin," Avandar said.

She turned to face him, one thick and scuffed leather volume in her hand. "I've got it."

He nodded, as if the book had no significance; to Avandar, it had little. "You have three hours in which to prepare for your first public outing as The Terafin."

She hesitated for a long moment, and then slid the volume back onto the shelf.

Haval was waiting for her in the West Wing in what had become her fitting room. He had already set up the tools of his trade; the stool upon which she might stand for adjustments in length of hem, the spools of thread and needles of varying thickness, and the pins which were such a necessary annoyance. Although Snow lounged in the corner, he had failed to insist on the creation of any new dresses. He nonetheless felt compelled to offer criticism of the clothing she did end up wearing. He was, in cat parlance, *bored*.

"You did not," Haval said, "take Night with you."

"I only went upstairs, Haval. I had six of the Chosen *and* Avandar with me at all times."

"In the last eight weeks there have been four attempts on your life, at least three of which obviously involved magic."

"Believe that I'm aware of that fact. Sigurne—"

He cleared his throat loudly.

"—The guildmaster expects to speak with me tomorrow. Again. The Order of Knowledge has been given permission to lay down whatever magics she feels will be useful to us in the months to follow. I have food tasters in and out of the kitchens and the dining hall before any meal; I am not allowed to snack without their presence. Daine is in full command of the healerie as we speak, and the previous four attempts on my life, while unsuccessful, caused enough injury that he's unlikely to relax. I feel the absence of one cat is unlikely to make much difference within the manse itself."

Snow hissed.

"I fully intend to have *both* Night and Snow on guard for my first walk-about in the victory parade."

"You will take Lord Celleriant?"

“Yes.”

“And the Winter King?”

“No.” Although she was grinding her teeth in an attempt to keep half of her annoyance on the right side of her mouth, Jewel found Haval’s obvious irritation a boon. If the servants, the guards, and the Chosen accorded the office far more respect than Jewel found comfortable, Haval did not. “Have you heard anything new?”

“Of relevance? Possibly. It is not, however, of relevance *right now*. Standing still, on the other hand, is. Honestly, Jewel, you might spend more time in the company of young Finch; she adapts. You might absorb something.”

“I would, if Jarven were around less often.”

“I believe he is her central adviser on Council matters.”

“He’s also her boss—I consider it a conflict of interest.”

“Meaning you don’t care for Jarven ATerafin.”

“Something like that.”

“Finch seems fond of him. The inimitable Lucille ATerafin also holds him in some obvious esteem.” Haval stilled; he lost his pinched and parental look as his face became expressionless. “What do you see, Terafin?”

“I’ve had no visions involving Jarven.”

“Ah. Why do you dislike him? I will assume it is not for reasons of petty jealousy.”

Jewel glared down at him; the stool’s height gave her that advantage. “I don’t trust him.”

“Very well; you are obviously not a fool. He is, however, a valuable source of information. It is my considered opinion that he means no harm to either Terafin or Finch personally.”

“It’s not that I think he means harm,” she said, turning as he nudged her. “I just don’t think he cares if harm happens.”

“Astute. Irrelevant, but astute.” He stepped back, examining his work. “I believe Ellerson is waiting as well. The order of guards?”

“Torvan and Arrendas are in charge of that at the moment.” She stepped down, fussed with the skirts; they were a color of blue that most closely resembled the House Colors, but there was a wide swathe of white that ran from throat to ground, and the sleeves and hem were edged in black and gold. Every other member of the House Council was allowed, by mourning custom, to wear white and gold; The Terafin alone was exempt.

“Let me remind you, Terafin, that the victory parade—the return of the Kings’ armies after a significant and important battle—is meant to be a celebration.”

Jewel nodded. “I know what they were facing,” she told him. “Part of me is surprised that there’s much army left to return.” She hesitated and then said, “Did I forget to tell you that the Council of The Ten will convene in three days in the Hall of The Ten?”

“You did. Devon, however, did not.” He fussed with the fall of her skirts, and then folded the cuffs of her sleeves, which she accepted. “The Southern victory was—and is—important, Jewel. You were in the South; you understand why.”

She nodded. Morretz had died in order to deliver the message that had summoned her home from the Terrean of Averda. Summoned her, she thought bitterly, in time to witness—but not prevent—The Terafin’s death.

Haval’s hand tightened. “Remember that you desired the position you now occupy. Attempt to occupy it well. Devon will be situated in the crowd.”

“Devon will? Why?”

Haval pinched the bridge of his nose. “Two of the four attempts would have been successful if not for the speed of your response—and yours alone. I believe he takes this fact personally.”

“And you don’t?”

“No. I am grateful, at the moment, for your survival. Do not tax my joy. If I may have a moment of your time after the late dinner hour?”

