

Finch stood in the long hall beneath dimmed magelights, her hand an inch above the surface of a door. The door was Jay's; it had been months since anyone but servants had opened it, and even that had ended after a few weeks. She was dressed for bed, and it was well past late, with a tomorrow that would arrive before the dawn. It would not be a good day; it would be a nightmare day.

The Terafin was dead.

The Terafin, by the hands of a demon, with the guildmaster of the Order of Knowledge and the Twin Kings as witnesses, was dead. Her House Guards had lost men, and her House Council was probably spending as sleepless a night as one of its most junior members. Tomorrow, unless the gods were merciful and the events of the day were a nightmare from which she could waken if she tried with all her might, the Terafin would be still be dead.

Finch did not believe in miracles, not by nature; she had seen one or two in her time. The age of miracles had passed.

But Jay was home. Jay was *here*. Silent, dirty the way travelers are when they reach the end of a long journey, she was here. They had been so terrified that she would never return at all. When the demons had attacked the Common, when they had done enough damage with their terrifying magic that the fires could be seen from across the bridge, in the Isle itself, they had run. They had run to the Common, to find her, and they had found, instead, the injured and the dead; the broken stalls, the damaged stone edifice in which Finch worked, the ghost of loss.

But she was here, now. She was back.

And The Terafin was still dead.

Finch lowered her hand. Bit her lip. Raised her hand again.

"If I may be of assistance?"

She smiled as she turned to face Ellerson; he held a lamp. Her smile spoke of the guilt and the self-consciousness she felt; she didn't need to put it into words. He understood.

"She won't—she won't understand why you're here," Finch said quietly.

"No."

"And she won't—"

“Ah. You mistake me, Finch. I did not bring the lamp for her benefit, but for yours. If you intend to remain in the hall for the rest of the evening, perhaps it will bring you some comfort. But if you do not, might I open the door for you?”

It was just a door, and she was trembling in front of it like a frightened child. She regularly faced the ire of irate and condescending merchants—and if she was not Lucille, she did not wilt or dissemble in the face of their fury. But this was different. She straightened her shoulders; they held for five seconds before they once again crept down her back.

“I don’t know what to say to her,” she finally confessed. “I want—I want to say something. I want to see her. I want to hear her. I don’t care if she slaps me or throws something at me—”

“I do not believe she has ever raised hand.”

“Tell that to Carver.”

“Ah, you mistake me. I meant against you.”

It was true. She’d never thrown anything at Teller, either. “Do you think *anyone* is sleeping?”

Ellerson reached out before Finch could stop him, and he opened the door she was too cowardly to knock. “I do not think she will be sleeping, and at the moment, that is all that matters.”

“I—”

“You are a member of the House Council. You have witnessed the events of the past several weeks; she has not. If she left without warning, without notice, and without word, she is back—and she cannot afford to remain ignorant. Go,” he added.

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Jay wasn’t alone—but at night, she almost never was. Avandar was in the room, sitting; a lamp burned on the floor to his side. His eyes were closed, and they did not open when Finch stepped so hesitantly into the room. Jay was in bed, but she wasn’t sleeping; her breath was too shallow for that. Finch turned to leave because she understood one thing about Jay, and it had never changed: she didn’t cry in public. And in public, in this case, meant in front of witnesses. She almost collared Avandar and dragged him away as well, but Avandar was domicis. She couldn’t make him leave

—only Jay could.

But as she hesitated — again — Jay sat up and turned toward the door, where light from the hall streamed in. She lifted her hands; they shook, but Finch understood the gesture she couldn't really see in the dim light, and she nodded and walked past Avandar — eyes still closed — toward Jay; she sat on the bed beside her, and Jay once again slid back down, beneath the covers. Finch swiveled, bringing her back to the headboard and her knees beneath her chin; she wrapped arms around her legs to keep her hands still.

There was silence. For a long moment, silence.

Jay broke it. "You were in the Council Chamber."

Finch nodded.

"So was Teller."

"Yes." They weren't the only den in the hall, but Finch waited.

"How did it happen?" Pause. "No, sorry, that's the wrong question. I saw how it happened. I—" So many questions. Jay lifted her hands to her face, covering her eyes for a long moment. "I'm home," she whispered; it sounded like a plea. "I'm here. I spent so long wanting to *be* here. I wanted to be here while I trekked through the desert; I wanted to be here when I skirted the edge of the Green Deepings. I wanted to hear the sounds of my den, my Wing—I wanted to hear Weston. I wanted to be somewhere *real*. Somewhere normal. I'm whining, aren't I?"

