

Teller had always been the den's chronicler. Once, he'd used slates, and the chronicles, such as they were, lasted only until Jay's next nightmare—her next significant nightmare. Everyone she'd found, gathered, and made a home for understood what significant meant: she saw twisted strands of the future, and what she saw was truth. She could meet that future head on, and if she was prepared for it, she might interact with it, change it.

Teller had come to Jay through a waking vision. Finch had come through nightmare. Neither they—nor any other member of the den—wanted to go anywhere else. Following Jay had lead them through the poverty of orphans in the poorest holdings to the high, vaulted ceilings of Terafin's glittering rooms. Here, they had made a name for themselves: they were ATerafin. But they were also Jay's.

Tonight, he had no slates. He had parchment, quill, ink—things that only Rath had had in the early years. The parchment would not be erased in the event of another vision; it would be set aside in Teller's personal office.

The Terafin — any Terafin — has always kept a journal of record; it is available only to The Terafin that succeeds him. Amaraïs. Amaraïs Handernesse ATerafin. What, he thought, did you leave for Jay? What will she find if she takes up your mantle and survives to rule the House? He hadn't asked; it wasn't his place to do so. But it was his place, by dint of their history, to keep the records.

He watched as Jay entered the kitchen; she entered it as if it were a cathedral—a cathedral built in the name of a god she was afraid she'd offended. He couldn't sit until she did; no one could. They watched her, furtively or openly, as she walked. Beside her, between them, walked a total stranger. Not even Avandar walked as close, and as domicis it was both his duty and his right.

The stranger was taller than any member of the den, save perhaps Arann; he was slender of build, his skin as perfect as the most cozened of patricians. He wore armor, but it was not the armor of a House Guard or a Kings' Sword; it was lighter, like chain mail that had no weight. He no longer carried a sword—but Teller and Finch had watched him wield one; he had, in a single blow, destroyed the Terafin's assassin.

The Terafin's demonic assassin.

Jay, he thought. She'd come *riding* into the Hall, the doors thrown wide to accommodate her mount. Had it been a horse, it would have been shock enough, but Jay didn't ride. No, she'd come on a stag, a great, silver-white creature whose tines

glittered with ice and whose eyes—ah. He shook his head. If the strange, pale-haired lord had entered the kitchen in a frosty silence, the stag had not; he had vanished between one moment and the next, and given the events of the day, no one asked Jay where he'd gone.

Teller could not remember the last time he'd seen her. He knew the day, of course; it was in the records both here and in the Merchant Authority, a building much damaged by the demons that had destroyed large parts of the Common. But on that day, she'd been busy, as had he; life, with the shadow of war looming across the city, had continued in much the same way it had done for the sixteen previous years. Sixteen years had seen subtle changes, of course; both he and Finch had been promoted, graduating from under-secretaries with small desks to officials with offices of their own.

He glanced, nervously, at the ring around his finger; it was new. It was new, it was far too heavy, and it made him self-conscious; it was the signet ring of a member of the Terafin House Council. He and Finch were its two newest members. Jay hadn't noticed yet.

Or maybe she had; it was hard to tell.

She was sun-dark, her hair red with the highlights that came out in summers and vanished over the course of the darker winter season. Lines around her compressed lips seemed deeper to his eye, as if etched there. She wore the clothing she'd arrived in: pants, long, loose sleeved shirt, a vest, and heavy boots that seemed mired in dust or dry mud. She carried two visible daggers, although she'd touched neither.

She took the chair at the head of the table, and when she did, Teller moved to take the seat to her right. He set parchment before him, but did not uncap the inkwell; she wasn't ready to talk, not yet. Ellerson brought lamps and set them on the table at either end in silence; Teller watched as Jay carefully avoided meeting the older man's gaze.

When was the last time he'd seen her, clearly? What was the last thing he remembered?

Ah. He shuffled through the paper he had brought, and found the one sheet which was not blank. It was one of the few not in his hand; Finch had transcribed it months ago. He uncapped the inkwell, then.

“What are you reading?” Jay asked, which surprised him.

“Your vision,” he told her, “the nightmare that that you meant to follow to the South. We knew you meant to go,” he added.

Her expression softened. “Read it out loud?”

Teller nodded. He set the blank sheets to one side of the sparsely written one. ““Terafin is burning. The fire is black, but the heat—the heat is white. There’s sand on my clothing, in my hands, my mouth; I’m dry and hot and I can barely move.”” He glanced up.

She watched him in silence; he wondered if she remembered the words she’d spoken; if they invoked the vision itself. After a pause, he continued. ““Someone calls my name. I turn toward the voice. Behind me, there’s a woman. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She’s sixteen, seventeen, and her eyes are filled with fire; she kneels, as if she’s suppliant, but she’s wearing a thin crown, and a bloodied sword is staining the silks she wears. She tells me that I cannot turn back.

““The Chosen are scattered. I can only find Torvan; the rest are dead or blind or deaf. He says, ‘Why did you have to leave?’, and I feel it, the weight of those words, and he grabs my hand and drags me to the Terafin Council chambers.

““She’s dead.”” Teller paused for a moment, his hands trembling over the words written months ago. Jay’s eyes closed, but she nodded, meaning him to continue. ““There are three knives in her body and she lies across the Council table. Gabriel looks up as I enter the room; there’s fighting, of course, the war for succession. And he says, ‘You. You *left* her to die.’

““The Terafin sits up. Her eyes are dead eyes. Her wounds don’t bleed. And her voice is not her voice. Her head rolls awkwardly on her shoulders as she turns in my direction. She says, ‘Another lesson. The hardest lesson. There will be blood on your hands no matter what you choose.’. The color returns to her face; the knives fall out; she shakes her hair down and stands. She’s not dead and she’s not undead; she’s alive.