“You can have an hour.”

“Good.” He set aside his needles and turned to the white sprawl of lounging cat. “Snow, I believe it would be best if you accompany Jewel now.”

Snow hissed. “She’s not *leaving* yet.”

“Very well. You may remain here. If she forgets to summon you—”

The cat rose. “I *like* assassins,” he said as he padded toward the door. “They aren’t *boring*.”

The Terafin garden was almost empty, for the first time in eight weeks. Even the by now familiar robes of the Order of Knowledge were nowhere in sight. Jewel stepped down from the terrace and instantly populated the grounds with her battery of Chosen, House Guards, domicis, and two cats, the latter of whom were arguing and stepping on each other’s feet. As Jewel found it difficult to move without stepping on someone she had some small sympathy for their annoyance, although the resultant behavior was fast destroying it.

“Night,” she said, choosing one of the two arbitrarily, “go find Celleriant and bring him here.”

“Why do *I* have to do it?”

She answered his question with a silent glare, and his belly slowly sank

toward the ground. After a minute of this, he moved, complaining as he left. Snow was hissing, because he was spiteful.

A breeze touched her cheeks and hair; not even a full summer storm would dislodge so much as a strand given Ellerson's work. Leaves rustled as that breeze moved through the tall, tall trees that could be seen from the street—any street—on the Isle; they sounded like the sea. She closed her eyes, lifting her chin as she did; she reached out with one hand from the terrace and felt, for a moment, the rough touch of bark beneath her fingertips. She lost sound, let go of frustration; the scent of undergrowth rose, and with it the quiet of a forest seen in isolation. Birds sang in the distance, wordless and insistent.

"Terafin."

The single word brought her back to the terrace, the manse, and the reality of the city. Celleriant strode up the path toward where she now stood; she could see Night in the air, weaving his way around the trunks of the great trees.

"Lady." He bowed.

"Rise," she told him, and he did. He carried no sword, no shield; he wore armor that seemed, in comparison to the armor of the Chosen, light and trifling. His hair fell down the length of his back in a straight, unfettered drape, and his eyes were the color of silver leaves, sharp and cutting. "We travel into the city, to celebrate the return of the victorious Kings' armies."

Celleriant nodded.

If Torvan and Arrendas resented his constant intrusion, they kept it to themselves, wordlessly rearranging their own marching order to accommodate his presence. They accepted Avandar's presence in the same way, although Avandar was domicis, and they had become accustomed to Morretz. They were less copacetic about the cats, in large part because the cats failed to maintain a peaceful marching order. The cats were, however, more or less respectful in the presence of Lord Celleriant, which is as much as Jewel felt she could realistically ask.

Marrick was waiting for Jewel in the foyer. To her surprise, Angel was by his side. He was smartly and neatly dressed, although the current high-collared style of his jacket—a dark blue very similar to Terafin's colors—did not suit his hair. Then again, very little did. Marrick was dressed in full mourning; he offered Jewel a deep bow as she approached. "Terafin."

"ATerafin," she replied, dipping chin. "Marrick."

His smile was the broad and avuncular smile that characterized his pres-

ence in the Council Hall. “House Terafin will be given position less prominent than that afforded Berrilya and Kallakar.”

“Given their position as Commanders, that was to be expected, surely?”

He chuckled. “It was. Haerrad, however, is displeased. He wishes to know if you argued for position by prominence at all.”

She shrugged and began to walk toward the waiting carriages. “He can ask.”

“Ah. And if I ask?”

“No, I did not.”

Marrick’s smile froze in place.

“I was in the South, Marrick, in case you forget. I was in the South, and aware of the enemies the Commanders faced. Their losses there are both a loss to the whole of the Empire and a personal loss; it is in respect of the personal that I declined to play political games. If Haerrad—if *you*—have a problem with that decision, let me make it clear now that I expect it to remain your problem.”

A gray brow rose as animation once again returned to Marrick’s face. “What did you see in the South, Terafin?”

“Demons,” she replied. “And death.”

“We have not been absent demons ourselves.”

“No. But here at least our mages can be said to be functionally on our side. I’m not sure I understand the role of the Sword’s Edge or his subordinates in the Dominion; if I ruled there, I’d disband them.”

“That is possibly easier said than done. Haerrad has gone ahead. I have not seen Rymark.”

“Elonne?”

“She traveled ahead with Gabriel.” He bowed again. “I will take a separate carriage as well, unless you wish to make room in yours.”

“It’s probably safer if you don’t, given the last two months.”

He chuckled. “I believe that was Haerrad’s thought, as well.”

She would have laughed—or cursed—but was forced to break away to mediate between the two cats who had decided that they would ride on the roof of the carriage.