"A little. I'll forgive you if you forgive me."

"You're not whining."

"Not yet."

Jewel lowered her hands. "Talk to me, Finch. Tell me what I need to know. I feel so lost here. House Terafin has always been The Terafin's. I don't know what it is without her."

Finch nodded, wrapping her arms more tightly around her legs. "Until very recently, it's been — normal. Haerrad hasn't made any further attempts to offer warnings, and Teller is fully recovered. None of us have been injured. The four have been building their economic bases, and pressing merchants and significant members of the House for their support.

“Vultures.”

“Very pretty, cultured, and powerful vultures, yes.”

“They’ve approached you?”

“Yes. I’ve had several meals with Elonne and Marrick. Elonne is so perfect it’s agonizing to share a table with her, but Marrick is more dangerous.”

“How?”

“He’s friendly, he’s disarmingly honest. I can believe that he means me no harm, and I *want* to believe it. He makes me laugh,” she added, as if this were the confession of a dreadful sin.

“Haerrad? Rymark?”

“I’ve had one meal with Rymark. In the Placid Sea, in public. I will not dine with Haerrad.”

“Finch.”

“I don’t care. He’s been careful around Teller; he was shocked and displeased to see us in Council seats. I hope it keeps him up at night.”

“Don’t. If he’s up at night, he’s planning your deaths.”

“He’s planning the death of anyone who might oppose him,” Finch replied with a shrug. “There’s nothing new there. And we’re too insignificant. We’re not you.” She swallowed. “We thought you were dead. No, we were *afraid* you were dead.”

“Who’s ahead?”

Finch didn’t pretend to misunderstand her, and she accepted the change in subject. “I did warn you I was going to whine,” she added with a smile. “Until three weeks ago, I would have said it was a toss-up between Haerrad and Elonne.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know. Everything changed with the demons.”

Jewel cursed. “I thought—I hoped—that demons would follow us to the South. They did,” she added, “but clearly not all of them.”

“You haven’t been here, so you don’t know, but let me tell you that the Houses of

Healing are in an uproar. There are Kings Swords posted at every possible entrance and exit, and a ban upon all but emergency victims visiting without prior consent.”

“Levec doesn’t let anyone near the Houses of Healing without consent anyway.”

“It’s more serious.”

“Plague?”

“Of a type.”

“Demonic?”

Finch fell silent again. “We don’t know. It’s relevant gossip,” she added. “It almost killed the Terafin.”

“Only the Terafin?”

“Only the Terafin in this manse.”

“How is that even possible?”

“The healers don’t know. Even the Queens healers have been working with the plague victims in near-desperation. There’s no quarantine because if there were, they’d have to shut down the entire city. There are no reported incidents of the plague anywhere but Averalaaan. But...it makes people sleep.”

“That’s it?”

“They don’t wake. Only one of the victims woke at all.”

“The Terafin.”

Finch exhaled. “The Terafin. She was unreported. She wasn’t counted as a plague victim.” She hesitated again, and then added, “I’m exaggerating a little. Others have woken, but only within the Houses of Healing; none of them, however, can remain awake for long.”

“Levec can wake the sleepers?”

“No. Not Levec. But—but one of the healers. It was Adam.”

Jay covered her face with her hands again. “Adam.”

“Adam’s the one—the only one—who can wake the sleepers.” She drew her knees into her chest again. “Levec called us to the Houses of Healing, via Daine. We were

surprised,” she added. “Levec is infamous for his dislike of visitors—even Daine was confused. But Adam offered word—of you—to us. We still don’t know how he arrived in Levec’s care from the South—but it was clear he’d seen you, he *knew* you. It was all I could do to stop Angel from—” She shook her head, thinking of Carver, of Angel, of the pointless fights that Angel’s frustration and fear had caused in Jay’s absence. “He’s here, for now. Levec *asked* that we take him in, and he was so lonely and so confused, I couldn’t say no.

“Of course, now that he’s *here*, Levec repents daily and demands that we return him,” she added with a grimace. “But we’ve left it entirely up to Adam, and Adam doesn’t want to leave. Did he—did he heal you?”

“Not me, no.”