““She keeps speaking with the same voice, as if life or death doesn’t matter to what she has to say. ‘There will always be blood on your hands. Glory in it, weep at it, as you choose—but when you choose who *must* die, choose wisely.’ And before I can answer, before I can ask a question, she gestures and the city rises. The Shining City. And then the screaming starts.””

Teller fell silent. They all did. The weight of the words about Terafin were sharper

and harsher than they had been in the wake of the nightmare vision.

“Did you meet her? Did you meet the princess you thought you were meant to save?” Finch asked.

“Yes.”

“And she lives?”

“She lives for now.” The expression hardened again. “The Terafin is dead.”

Teller closed his eyes. “Yes,” he said. He set the page aside. “Did you do what you set out to do?”

“I don’t know. The princess—the Serra Diora en’Leonne—is safe in the hands of her prince, but they stand on the edge of war. I don’t know if they’ll survive it. I can’t see *how* they’ll survive it. But I’m not there. I’m here.” She inhaled and looked at every one of the den. “I’m sorry. I—I didn’t meant to leave the city the way I did; I did intend to desert the army—”

“It’s not desertion,” Angel cut in sharply. “You swore no oaths to them.”

“I was to be seconded to the armies by the Kings.”

“You can’t be seconded to an army.”

“Technically, I can, if I’m standing in the wrong room, at the wrong time, with the wrong people.” She shoved hair out of her eyes. Familiar gesture; it meant she was worried, exhausted, or both. “I’m sorry.” She straightened her shoulders as she spoke the two words no one needed to hear.

“The demons destroyed some of the trees in the Common,” Finch told her.

Jewel sucked in air. “How many?”

“Three.”

“*Three?*”

She nodded. The trees in the common were a special kind of property; the fines—the penalties—for harming those trees implied the trees were valuable citizenry.

“When?” She asked, but to Teller it was clear that she knew.

“The day you disappeared.” Finch placed her hands in her lap before she lifted her chin and asked the question she had asked for months. “What happened?”

Jay's laugh was shaky, brief; it wasn't laughter at all. It was a sound of pain that she turned, by dint of will, into mirth, and it guttered. "Avandar and I were attacked in the Common by a demon. It looked human, spoke like a man but—" She glanced at her domicis. If Jay had been missed, Avandar had not. "It was powerful, and it wasn't alone."

"Was it there for you?"

She was silent. Teller knew her. "It was there for Avandar?"

Her eyes rounded. She did not, however, answer. He wrote.

"Avandar took us away."

"Took you away?"

"He used magery to transport us from the heart of the Common to—Evereve."

"Where is Evereve? In the South?"

"In the mountains," she replied, letting silence serve as punctuation.

It was the white haired stranger who said, "In the vastness of the Stone Deepings." He had not taken a chair; he stood against the wall farthest from the table, his expression remote, his grey eyes narrowed as if he could not believe the squalor in which he found himself. Teller didn't like him. And he knew it didn't matter.

Jay glanced at him, but there was no command, no glare; she accepted his interruption with a wince, no more. "This," she told the den softly, "Is Celleriant. I tried to call him Killer, but...nicknames don't stick."

"I can't imagine why not," Carver murmured.

She chuckled. It was pained. Glancing at her knuckles, and turning her empty hands toward the light, she said, "Evereve is the name of a—a fortress or a castle in the heart of the mountains between the Empire and the Dominion. It's old. It's old, and no one lives there anymore."

"But Avandar knew of it?"

She nodded.

"Do they not understand who Viandaran is?" Celleriant asked, his voice chillier.

"They know he's my domicis," she replied, this time with more heat. "He's been that

for sixteen years, and in *this* house, he doesn't need to be anything else."

Celleriant's pale brows rose slightly; Teller thought him genuinely surprised, and not happy to be so.

Avandar spoke. Avandar spoke to Celleriant in a language Teller didn't recognize. Celleriant replied in kind, the words traveling over Jay's head as she ducked beneath them. "You will forgive Lord Celleriant," he said to the den, in his imperious and familiar Weston. "He is not accustomed to mortal lands."

"He's ... not mortal."

"No. He existed far before the founding of the Empire, and there is some faint hope that he will exist when the Empire is a footnote in history."

"But he knows you."

Jay held up a hand. Swallowed. *Jay*, Teller thought, *where have you gone? Where are you now?*

"He demonstrably believes that he knows who I am," Avandar replied. If Jay seemed drained, he did not; his natural arrogance asserted itself with ease in the night kitchen.

Angel turned, not to Avandar or Jay, but to Lord Celleriant. He rose, leaving his chair—and his position to Jay's left. In the lamplight, the spire he painstakingly made of his hair cast odd shadows. "We understand why Avandar is here. What business do you have with Jewel ATerafin?" His hand fell to the hilt of his weapon; it was not a threat. Somehow.

"Angel—"

Angel ignored her. He also ignored the den-sign beneath his eyes; he watched Celleriant.

Celleriant raised a brow. He did not condescend to reply.

"We serve her," Angel continued, into the silence.

"Angel—"

"I serve, as well."

Angel asked another question—or at least Teller assumed it *was* a question; he couldn't understand what Angel said. He did, on the other hand, recognize the tongue:

it was Rendish.

Lord Celleriant — and the title suited the bearing, in Teller's opinion — replied; it was curt, short. It might have been enough, but after a pause that implied he was considering his words with care, he spoke again.

Angel drew sword.

The stranger laughed; it was a wild laugh, heavy with both contempt and surprise. Arann rose as Celleriant answered in kind: the light of a blue sword filled the kitchen, making the room smaller, dingier just by shining.

Jewel rose instantly, knocking her chair over in her haste. Her hands were balled fists. "Enough."

Celleriant spoke again. She turned on him. "Leave," she said. It was not a request.

"Where would you have me go?" Was his cool reply.

"Go to the great room with the fireplace and wait there until I come for you. You are not to harm any living thing in this manse without my express permission."

Avandar cleared his throat.