The carriage door closed upon four: Avandar, Celleriant, Angel, and Jewel. The cabin, with its padded, velvet cushions and backing, all in House blue, was neither large nor spacious, but Jewel felt herself relaxing. This was as much privacy as she’d been granted in weeks. Even the room in which she slept contained four of the Chosen, Avandar, and two cats at its least occu-

pied; two more of the Chosen stood sentinel on the other side of closed doors. Torvan and Arrendas had, for the better part of six weeks—since the first failed assassination attempt, urged her to expand the ranks of the Chosen.

She couldn't. She was willing to let Arrendas or Torvan make recommendations—but she made the offer with care. The Chosen served The Terafin, and they were called Chosen for a reason; the choice had to be hers. The trust implicit in the choice, hers as well. She needed to make the time to observe—or to spy on—the House Guard, and she had not yet done so.

She could not leave her room without her retinue; not to slip into Teller's room, or Finch's; certainly not to travel to the large offices in which most of The Terafin's records and paperwork loomed. Jewel wondered if a day would come when the constant presence of people who were *not* her den would feel natural. Amarais had never seemed troubled by it.

But Amarais sometimes shed some of her Chosen and her domicis to retire to the garden of contemplation, or the House shrine, a feat that Jewel had yet to duplicate. It was not, however, the only reason she had failed to visit that shrine. It stood too close to the heart of the hidden, the wild. Even with four loud wheels beneath her seat, she could hear the sounds of leaves—gold, silver, diamond—and the crackle of a lone tree of fire, as if each movement was a syllable in a strange, compelling chorus.

She understood her home: it was her den. Her House. With time, it would encompass the Chosen. But the forest eluded all but her dreams—and her nightmares. Those had been bad.

Celleriant said, as if her thoughts were visible and loud, “Lady, will you not reside in the forest?”

“The manse comes with the office.” She turned her gaze to the window and watched as the mansion began to recede. Although the carriages were horsed, they could not travel quickly; not today. Fully a third of the Isle, from servants to the Kings themselves, would be traveling across the bridge to the heart of the Common.

“Will you play games with words?” the Arianni Lord said sharply. “The heart of the old woods is yours, here. You are not Queen, and you are not firstborn—but if you will it, the forest will grace your manse of stone and wood, and lend it both splendor and life.”

She said nothing.

Angel, however, did. “The Kings, the magi, and the Exalted are watching every move, every action, and every decision of the current House Council. Turning part of the manse into a forest wouldn't be to anyone's advantage.”

“Oh?” was the chill reply. “It would not be to yours, certainly. But since

the day of The Terafin's funeral, my Lady has not walked the wild roads, except in her dreams. Had she, at least two of the assassins might never have reached her side."

"Angel's right," Jewel said sharply, turning from the window. "I can't just wander into the ancient forests; the paperwork—and all of the meetings it engenders—still has to be attended. And if two attempts might—*might*—have been prevented, two would not; if I had spent more time being political, and gathering information on the House Council, *they* might have been prevented."

"Do you still consider it unwise to dispense with the current House Council? Excepting, of course, those members who are already in your service."

"This is the Empire. Murder is frowned on."

"This is House Terafin. If the deaths occur within the manse—or any property owned by Terafin—they are not a matter for Imperial Law." Celleriant spent most of his time in the gardens, lost to all sight; she should have been surprised at what he'd managed to learn in his almost complete absence. She wasn't.

"Whatever else you think I *can* do for—or with—the forest, I can't make wholesale changes just on a whim." He started to speak; she lifted a hand. "If it were possible, it would still be wrong. I understand that the old forests—the deep forests—were the home of your youth, Celleriant. Understand that the old city, the hundred holdings, were *mine*. I don't know how far my reach extends, and I don't want to take that risk without a damn good reason."

"You are afraid to learn."

"Does it matter? It's *my* decision. If I use the power on a whim, if I change the landscape to no useful purpose, I'll probably turn thousands of people out of their homes. I don't care if you think their homes are hovels, or worse. They probably are. But *so was mine*. Regardless, if I tried, the Kings would be forced to remove me. And I can't depose the Kings. I can't bring down the cathedrals."

"You have already made changes in the palace of your Kings."

She flinched. She had not yet seen the changes Celleriant spoke of, but she knew he was right. It was why Duvari had become so quietly threatening. She was almost certain that none of the four attempts on her life to date had been engineered by the *Astari*, but the distance between that almost and certainty couldn't be breached.

She was more comfortable assuming that they were organized and engineered by members of her own House. How wrong was that? But Haerrad had been difficult in Council—more so than she remembered, although she

had never liked him, and they had often clashed. Rymark had been remarkably helpful—publicly. His considerable arrogance had disappeared, like a bad dream. She found its absence perversely unsettling.