“Levec said you saved his life.”

Jay said nothing for a long moment, and then, softly, “Talk to me. Keep talking.”

Finch swallowed. “The Terafin slept and didn’t wake; she woke only with outside intervention. She wouldn’t rest. She wouldn’t rest, but...she knew. I think we all suspected—but when she called us out to the House Shrine, *we* knew. We just didn’t expect her to die at the hands of demons.

“She made Arann one of the Chosen.”

Jewel’s eyes widened.

“And she promoted both Teller and I to the House Council. Arann had the option of refusing. We didn’t, if we wanted to remain ATerafin.”

“She put you in the line of fire without giving you the choice?”

“Yes. Don’t be angry. There’s no point. She’s—”

“Dead. Safely dead.”

Finch swallowed. “We would have done it anyway. We knew why, and why it had to be us. In Meralonne’s absence—he went South with the Imperial armies—Sigurne Mellifas was introduced as interim House Mage.”

“Impossible. Sigurne doesn’t work as a House mage. She’s the guildmaster; she can’t afford to show any favoritism, and employment of that nature—”

“I was there when she was introduced. The guildmaster is famous for her loathing of

demonkind, and there were demons in Terafin. I don't know if it was The Terafin's idea; I didn't ask. If I had to guess, I'd say it was Sigurne's. She's not often in the manse, but she comes and goes at will.

"I think whoever caused the plague—and I think there must be something behind it only because of The Terafin—expected the sleeping sickness to take her. But it didn't. People don't know about Adam. If they found out, Levec would remove our collective heads from our shoulders, and probably only after he'd beaten us to within an inch of our lives." Finch looked away, toward the doors. "...And because of that, someone must have assumed Alowan was somehow keeping The Terafin awake and alive." She bent forehead to her knees and left it there for a long, long moment. "I'm sorry. I feel like we—"

"Don't. Don't say it. Don't think it. You didn't kill him."

"He died days ago. Some of the flowers and mementos are still in the galleries; they were everywhere. He was—" She swallowed. "He wasn't the only one to die. Two of his assistants also perished. Daine wasn't in the healerie at the time, or he would have died. I think...I think Alowan cut Daine's shifts in the healerie short for that reason. I think he thought there would be some attempt, *something*. Daine was angry at himself; I think he still is. He understands that had he been there, he would have died; he understands that *you* need him, in just the same way the Terafin needed Alowan. He's taken over the running of the healerie, and it's been so hectic no one's had time to be pissed off that a twenty-year old is in charge there. We've told no one that he's a healer, but I think anyone determined enough could find out."

"He's at risk."

Finch said, "We're all at risk. Daine is not a child. Levec offered him a place in the Houses of Healing, and Daine...refused."

"How did he refuse?"

"I won't repeat it. I think he took it as an insult, if that helps."

Jay grimaced. "Levec will blame that on me."

"Probably. But he's got enough on his hands he's not looking for people to blame. Unless you make him leave it, Daine will keep the Healerie; he feels it's the only meaningful thing he can do to show his profound respect for Alowan."

"Alowan deserved it," Jay whispered. "He was the best of us. Of all of us."

Finch couldn't argue, and didn't try. She could not think of a single person in the House who did not hold Alowan in affection. "The demon — and it was a demon, we confirmed it — inhabited the body of Alowan's cat; it waited until the healerie was empty and killed Alowan and his assistants. It knew enough about healers to remove his head."

"How are you so certain?"

"Alowan told us," she whispered. "The Terafin requested a godborn son of Mandaros, and one came. Mandaros apparently doesn't like healers; he considers them some sort of thief or sadist. They pull the dead back from peace into pain, and the dead follow."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, not according to either Alowan or the godborn. I was a bit surprised," she added. "But the godborn boy called his father, Mandaros. We all met him in the Between. He brought Alowan and the two girls. The girls —" she flinched. "They screamed. They just — they screamed and screamed. We couldn't talk to them. But Alowan...didn't. He was Alowan. He told the Terafin what she needed to know. I —" she exhaled.

"What are you not telling me?"

"We have Justice. We have the House Sword."

Jay covered her face with her hands. "The Sword, two House Council members, Arann as Chosen. An Alowan of my own if my near-death doesn't involve loss of my head. Was there anything else she left me?"

"The House," Finch said, the words thick and heavy in her mouth.

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