"Demons aren't technically alive," she told her domicis, without once taking her eyes off Celleriant. "These people are mine. They're my kin, my closest friends. What they say or do to me, I accept — but if you harm them in *any* way —"

He raised a brow. "Yes? You are not a King of man; your wrath, no matter how greatly you feel it, counts for little. What will you do?"

"I will see you suffer the fate of the foresworn."

The cold, slender smile that graced his face froze there.

"Leave," she said again.

He looked as if he might argue, but he did not; he sheathed his sword and it vanished.

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"He serves me," Jay said, when he was gone and the den had once again resumed their seats. "It's his punishment for failure."

"Failure to do what? Kill you?" Carver demanded.

Jay laughed. "Pretty much."

Carver's turn to look surprised. "And you brought him *here*?"

"Where else was he going to go? He was ordered to serve me, Carver. He won't kill me."

"He won't save you either, if it suits his purposes," Angel told her grimly.

"No, probably not. But he won't kill me, and given the last few months, I'll take it."

"He will not kill Jewel," Avandar said, "and she is mistaken; he will fight to preserve her, where it is at all possible."

"Did you bring him here to be Duster?" Jester asked.

"Duster? No. He could never be that. Duster was human. Duster wanted to be here, when she wanted anything at all." She hesitated, and then added, "I think we need him." The words were soft. And that was that. No one would argue with those words, although Angel looked as if it might kill him.

"Where was I?"

"Evereve," Teller replied. He glanced at Angel. Angel's arms were folded across his chest; he was not relaxed, and probably wouldn't be for a day, if that.

"Evereve. The transit wasn't flawless; there was difficulty."

"What kind of difficulty?"

"I don't know. I don't understand all of it myself. Evereve has no entrances and no exits—as far as I can tell there's only one way to enter, and that's with Avandar's permission and help."

"And to leave?"

She glanced at her domicis. After a moment, she fumbled with a pouch on her left, and she pulled out four things. She laid three as close to the centre of the table as she could while remaining seated. They looked like leaves, but they couldn't be: one was silver, one was gold and one was glass. Glass, Teller thought, as he reached for it, or diamond.

Divining his confusion, Jay said, "It's diamond."

"Where did these come from?"

“From a dream,” she replied.

“A...dream.”

“I told you—it was a really strange place. It all feels like a dream to me now—I woke often from dreams with no memory of falling asleep first. Celleriant called them the Stone Deepings. Avandar couldn’t leave the same way he arrived—not and take me with him, and I had no desire to remain there.” She hesitated again. “But one night, I had a dream.”

“A vision?”

She frowned. “Yes, and no. It wasn’t like the nightmares; it wasn’t the three dreams. But it wasn’t ordinary. In this dream, I entered a long, unlit hall, and began to walk down it; the cats were there.”

“Cats?”

She grimaced. “You’ll like this part, Teller. I thought they were gargoyles until they moved; there were three winged felines the size of small horses; they were alabaster, obsidian and stone. I understood that they served the Winter King, the way you understand things in a dream. They were waiting for me; they had orders to take me to where he waited.

“How do you know?”

“They told me. They spoke the way I imagine cats would if they could actually speak. They were extremely frustrating, very self-important, and very condescending.”

Teller lifted the gold leaf, after passing the diamond leaf on. In the light, he could see the veins and the subtle textures of a living leaf. Its shape was familiar; they looked very like the leaves the trees in the Common shed.

“They flew through a forest, and the trees there were silver, gold and diamond. They didn’t steer clear of the trees because the leaves couldn’t cut *them*. I wasn’t as lucky.”

“These leaves are from those trees.”

“Yes. The cats took me to meet the Winter King. I thought, when I first saw him, he was a desiccated corpse—but his eyes were living eyes, and when he spoke he sounded like—like Avandar, a bit. He said he had drawn me into his world, through my dreams.” Teller picked up the silver leaf. “I know,” she said softly, and she

shuddered once and grew still.

“But he asked one favor of me, in return for passage from Evereve, through the Stone Deepings to what he called the mortal world. When I woke, the leaves were with me, as if they’d clung to my clothing when the cats flew through the trees’ branches. I might have picked them. Sometimes I remember the feel of their branches in my hands—but it’s foggy. It’s not clear.”

“What favor?”

She stared at her scratched reflection on the table’s surface. “I didn’t—I don’t—understand it, but...I think he wanted to die. He was consort to the Winter Queen.” She closed her eyes. “The Winter Queen.”

They were silent as she set the fourth thing upon the table; even at this distance, it was almost invisible to the eye. “I saw her,” she whispered. “I can’t forget her. Everything else can dim and fade—but when I close my eyes and think of her, she’s *there*.”

“Who is she?” Finch asked softly, because all questions had to be asked softly at the moment.

“Daughter to gods. I didn’t think to ask which ones.” She shook herself, straightened. “I’m getting ahead of myself. After the dream of the Winter King, Avandar agreed to make the attempt to walk out of Evereve; there was a bit of difficulty, but we made it. And I—I walked. I walked, but I swear, I spent most of my time on the road just waking. Waking up from dreams or nightmares. I don’t remember falling asleep on that road—just the waking. It was jarring.”

“You walked the Stone Deepings,” Avandar said. He spoke to her, but for them. “The Deepings are the ancient paths, and the hidden ones; only the very powerful among the mortals can walk them at all; the powerful or the cursed.” His smile, as he said this, was strange; bitter, but not unamused. “They were meant for, made for, the firstborn: the scions of the old and wild gods.”

Teller lifted both head and pen. “You took her somewhere that gods might have lived, when they walked the world.”

“Yes.”

He wanted to ask more, but didn’t; Jay had tensed at even the question he did ask. She swallowed and said, “Avandar is old. He’s lived for a long damn time.”

How old? How old did a man have to be to be able to live in a fortress that gods might once have used? Teller hesitated, and then, with care, wrote.