He did not, however, treat Teller or Finch with any great consideration, and while she didn't wish Rymark on either of them, it made it hard to forget that he was clearly capable of decent acting. She felt no additional resentment for his almost open dislike of the cats. People were contrary.

Haerrad was the obvious choice of antagonist; Rymark was a not-very-distant second. But Elonne was also a candidate, although Elonne had voted in Jewel's favor. Marrick, Jewel had given up on suspecting, much to Haval's annoyance. Yes, he was capable, and she suspected he was capable of attempting to arrange her death, but so was Haval, and she didn't suspect him.

"Jay?"

She looked up, her gaze sliding off Avandar's instant and glacial frown.

"He's right," she told Angel. "I did. I don't know what the changes are, and I don't want to see them. I didn't do it on purpose, but it doesn't matter. In some ways, it makes it worse." She glanced at Celleriant; ice would have been warmer. Her voice dropped; the words, however, didn't stop. "I did whatever I did at the Palace—and I'm sure someone will helpfully walk me past it on the way to the Hall of The Ten—because of the earth and the air. I could hear them. I couldn't understand them, not the way I understand us—but I knew.

"I was angry," she said, her voice dropping further. "I was angry at the *damage*. I was angry at their presence and their stupid fighting in the middle of The Terafin's funeral. I was angry at the demons, at the death I couldn't prevent. I didn't *think*. I just reacted." She laughed. It was not a happy sound. Angel's silence wasn't, either—but it was a comfort.

"Standing near the terrace—our terrace—I did something to the *structure* of *Avantari*. I might have killed people. I might have injured them—you don't move chunks of stone like that and disturb nothing. I touched things I couldn't even *reach*. Because I was angry."

Angel shook his head. "Not because you were angry. You wanted to protect your home."

"Most people can't—"

"It doesn't matter. They're not you. You're not them."

"I was angry," she said, denying the comfort he'd folded into the words. "I was angry because of what I'd already failed to protect. Morretz is dead," she said. And then, because the bleakness was there and she'd already touched its sharp edge, she added, "The Terafin is dead. I'm not. It's never me."

“Don’t expect me to regret that.” The words were as low and intensely spoken as her own.

“I wanted the power. I wanted it because I could use it to protect my home. But I don’t want—” her breath was sharp, singular. “I don’t want a power that I don’t control. If I want to kill a man now—I mean seriously want a man dead—I can arrange that. But I’d have to be careful. I’d have to *work*. I’d have to plan my way around even the discovery of it. This way?” She laughed again. “I’d barely have to *think*. I don’t want that. I don’t want it to be so easy, because I can’t bring them back.

“I’ve had to apologize and grovel for the words that fall out of my mouth so many times I’ve lost track. But I can’t apologize and grovel to a corpse and expect to be forgiven. I can’t bring the dead back to life.”

“You have not killed,” Avandar said, in a voice that matched his expression.

“No. I was lucky.” She turned back to the window. “I know I’ll have to kill. I *know* it. I don’t know who, I don’t know when. But I *know*, Angel.”

“Let us do it.”

“No. If I can’t face it myself, if I can’t stain my own hands, how can I expect you to face it? I don’t want that, either.”

“We’re not your children,” he replied. “We’re your peers. Where you go, we go. If you kill, Jay, it’s because there’s no other choice.”

“Yes. Now. I want to keep believing that’s true.”

“Terafin,” Celleriant said, his voice twin to Avandar’s.

She grimaced. Half of his word was lost to the raised voices of irritated cats, and she was almost certain that one set of claws had pierced the roof from the other side. She didn’t, however, climb out the window to threaten them. The luxury of behavior that practical would never be hers again.

“If you will allow me?” Avandar said, lifting one hand and placing his palm very near where the damage had been done.

“Please. Just don’t piss them off so much they destroy the *rest* of the roof.”

The roads were, as expected, congested, even at this distance. Although it was early, and the army was not due to appear near the Common for some hours, The Ten, the Kings, and the Priests from the Isle were expected to arrive and arrange themselves before the rest of the citizens grew too numerous.

The Ten and the Kings did not divest themselves of guards, Swords, Chosen. They did not divest themselves of courtiers or attendants, counselors and advisers. If individually these companions were accustomed to the trappings and privilege of power, they were nonetheless constrained by the number of

bridges and the guards that manned them. They were also, sadly, captivated by the sight of what Jewel assumed were Night and Snow, perched noisily above. Had she not been The Terafin, she was almost certain she would have been asked for some sort of writ granting permission for the display of uncaged exotic animals, which wouldn't have made them any quieter.

As she was, or rather, as the carriage was clearly marked to indicate that its occupant held the seat, the carriage was immediately waved across the bridge—once it reached that point. If the weather had not been cool, it would have been unbearable. As it was, enclosed in a carriage with Avandar's disapproval and Celleriant's disdain, it was close. Angel, never the most talkative of the den, chose to watch the road.