“I met them. Some of them. The firstborn, the children of gods. Calliastra, Corallonne, the Winter Queen. I met them as we walked. Calliastra would have killed me, had Avandar not been present. I remember her,” she added, and shivered. “Child of the goddess of Love and the God of Endless night. I can’t imagine her existence: all love ends in death. All.”

“Jay—”

“And she would have killed me without blinking,” she continued, “and a large part of me didn’t care. I would have died. I would have wanted to die.”

“She was worse than the Winter Queen?”

Jay blinked. “Worse? No. I think—more pathetic, if you can call instant death pathetic. I think her whole existence is nothing but pain and loss. The Winter Queen is—is like the ideal of a god: she’s so far above us, you couldn’t imagine she could love you or care. She might kill you without even noticing you were underfoot, the way we step on stray ants.

“Could the Winter Queen have killed me? Yes, but—I’m not sure she really tried. She was the last. She didn’t come alone; she came with her hunting party; it was a war host. They rode stags like the one I rode into the Council Chambers.”

“They did not,” Avandar said quietly.

“They were—”

“They were not, in any way, the equal of the stag you now ride. What he is and what they were, before they became the Winter Queen’s, were not the same.”

“Are you telling this story, or am I?”

“You, of course; were I to tell it, it would be more accurate.”

Jester coughed. He was probably the only person in the kitchen to find this funny, but it eased—or at least shifted—Jay’s expression. “They were *mounted*,” she continued. “And I happened to be standing in their way. The path was narrow. Lord Celleriant came first, and he attempted to drive me off the road by forcing his mount to ride me down. The mount had to travel through Avandar’s protections and it—” she flinched.

“They’re not stags. I mean, they *are*, but they didn’t start out that way; they were once human.

“I could see the man burning within the body of the beast. He was screaming —” She stopped again. Drew breath. “So I sent him away.”

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Teller looked up from his page. “What do you mean, sent him away?”

“I was afraid you’d ask that. I don’t know. I just—I wanted it to be *over*. I wanted his pain to stop. I couldn’t tell Avandar to drop the protective barrier—I’d’ve died there. But I couldn’t—” She shook herself. “I wanted him gone. He was gone.”

“It is the nature of the path that runs through the Deepings,” Avandar said. “When you walk it, it is part of you. If you are determined or powerful, it is, for all extents and purposes, your own. I would not have said, when we set out from Evereve, that Jewel would have owned the path she walked. But she did.”

“What do you mean, own?” Angel asked.

“The land bent to her will, and hers alone.”

Jay didn’t appear to hear Avandar. “I left Celleriant unmounted, and as I discovered, you can’t be part of the Winter Hunt without a mount.”

“You discovered?”

“Yes. Because she came next. Ariane. The Winter Queen.” She swallowed and looked across the table to Avandar, who stood by the door, as he always did. Like Celleriant, he never chose to take a seat. But neither did Ellerson, and Ellerson was nothing like the immortal Lord.

Avandar accepted her request and continued her tale. “Ariane came, at the head of her host. The Winter Hunt is confined to the hidden paths. But the path in the Deepings is narrow, and the path we walked, exceedingly so. It is not the path she would choose if the Hunt did not lead that way. Because Jewel could stand in the path and hold it against any force, Ariane could not pass unless Jewel granted permission.”

“So...she stood in the middle of a small stone walk-way and told a small army to get stuffed.” Carver leaned back on the chair’s hind legs again, as the domicis frowned.

“That is not the way I would have put it, but yes. That is essentially what happened.

She could not, however, hold that path against the Winter Queen forever.”

“I could have,” Jewel said, voice low. “It’s not real, there” she added to her den. “You don’t *need* to sleep. Or eat. Or anything else. It’s like a really vivid dream, with nightmare waiting around the corner. I could have stayed there forever. But I would never have been able to come home, because if I moved from there—at all—I’d be worse than dead. She did what Celleriant did; she forced her mount across Avandar’s barrier. Only her mount.

“She *knew* she couldn’t cross it. She knew I could hold that ground.”

“Then why did she try?”

“She wasn’t trying. She wanted the mount to suffer and burn because she knew it would—it would hurt me. Not more, not less. She did it because it would hurt me.”

“Which is why I have always said it is important to show no pain, especially in the face of your enemies. They will use it against you.”

“And how did that work for her?” Jay shot back, cheeks momentarily redder. She swallowed. “I made a deal. I’d let her ride—with a smaller number of hunters—if she left her mount with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to cause her some damage, in return for the damage she’d done, and it meant she couldn’t use the same trick against me again. I forgot the Winter King. I forgot everything on that road, standing in her way, except home.” She laughed. “I made it home. I changed the road. It went from cave stone to the cobbles of the streets in the twenty-fifth holding. I could hear Weston. I could smell bread. I was yards away from Taverson’s.

“And I could see her, as if it were just the two of us. In the end, she agreed. She told me the old ways were strengthening, she told me—” Jewel shook her head. “She agreed. But she ordered Celleriant to serve me—a less demanding master—until the end of my days, and if he discharged himself with honor, she might find another mount for him, and a place within her ranks.”

“You should have refused,” Angel said quietly.

“There was nothing to refuse. She gave him the order. She didn’t ask my permission. But after that, I kept walking. And dreaming. And walking.” She closed her eyes. “And

I walked out of the dark, night path—it was *always* night, on that path—into a bonfire that didn't burn."

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Avandar left the kitchen and returned with water; he set glasses in front of each member of the den, even the silent Arann, and he poured. Teller watched Jay as he worked; she seemed almost confounded by the simple action, although she'd seen it so many times in the past sixteen years. She had offered so little information about Evereve; Teller knew, watching her, that Evereve *was* Avandar's. What she had discovered there, she would keep to herself for a long time.

Which meant one of two things: she was protecting Avandar, or she was protecting herself. Both options were unsettling. Avandar was not a man who required protection, but very little unsettled Jay this way.

"The bonfire," she said, "wasn't actually a fire. I mean, it was, but—it was summoned fire."

"Like summoned demons?"

"Like the wind," she whispered. "Like the wind that Meralonne rides. It had a voice and a presence—I can't explain more than that."

"You summoned it?"

"No." She laughed. "The fire wasn't part of the hidden paths; it was built by real people, in the heart of the Dominion of Annagar. I don't know if they were expecting *me*," she added softly, "but four Voyani women worked together to build it, and when it was done, Avandar and I landed in the middle of their encampment. It was—it was very close to Scarran. In the Dominion, the longest night of the year is celebrated."

Silence.

"It's celebrated, not feared. They hold the Festival of the Moon on the twenty-second of Scaral. We appeared just before its start." She shook her head. "You should have seen them. One of the four—the oldest, Yollana—made my Oma look like a spineless coward."

Teller winced; they all did. You couldn't be part of Jay's den and not know about her Oma.

"But there were two people there I recognized."

“Who?”

“One was Evayne. Evayne a’Nolan.”

Silence.

“Sometimes I hate her,” Jay continued, voice soft. “It’s like she’s a vulture, like she’s a carrion creature; she’s there when things are so bad we’ll survive by the skin of our teeth—those who manage to survive at all.” She looked at the lamplight. “Sometimes,” she continued, “I pity her. She’s—I don’t want to *be* her. I look at her, and I’m afraid that her fate is my fate.”

“It is not,” Avandar said, quietly and without his usual dismissive intonation.

“She’s the only other seerborn I’ve ever met.”

“She is not the only one such that I have,” he replied. “She is unique.”

Jewel nodded. “Kallandras was there, as well.”

“Kallandras? The Master Bard?”

“The same.”

“What was he doing in the South?”

“Probably serving the Bardmaster or the Kings. He’s not the only bard in the south at the moment. But he—he survives. I think there’s nothing that could kill him.”

“But he’s mortal.”

Jay nodded. Inhaled. “Look, there were a lot of people there. I spent so long on the damn night road in isolation it was almost too much to take in. The four women, they were Matriarchs. I mean, that’s what they were called. It’s a title. They’re—I’d swear they were mageborn, but Avandar says—”

“They are not.”

“But—Scarann. Evayne. Kallandras. I didn’t expect things to be simple or easy. Something is happening in the Dominion. There were demons,” she continued.

“There was so much magic on the night of the Festival Moon. So much. I—there were masks, there were founts, there was the Lake—” She shook her head. “I can’t describe it all; I’ll be here until next week. The four Matriarchs had a role to play on the night of the Festival Moon because the Shining Court—the Court of the Lord of the

Hells—had done *something* to the Lake, the masks, the markers of the Festival itself.

“The demons opened the hidden paths because they could—it was Scarran. They opened the paths, and the Winter Host came to the Tor Leonne.”

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“I had a role to play,” she continued. “And while the Arianni rode through the streets of the Tor Leonne, slaughtering any between themselves and their targets, I met the Winter Queen for the second time.”

“You weren’t on the hidden path.”

“No.”

“So...you weren’t on ground that you could make your own.”

“No. I would have died if she was determined to kill me. I would have died regardless, but Celleriant came before she could ride me down, and he stood between me and his Lord. And I understood why *I* was there. I understood what I was supposed to say to stop her. No, that’s the wrong word. Stopping her—it would be like stopping the tide. Like stopping a waterfall. The best I could hope for—the very best—was to divert her.

“So I told her about the Winter King, and his challenge. He wanted that,” she added softly. “He wanted it. And she wanted it as well. She called her host, she called them all, and they came, and they rode, and the Winter King—” Jewel shook her head. “I didn’t see the end of it; I would have had to be able to follow them.

“But they ceased their hunt and slaughter in the Tor Leonne, and I think that was the best we could hope for, and even that—” she shook her head. “Even that feels like it wasn’t enough.” She stared at her hands for a long time, exhaled, and said, “but it was after we left the Tor Leonne that I met our princess. Serra Diora. Her aunt. Her slave.” She looked up at the lamp. “She *is* beautiful. Not the way the Winter Queen was—but almost. She was—even in slave’s clothing—so graceful, so elegant, so delicate.

“Delicate or not, she’s a sword. And as it happened, she stole a significant sword before leaving the Tor Leonne.”

“How significant?”

“It’s the southern version of the King’s sword,” she replied. “And she meant to carry it to the man she wanted to see become that King. But she carried another burden, as

well, and that one—that one could only be discharged in the desert at the heart of Annagar.

“It wasn’t always a desert,” she added, tracing circles on the table’s surface. “It won’t always be one, either. But the only people who travel it are the Voyani.”

“Who are the Voyani?”

“They’re—people. They’re more like my Oma than any other people I’ve ever met. I was an outsider, there. It was strange. I always feel I look southern. Like my Oma. But among the Voyani, I’m the child of deserters and cowards—people who fled the Voyanne for the safety of Northern, foreign lands. They don’t have homes; the Voyanne is, as far as I could tell, wherever their wagons happen to wander. It’s been that way for centuries. The Voyanne *is* their home. Or it was.”

“They don’t live—”

“No. There’s only one place the Matriarchs will acknowledge *as* home. They wander as sentinels or guardians or penitents, waiting for the moment they can return to their home.”

“What home?”

She closed her eyes. “I’ll get there, I promise. But I’ll say this: a long, long time ago there were cities in the desert, and it wasn’t a desert. Those cities were larger, grander, and far more cruel than Averalan. I think they were worse than the cities the Blood Barons ruled, but bigger. One of those cities was named Arkosa. I assume there were three cities that bore the names Havalla, Lyserra, and Corrona.”

Avandar said, “There were.”

“How do you know?”

“Because there are four Voyani clans: Arkosa, Havalla, Lyserra and Corrona. Each clan is ruled by a Matriarch.”

“The four women who summoned that fire that brought you to them?”