No one spoke until the carriage reached the holdings. As it did, the noise on the roof receded. Snow and Night were perfectly capable of dignified behavior when it suited them; it seldom did.

If you so chose, Avandar said, they would behave perfectly at all times.

Jewel didn't particularly feel like listening to an angry domicis on the inside of her head. "I choose not to."

"It diminishes you."

She shrugged; his frown, which had started before the carriage had pulled away from the manse, deepened. "It diminishes them. They're cats in name only; they look like winged, maneless lions. They're a threat; everyone who sees them can feel it. But anyone who has to listen to them for more than five minutes doesn't. I can't get rid of them; not even Haval considers it wise. This is my compromise."

"If they are, as you suggest, terrifying, it suits their role as guards."

"It doesn't. When I lived in the twenty-fifth, I would have avoided any streets—and the market—that contained those two unless I'd heard them squabble."

"You would have avoided the House Guard as well."

"Yes and no. The magisterial guard, yes. They generally threw us out of the Common on the flimsiest of pretexts. House Guards didn't; as long as we kept out of purse-cutting range, they left us alone. When the cats are dignified—as you put it—they look like they're on the prowl. We would've assumed that they'd eat us—or worse—and the magisterians would turn a blind eye. After all, The Terafin is powerful." Her laughter was brief and bitter.

She was. She knew it. She knew what House Terafin meant, both in Averalaan and in the Empire itself; as a House Councillor, it had been part of her job—and not a little of her pride—to bolster that reputation. But noth-

ing she had done since The Terafin's funeral had made her feel more powerful. She was theoretically in charge, but every order of any import at all had to be inspected, measured, and weighed before it left either her mouth or her office. The former was much more difficult.

The assassination attempts had done very little to ease her doubts. Yes, she had been affirmed as The Terafin; Elonne pointed out that given the events of the first day rites and the presence of every man or woman of any standing at all in the Empire the title had already been given to Jewel in all but name. But clearly, affirmation was not the same as acceptance. If she was to be replaced, time *mattered*. She had not yet fully consolidated her power, especially not in the outer reaches of the Empire. Haerrad's duties to the House were his; if she wanted a full review from him, she needed a small legion of incredibly competent spies. He was only willing to tell her what she already knew; he would cede nothing.

It was not Haerrad that troubled her, although she hated him. She had hated him since the day Teller had been taken to the infirmary with two broken limbs—a gift and a warning from Haerrad. She had fervently hoped that Rymark—or Elonne—would succeed in ending Haerrad's life; attempts had been made, but he was, besides being a cruel, power-mongering son of a bitch, clever, cautious, and lucky.

Rymark was different. He wanted power, of course—they had all wanted that—and he was clever, cautious, and lucky. But he was talent-born as well, a member of the Order of Knowledge, and the former right-kin's son. His presence on the House Council caused nothing but disquiet; she knew that if Rymark suddenly retired or disappeared, Gabriel might be convinced to remain.

But Gabriel did not want to face his son.

His son had produced a forged document proclaiming Rymark A Terafin heir to the House. It had been signed by Amarais, witnessed by Gabriel. Neither, of course, had seen the document before he had produced it in the Council Hall. Were it not for Gabriel's bitter silence, he would have been relegated to Rymark's faction by the other contenders; because of it, he had been allowed to rule as regent. His silence, however, included no open disavowal of the forgery.

Blood mattered. Even in a House where its members were required to take an oath that severed those ties completely, it mattered. If she had been Gabriel and Carver had been Rymark—if Carver had been in a position to produce such a document and make such a claim—it would have counted among the worst days of her life. She could not, even in the silence of thought, be

certain what she would say or do, but she was certain that she would hold denial in abeyance until she had the time to grab him by the collar, drag him off into a corner, and demand an explanation. She would owe him that much.

What was difficult for Jewel was Rymark himself. If Rymark had been like Marrick—or the dead Alea—Gabriel’s reaction would at least make *sense*. Rymark wasn’t. He had always been arrogant; he had never stooped to kindness where malice—or veiled threat—would do in its stead. Magic, for Rymark, was a tool, just as assassins were tools. He lived part-time in the manse; all of the House Council had rooms there, and the rooms were grand ones. But the Master of the Household Staff was very particular about the cleaning and care of those rooms. Only specific servants were allowed to tend them, and the schedule of their working hours was strictly enforced and inflexible.