Jewel nodded. “They take family seriously. I think they think the Ten are an obscenity—large, spread out families with no blood-ties whatsoever. It’s wrong, to them. My Oma didn’t care for it either.” She grimaced. “The Voyani and the ruling clans of the Dominion aren’t exactly friendly. They’re so different it’s a wonder they can live in the same country at all. But the Serra Diora travelled with the Arkosan

Voyani.

“Serra Diora and Margret of Arkosa are bound in a way I don’t understand; they certainly didn’t get along all that well to start. But the Serra—” she shook her head. “The Serra owed something to the Arkosan Voyani, and in order to secure their protection while she traveled with the Sun Sword, she agreed to undertake a pilgrimage. Into the heart of the desert.”

“You went.”

“I went. Yollana of the Havalla Voyani accompanied Margret of Arkosa as well; the other Matriarchs left to return to their own kin. There wasn’t any other place for me to go. Whatever the reason I saw the Serra Diora in vision, it hadn’t happened yet.” She stared at the table top, and then balled her hands in fists. “This is so real,” she said softly. “The desert seems like a dream.”

“A dream or a nightmare?” Teller asked.

“Is there a difference?” Her lips tightened; she glanced at Avandar; Avandar was silent. “The Voyani don’t pull their wagons into the desert.”

“I wouldn’t take wagons into desert at all,” Finch said.

“These were special. They—they flew.”

Silence broken only by Teller’s quill.

“How?”

“Magic. Voyani magic. It’s different than ours. There are more symbols, more blood.” She winced. “Margret painted symbols on the wagons’ bodies, and when she was done, they could fly. They could fly and they could land. The camp split up at the edge of the desert; Margret wouldn’t risk the children to the sands and the wind. She took few with her. One of them was her brother.” At this, she smiled and glanced across the table at Teller. “He looks nothing like you, and he’s young—fourteen, I think—but he reminded me of you.”

“What was his name?” Finch asked.

“Adam. Adam of Arkosa. The Matriarch’s brother. He’s only two years younger than the Serra—but I thought of him as a child.”

“The Serra?”

“No one living could mistake Serra Diora for a child. The Voyani treated her with indifference, except for Margret and Adam. Margret treated her with hostility and contempt. Adam treated her with deference. He’s a boy,” she added, with a wry smile, “and the Serra is very beautiful. He borrowed Kallandras’ lute just to give her a musical instrument to play, because she can, and because he thought it would comfort her.”

“He parted a bard from his instrument?” Jester was almost shocked.

“Kallandras agreed—he must have; Diora had the lute. She was playing it,” Jay added. “I heard her. She has a voice that’s bardic in quality, but it cuts you to listen to it; I swear, you bleed and scar.” The scar was clearly not painful, but Jay shook herself.

“The desert—it’s cold. At night, it’s cold. The sand isn’t like beach sand, not everywhere; it’s hard in some places, and cracked. The winds—there’s nothing to stop them, and they *howl*. It’s like winter, but worse. We—we camped in the desert.” She swallowed, forced her fingers to lay flat against the table. She looked at no one as she spoke. “We were attacked in the desert. I want to say we were attacked by demons—and we were—but it wasn’t the demons that were significant. We were attacked by a serpent, a wind serpent, at night.

“With the wind came rain. I would have said rain in a desert would be a good thing.” She laughed, but without amusement. “I would have been so wrong. The—there was too much water, and the ground didn’t absorb it. We were caught in tunnels we’d chosen as windbreaks with nothing but water, wind—it wasn’t the sun or the cold that was going to kill us all; it was the water. We were going to drown in the desert.” She did glance at Avandar, then.

He nodded, no more.

“Avandar called the earth, and it came and it rose above the water that was rushing through the hard dirt—but not by enough. We were—” She bit down on words again. “The serpent was controlling the storm somehow. So the water—it just kept coming. Celleriant and Kallandras took to the skies to fight it.”

They all stared at her. She was once again staring into a space that held none of their faces. “They flew.”

Avandar said, “they called the wind, and it was willing to listen. It is not the same thing.”

He might as well not have spoken at all. “I couldn’t see what was happening in the skies, but after a time, the rain lessened. I think they killed whatever was at the heart of the storm.

“Margret took to the Matriarch’s wagon, and she rescued Diora. I don’t know what happened in the air, but — something did. I don’t know if Margret intended to drive the wagon into the serpent. I lost track of it; it was so hard to *see* anything. But we — ...

“The stag I rode into the Council Chambers was once the Winter King. If he’s willing to carry you, you don’t fall off. He can ride — I swear — on air. He can certainly run over the surface of water without sinking. I found Adam. He was —” she shook her head, bit her lip. “He was dead, face down in the tunnel, in the water there. I lifted him, and the Winter King carried us to where Avandar had gathered the rest of the Voyani.

“He was dead,” she continued, softly. She lifted her chin. “Evayne came, then. Evayne came — with Levec. It was a bit of shock to see him there, but the desert didn’t make his mood any worse than it usually is.”

That caused wincing and chuckling. Teller had a great deal of respect for Levec; Levec had a great deal of respect for almost no one. He guarded his healers with a ferocity that made Duvvari seem almost tame in comparison.

“Adam was dead. But he didn’t stay dead. On his own, with a power no one knew he had, he was making his way back to the living. Levec took him from his kin before he woke because Evayne brought him for that purpose. And she brought him to you. Had I the choice, it’s to you I would have sent him. If nothing else good comes of this, Adam is here.” She closed her eyes, ran hands across them, and pushed her hair aside.

“Then we traveled. There were no more storms, no more serpents. We reached the point beyond which no one but the Matriarch and her heir were allowed to go. That was hard,” she added. Jay had never been good at waiting. “Margret, her cousin Elena, and the Serra Diora, left the camp.”

“The Serra Diora?”

“I don’t understand it either; she wasn’t kin, she wasn’t Matriarch, and she wasn’t heir. Yollana boxed the ears of the only person stupid enough to ask why she was included. That person not being me,” she added. “We waited.” She hesitated, and then said, “We waited until the Winter King told me that *kialli* Lords had come.

“Then we tried to mobilize the Voyani to ride to their Matriarch’s side. Yollana forbid it.”

“Yollana wasn’t Arkosan, was she?”

“No. But...you don’t ignore that woman. Kin or no, you don’t ignore her. We waited. It felt like we waited for days. It wasn’t,” she added. “But—it was hard. None of us knew what Margret was supposed to be doing in the desert, but the Arkosans don’t ask. The Matriarch knows—in theory. Margret was damn nervous for someone who knew what she was supposed to do.

“I didn’t understand why they didn’t ask, not then. To me, the Matriarch seemed like a denleader. But I understood it later. I understood it, and I’d forget it all if I could. I’m so tired, I feel like I’m talking in circles.

“We didn’t know what Margret was supposed to do. We knew that the Serra Diara had to leave the desert and travel to Averda.”

“What happened?” Finch asked, voice soft, when Jay fell silent.

“Finch—a *city* rose. A city rose out of the earth.”

#

It was Avandar who spoke when Jay’s words faded. “When she speaks of a city, she does not mean the ruins of a city; she does not mean the remnants. A city, perhaps half the size of Averalaan, whose seven towers are taller than even the spires of the cathedrals on the Isle, rose from the sands in the Sea of Sorrows. The buildings themselves were whole; the earth left them as it had once enveloped them. The walls were sound, the gates, sound; it was a city in all ways, except for its people.

“And its people are the Arkosans, although their numbers are scant. It was one of the fabled Cities of Man, and it was built when gods walked the face of the world. It is ancient, in the truest sense of the word, but living.” His smile, as he spoke, was odd; it was—almost—tinged with wonder. Wonder was not an expression that Avandar generally showed.

“She was blessed to witness it, and blessed to survive the witnessing, but she cannot or will not put into words what it invoked.”

As if to prove the truth of his words, Jay continued, her voice dry. “The demons were driven away by the rising of the City. Arkosa itself is proof against their

incursions. But the city didn't rise without cost; the Matriarch's cousin and heir was kidnapped by a *kialli* Lord, and three of the men who traveled with the caravan died. Only one body was found; her cousin's. They buried him in the lee of the city two days after its rise.

"I wanted to leave. I'm sorry. I wanted to go. I wanted to come home, somehow. I wanted to fulfill whatever duties I had, and come home. But home wasn't in the cards yet. We didn't leave for two weeks. For *more* than two weeks."

"Jay—what you saw, what you learned in those two weeks—the Order of Knowledge would *kill* for it. For even word of it."

Jay looked like she'd bitten a lemon at the mention of the Order. "Margret sent her people out of the desert to carry word: the Arkosans in any Terrean were to return *home*. They have a word for it," she added. "I don't understand it. I don't *feel* it. What they feel for their blood-kin, I feel for my den. Home—it's not the manse. It's not these walls. It's not a *place*. It's the people *in* it." She swallowed. "And Terafin was the Terafin's." She closed her eyes tightly, and they all averted their gaze. All. Teller almost capped the ink well; he thought she'd reached the end of her strength, that she was done for the evening.

"We weren't allowed to leave; we were waiting, we were told, for a sign."

"A sign?"

"As it turned out, a man. The Radann par el'Sol, Marakas."

"Is the name significant?"

Jewel nodded. "The only version of priests the Dominion has are the Radann—and no women are part of their number. They serve the Lord of Day."

"Not a true god."

"No. They fight the Lord of Night, and if their god is a fiction, their enmity is not. The Radann came because he owed a debt to the Arkosan Voyani. Margret tasked him with protecting and delivering the Serra Diora to the last of the Leonnes. To," she added, "Valedan kai di'Leonne."

"Valedan? The hostage?"

"Yes, and the reason we could enter the war at all. She carried the Sun Sword. Only a member of the Leonne bloodline can wield it."

“Is that the truth?”

“I think so,” Jay replied. “Kallandras said that during the Festival of the Sun, the ruler of the Radann unsheathed the Sword in front of the gathered clansmen—and he was destroyed by the act. His death made the sword a potent symbol of legitimacy, and given Valedan’s spent more than half of his life in the Northern Courts, he needs it.

“But when Marakas par el’Sol arrived, it was finally time to leave. Nothing dangerous attacked us in the desert as we made our way out. Serra Diora, Serra Teresa and Yollana were ready to depart with him; Kallandras, Celleriant, Avandar and I accompanied them. The trip away from Arkosa was more peaceful than the voyage in, but...

“For the second time, I was visited in my dreams by something that took control of what I saw.”

“The Winter King?”

“No. Lord Isladar of the Shining Court—the demon who almost killed Angel and me in this city.”

#

She spoke as if that attempt was barely worth concern; it was the distant past, for Jay; she’d seen too much since it had happened. For the rest of the den it was still new, still raw; they stiffened in their seats, leaning forward into the words that she’d not yet spoken.

“He wished to give me two things: a message for Kiriell, and...a child.” When she saw the looks on their faces, she said, “No, *not* that way. He left a child by the banks of the small river.”

“There was a river in the desert?”

She nodded. “After the city rose. We followed it out, but that’s not the point: he left a child, an Annagarian child, by the banks of the river. For me. Because,” she added with a grimace, “I’m weak. I’m weak and he knew I would keep her, even if she’d been delivered to me by demons. She’s here. She doesn’t speak much, and she lost fingers to something. I don’t know where, or what, but if it was demonic, I’ll—”

She bit back the words. “Her name is Ariel. Her parents are dead. That’s almost all I know. But he was right. I couldn’t leave her. She was terrified of everyone, but she

trusted me because *he'd* told her she should. And maybe it was helpful to have her there, for me—it gave me something to worry about.”