Rumor had it that he was not particularly careful about the servants, AT-erafin or no. Especially not the women. Jewel had had some experience with Rymark’s certainty of his own irresistibility; she believed those rumors were true. They came, indirectly, from Carver. Rymark had an imperfect history within the Order of Knowledge; he wore their symbol and gained prestige through it, but Sigurne did not trust him. He clearly had funding—but attempting to trace that funding to its source had proved, to date, fruitless. Finch could find nothing in the records at the Merchant Authority; Angel’s friend could find no records of manifests or cargo that could be linked with Rymark’s external supporters. He owned some land and some leaseholds, but in and of themselves they were not enough to justify a bid for the House, unless that bid was accepted *quickly*.

There was no reason—at all—to give Rymark ATerafin the benefit of the doubt. But Gabriel, by his silence, had done exactly that. Someone like Carver had done nothing but good. No, that was an exaggeration, but Carver was part of her *den*. Rymark, she would never have taken.

You took Duster.

She stared out the window.

*7th of Fabril, 428 A.A.
The Common, Averalan*

Jewel was forced to disembark long before her carriage reached the platforms upon which chairs had been placed. Wagons lined the road, and they could not easily be moved to grant passage to carriages; only the Kings were given any exemption—an exemption they did not choose to enforce. What the

Kings, and therefore the Queens and the Princes, endured, every member of the patriciate was expected to endure. Even the Exalted. Bards, however, roved the streets that led to the center of the Common, lutes in arms; even when they couldn't be clearly seen, they could be heard, their voices full and sweet.

In her youth, when the bard-born walked the Common during Festival or the Kings' Crown, the sound of those raised voices were a source of unalloyed joy. This was in part because her Oma rarely had a sour word for bards; she didn't like their lutes, lutes being Northern, but she allowed herself to be captivated by their voices.

Oma. What would you think of me, now? The old woman, teeth yellowed by pipe smoke, lips creased in perpetual frown, had never cared for the patriciate, but she'd held them in no more contempt than she did two of the bakers and one of the cloth sellers. She didn't trust them. She considered The Ten to be marginally less trustworthy—not because of their power, because power at least was predictable, but because they weren't *family*. Blood mattered, to her Oma. The Ten eschewed the only bonds for which her Oma would have been willing to die. Or kill.

Her granddaughter, her only surviving grandchild, had claimed the rule of House Terafin. Now, flanked by Night and Snow, Angel and Celleriant, led by Chosen, she walked easily through streets that had once been so tightly packed she could barely see a foot ahead of where she stood in her Oma's shadow. Although the day was cool, the sweat of the men and women who labored here in increasingly cramped spaces filled the air, broken by perfumes, colognes, flowers, and the welcome scent of food.

Enterprising bakers had already extended the lines of their stalls as far as the Common's guards would allow them to go; bakers, their assistants, their families and the slowly increasing press of their customers, stood under colorful spring awnings. None of the merchants hawked their wares at their usual uninterrupted volume at the Royal Party; they were notably subdued when Jewel and her guards passed them by, carrying the banner of Terafin. Its vertical edges moved in the stiff sea breeze, and the heavy chains worked into the end of the cloth clattered against the pole on which it was hoisted. Jewel disliked it; it reminded her not of pageantry but battlefield.

It hung over her shoulder, like a great sign or placard, making her visible and drawing the kind of attention that would have meant certain starvation in her early life in the hundred holdings. She weathered it, lifting her chin and straightening her shoulders.

"Avandar?" Her domicis was frowning.

“Look very carefully at every stall. If you see even a hint of magic, mention it briefly.”

“It’s the Common. There’s going to be trace amounts of magic everywhere.”

His silence was both loud and dismissive.

“The magi have been here. The Kings and the Queens will attend. If there’s anything the *Astari* missed in their sweep, I’m not going to find it while casually strolling by.”

They do not see as you see.

No. Most days, they see better. It was going to be that kind of a day.

The banner went as far as the second tier of the dais erected in the center of the circular road. It was, to Jewel’s eyes, a marvel of almost instant architecture, and she could see the faint glow of magical protections and enforcements—at least that’s what she assumed the soft blend of orange and green meant. This was not the Hall of The Ten. While Terafin presence was considered a political necessity, the internal politics of the House were considered beneath external notice; there were four large chairs, two to either side of the banner’s pole. Jewel was clearly meant to take one, and it was not uncommon for a domicis to stand behind the occupied throne. There was—if they were careful, and honestly, how likely was that—room for Night and Snow at the foot of those chairs; if they weren’t careful, however, they were likely to hit the backs of the Kalakar chairs, which had been placed in front of House Terafin’s.

The House Council had arrived, and they were congregated in a loose group; they appeared, as she approached, to be conversing—but it was the type of conversation in which little was actually said. They were waiting for Jewel, and conversation banked as she approached. Teller and Finch were there; so was Jarven. When she met his eyes, he raised a white brow and offered a smile that was slight and entirely without hesitation.

She nodded in turn and moved on. “Gabriel.”

“Terafin.”

“Elonne, Marrick, join us.” She lifted her hands, signed an apology to Teller and Finch, wishing as she did that she could speak to them the way she could speak to the Winter King. She glanced once again at Jarven; he wasn’t watching her. He was watching Rymark and Haerrad. His expression was genial, friendly—but Jewel had quickly come to understand that that was Jarven’s version of Haval’s sudden, neutral mask. The realization also made completely clear that Haval dispensed with the pretense of facial expression

as a courtesy to her, a signal that she focus her concentration and attention on his words, or the history that formed their context.

That Jarven watched the two Council members she had chosen to leave on the ground wasn't a surprise. Harraed and Rymark might consider the choice a slight; she'd bet on it. But she was also aware that they had abstained in the Council vote that had placed her in charge, and she couldn't, at this point, slight Elonne or Marrick; as declared allies—if cautious ones—they deserved some acknowledgment. The House Council was not, by any means, settled. It might have been more stable if not for the assassination attempts; those attempts made clear that the assignation of the title alone was not enough to lay the war to rest. Best to show public appreciation for public support; those who were quiet might be moved to reconsider their silence.

No call had yet been made for her resignation—but House history, which existed in the admittedly biased form of the journals of previous House rulers, made clear that resignation, in all but one isolated case, was a synonym for death. Death, on the other hand, had been tried. While it was possible Elonne was still in the hunt, Jewel doubted it. Jarven seemed to doubt it as well; although he'd briefly glanced at Elonne, his attention seemed reserved for Haerrad and Rymark.

Jarven noticed that she was watching him, and winked. It was annoying.

She could, of course, afford to slight Teller and Finch, the two people she would have chosen had she been able to make that choice without consideration for the political costs and benefits accrued. But she trusted Teller and Finch; they trusted her. They would understand why she had chosen Elonne and Marrick over two members of the House Council who had occupied their junior seats for a scant handful of months.

She also knew that would have to change. She trusted Teller and Finch. In order to build a House Council she could trust to actually support her, both of them would have to gain power. Power, in the Council chamber was not decided by any actions or arguments taken therein; you brought your power to the table and you wielded it with care. Or, in Haerrad's case, like a cudgel.

Jarven was close to retirement—or so he'd said. But Finch pointed out that he *said* this on a more or less continual basis. If he did amaze them all by actually retiring, Finch could, in theory, succeed him—but it was tenuous theory. To make it solid, she had to be responsible for some truly clever, and extremely profitable, trade deals. At the moment, according to Finch, there were three men associated with the Merchant Authority offices who were capable of doing what Jarven had done in his prime. Unfortunately, they were capable in thirds, and three men would not fit in that office.

Jewel shook herself and ascended the stairs; no one else would move if she did not. Gabriel offered his arm; she took it. “You will have to choose a right-kin in the near future,” he said, his voice low.

She nodded, that stiff almost regal movement of chin—and nothing else—that Ellerson had so laboriously taught her. “Let us discuss this in two days.”
“Terafin.”

She did not go to Gabriel for advice anymore. Not directly. Teller did, and Gabriel was comfortable with that. He had been comfortable giving advice to Amaraïs—but Amaraïs didn’t follow advice; she accepted it, as if it were an offering, examining it for its inherent value before she decided its disposition. She did not *need* Gabriel’s advice; she valued it, no more. Jewel, in Gabriel’s eyes, was in need of advice and it unnerved him.

Teller was her right-kin. He was the right-kin of her heart; he had served as right-kin in her den, although her den had never required pretentious titles for what he did. But Teller was so junior a member of the House Council he lacked the gravitas of Gabriel. If she made him right-kin now, she would be throwing him into the line of fire.

Gabriel took the chair to her right out of long habit; only when he was halfway seated did he realize what he had done. He glanced at her, chagrined. She couldn’t help but smile; she could keep it as brief as possible. Elonne took the seat directly to her left. If there had been some subtle negotiation between Marrick and Elonne, it went unnoticed; Marrick did not appear to be unduly ruffled.

When Snow and Night joined her, Snow to the left and Night to the right, she realized why; he’d taken the seat farthest from the cats. He caught her gaze and winked. It was something he wouldn’t have dared to do with Amaraïs, but it was conversely something he’d frequently done with the den. She knew it was inappropriate to respond to it here; she knew Marrick knew it, as well. It was a game, but as far as games went, it felt harmless. Attempting to avoid making any further eye contact, she looked up, and up again; the trees of the Common cast their shadows. Here, the leaves were in bud, not bloom, and the trees were surrounded by buildings and awned carts, not the carefully cultivated flower beds and smaller trees of the Terafin Master Gardener.