“You weren’t worried about—”

“Something that I could both worry about and do something about. I had dreams, while we traveled.” She hesitated, and then said, “we were trying to use those dreams as guides; we didn’t have a large map with an X on it that said ‘Valedan is here’. We had glimpses of my dreams, and the attempt to glean useful geographical information from them was—”

“Frustrating,” Avandar supplied.

“Very.” She glanced at him as she spoke, as if she both wanted to say more and hated the idea that she could. Teller glanced at Avandar as well, but there was nothing out of the ordinary in his expression. Just Jay’s. “Getting the sword to the kai Leonne sounded simple; in practice, not so much. The armies—the Kings armies—came from the North. The two Northern Terreans did not ally themselves with the usurper, but one of the two hates the North with an abiding passion.

“Valedan and the Kings armies were in Averda. But Kallandras thought, for that reason, the armies of the usurper would travel to Averda, and as we were coming from the South, we might meet them. That was *not* any part of a smart plan. We chose to enter the Terrean of Mancorvo, figuring it was easier to cross the border to Averda from there. We didn’t think the usurper’s armies would attack Mancorvo first.

“But there was another reason for the choice of Terrean. I didn’t realize it, not immediately. I’ve told you I walked through the Stone Deepings to reach the Tor Leonne. If I needed to, I’d walk them again. But to reach Mancorvo we walked through—through the Dark Deepings, the edge of the Green Deepings, and you could not pay me in *any* coin to return there.

“Yollana said we would be unnoticed by the *kialli*. She was right. But the *kialli* weren’t the only thing to fear. The dead guarded that road, and they held it. The Havallan dead,” she added, “and they had only hatred for their Matriarch. I do not know what she did; I know only that when we exited that forest path, she bled from two wounds and she had lost the use of an eye. I think she thought to die there,” she added, “and she would’ve died gladly, which is why she didn’t.” She shuddered.

“We left the forest and found ourselves in the Torrean of Clemente. I asked the Winter King and Celleriant to remain there unless called; it’s hard to hide a stag and an

Immortal. We were greeted on the road by the Toran of the Tor'agar of those lands. It was an honor guard, of a type. We were taken to his domis and separated there. The Tor'agar knew the Serra Diora on sight. I thought—I thought he would have us killed, or try, and offer Diora to the usurper.

“But he wanted something from the Radann. If the Radann succeeded, he would throw his men behind the Tyr'agnate, Mareo kai di'Lamberto; if the Radann failed, he would offer Diora to Alesso di'Marente as proof of his good intentions. We were in our rooms when we were summoned to a council of war; the council did not include the Serra.

“But it included all of the others. Kallandras called Celleriant,” she added. “The usurper had sent envoys to Clemente. Alessandro's cousin had sent...reinforcements for Alessandro's army. I didn't care for the Tor'agnate, but I wouldn't have wanted to be in his position. He had demons in his domis, and demons plus a force of at least three hundred hostile men stationed in one of his villages. He wasn't willing to commit to us if both of those weren't destroyed. That was what he wanted from Marakas, because the Radann have blades that are enchanted for use against demons.

“We discussed the situation,” she added. Teller winced. Given her tone, he chose the word 'argue' instead of 'discuss' in his chronicle. “In the end, he agreed to leave the Radann within the domis; the rest of us were to travel to Damar to face demons and a small army. I think the only shock—on my part—was that he intended to lead us. He was willing to take the risk, given we numbered seven and his cousin's armed forces over three hundred, because we had come to Clemente through the Deepings. The people of his Torrean fear them. Because they're not stupid.

“We were an omen,” she added. “Alessandro's cousin, Amando, was stationed with his troops in Damar; he was not given leave to travel to Clemente. But he delivered an ultimatum, and to reply, Alessandro gathered his men. Women don't ride to war, in the Dominion. Women don't have rank, or power. I was a little out of place.”

Jester laughed. It was brief, partly because Carver kicked him.

Once again, her eyes widened, her expression shifted; she was gazing into memory. “There were seven roads into the village of Damar. Seven. They were guarded by the kin.”

They didn't ask her how she knew this.

“And there was one road that wasn't. I don't think the kin could guard it and

survive. I don't think *anyone* could guard it and be guaranteed to survive."

"And that's the road you took."

She swallowed. "Yes, damn it all. That's the road we took. It was, of course, through the Deepings."

"The ones you said you would give anything to avoid?"

"I'd give my life," she replied, meaning it. "But not theirs. Not the villagers. Not the people who had *no hope* of surviving."

Teller smiled as he wrote. She could have spoken those words at the age of twelve, fourteen, sixteen—at any age, really. That part of her hadn't changed. She'd learned to be politic, although she found it difficult, but she held tightly to the things she believed. He never wanted that to change.

"The Dark Deepings—I don't understand what they are, or why they exist. The Deepings are supposed to be ancient and wild."

"They are," Avandar said, his voice soft in a way no one liked.

"But—I saw the dead, in that forest. I—" she shook her head. "It doesn't matter." But she had looked, long and hard, at Avandar. Whatever had happened between them in the South, she didn't like it, didn't want it, and couldn't shake it. "It was the only road that would take us to the village without raising the alarms.

"Alessandro rode with a large host. But when he crossed the bridge to speak with his cousin, his cousin's allies...invoked the wild water. They called water, and the river rose like a small tidal wave; it destroyed the bridge once Alessandro had crossed it, leaving his men no way of reaching him. It stayed in place, like a moving wall. Alessandro had his oathguard. His cousin had all of his forces.

"We were met by women who were willing to take the risk of giving us that information. They were willing to trust us because I—I rode the Winter King." She closed her eyes, but continued to speak. "I don't know what Alessandro said to his cousin; I don't know what his cousin said in return. But we all heard the demons when they attacked Alessandro's forces; we heard their cries, even across the banks in the heart of Damar. I sent Kallandras and Celleriant across the river."

"But the river—you said it formed a wall."

She nodded. "But they had ways of crossing it. Not safely, but the Clemente cerdan

were being slaughtered by the demons that attacked them.