Wind rustled the tips of high, slender branches. It was a cool, biting wind, heavy with salt. Home.

Terafin.

She blinked and found herself staring into the wide, golden eyes of Snow; he had shifted position to face her, and his wings here high.

Avandar. Beneath the tier on which the Terafin chairs stood, The Kalakar and her attendants had arrived. Not to be outdone, The Berrilya, with his attendants, was also present, although the Berrilya House Council had yet to take their seats. The Kings, in a position of prominence, had not yet taken their thrones—chair was too petty a word to describe them—when the wind grew stronger.

It was a wind she shouldn't have felt; the branches it moved were far too high. Her skin tightened; the hair at the back of her neck—what very little of it had escaped Ellerson's merciless attempts to confine it—rose. So did Jewel.

Gabriel looked to her instantly; Night rose and whispered something to Snow. Jewel heard it, but didn't recognize the word. She understood its significance.

"Avandar!"

He was behind the tall back of her chair.

"Terafin."

To the left of House Terafin sat The Morrisset; to her right, the deliberately bald Korisamis. Above, on the widest of the platforms, the rest of The Ten. She scanned the growing crowd, searching for Devon, for some sign of Devon; when she failed to find him, she searched, instead, for the magi. The guildmaster was distinctive enough that she, at least, was easily spotted.

"Terafin." Gabriel's voice was low, urgent.

Jewel said, "We need to get everyone off this platform. We don't have much time." To Night she said, "Find Sigurne Mellifas. Tell her."

"Tell her *what*?"

"Watch for fire." She stepped away from her chair and turned to House Morrisset. "Morrisset," she said, her voice even and steady, "we must vacate these stands." Without waiting for his assent, she turned to The Korisamis. He was a man to whom protocol was as natural as breathing; for that reason, she had always felt ill at ease in his presence. Today, it didn't matter.

"Korisamis, my pardon—but it is imperative that we leave the stand at once."

"May I ask why, Terafin?"

It was the question she dreaded. "I will explain later—any explanation now will be costly." Again, she moved, this time forward, to where the edge of this platform almost touched the back of the seats on the platform below. "Kalakar. Berrilya."

They turned instantly at the sound of her voice, as if they were still on the battlefield; they recognized the tone. The Kalakar's brows rose. "Terafin."

“The platforms must be cleared, now. The Kings and the Exalted must stand back.”

The wind grew stronger as she spoke. Snow came to his feet, his fur rising. The Kalakar frowned as she turned to The Berrilya; he nodded smoothly and without hesitation. Their counselors had heard Jewel speak, but waited, stiffly, on the commands of their own leaders, which followed seconds later.

“I will carry word to the Kings’ Swords,” The Berrilya said. He hesitated briefly before he leaped. Jewel was almost—almost—shocked; The Berrilya was so proper and so exact in all forms of patrician behavior the thought that he would take the most direct route to ground had never even crossed her mind.

As if she could hear the thought, The Kalakar smiled. It was both broad and grim, a slash of an expression. “We recognize the feel of this wind.” Her tone matched her smile. “It appears to have followed us home.” She turned. “Korama, alert the Kalakar guards. I will make certain that word travels in haste to the army.”

The army. Jewel closed her eyes and exhaled. The army that was, in theory, to perform a full dress parade through the center of the Common. She turned to see that The Morriset had already passed word to the platform above; people, some clearly displeased, were abandoning their chairs and heading toward the stairs that bound either side of the almost concentric flats.

The wind grew stronger and wilder—but the wind itself wasn’t the threat; she was certain of it.

Certain enough that when the wood cracked a yard beneath her feet, she shouldn’t have been surprised. Slats of wood splintered, as something burst through, knocking the now empty chairs in a wide, wide circle.

Snow leaped up, wings scraping air as if to gather it. His claws were extended, his lips pulled back over long teeth that glittered unnaturally in the morning light. Wood cracked again; someone in the distance screamed. Jewel turned to look over her shoulder; Avandar filled her view. He grabbed her, lifted her—and to her great surprise, threw her. He followed.

Only Avandar hit the ground, and as the platform crumbled, it was a significant drop. She should have joined him. Instead, the wind caught her, buoying her up, as if she had invisible wings. She caught threads of pale, platinum hair as they drifted across her open mouth.

“ATerafin,” a familiar voice said. “Ah, my pardon. Terafin.”

She looked up into the familiar face of Meralonne APhaniel. Snow circled them both.

“I see Sigurne did not exaggerate,” he said, although he spared Snow only a glance. Instead, he faced what was left of the platform as obsidian emerged, shedding planks as if they were splinters.

“Terafin,” he said, his face impassive, his eyes narrow, “guard yourself. I believe the *Kialli* has come for you.”