

She nodded. “But they had ways of crossing it. Not safely, but the Clemente cerdan were being slaughtered by the demons that attacked them—and the Clemente cerdan had no chance against those demons. Kallandras and Celleriant *did*.”

“I ordered Celleriant to save as many lives as he could. I think he found the order confusing.”

“I’m surprised he obeyed it.”

Jewel nodded. “So am I, if it comes to that, and grateful. No, Angel, I shouldn’t trust him, not completely. But...because of Damar, I do. Killing mortals means nothing to him. But saving them was difficult; he considers us fragile and too easily broken by trivial threats. He didn’t consider what we faced in Damar to be trivial. Had we only been fighting demons, the order to preserve and the order to kill demons would have been the same order.

“But it wasn’t, because he could, with difficulty, rein in the elemental water. I’m not sure if he did it by using the wild air—but it doesn’t matter; he certainly couldn’t kill the water or the air.”

“Fighting a flying serpent that controls torrential rain in a desert was apparently not as dangerous as trying to cross the river-wall.” She swallowed. “Kallandras attempted to break the demonic control of the wild water. He failed. It was bad.”

“He was hurt?”

“No, not him. I wasn’t worried for Kallandras.” She hesitated. “It’s not that he can’t be injured; in the fight with the serpent, he *was*. It’s—I’m never afraid that he’ll die. I don’t worry about what happens when he’s not where I can see him. If anyone’s left standing at the end of a battle, he’ll be among them.

“The water that had formed a wall between the two banks of the river...stopped being a wall. It was--the Winter King said the wild element was enraged. It broke into columns, and they reached for land. They drowned men just by encasing them; they crushed them by falling. No one could fight in safety near either bank.” She fell silent. “Alessandro said I had never been on a battlefield while we were discussing strategy before we left his city.

“I’d seen battles before. I was in the Terafin foyer when a bloody god destroyed half of it. It was wall-to-wall corpses in the shadows. I remember it. I thought Damar would be like that. I didn’t care for the Tor’agar. It galled me to be so wrong. Horses scream,”

she added, her voice dropping. "And men. Men scream.

"There were more than seven demons. Seven that had guarded the roads attacked the Clemente forces, scattering and slaughtering the cerdan while their Lord fought for his life on the other side of the river. But the three on our side of the river were more powerful."

"Ten? There were *ten*?"

"I think there were twelve, in total. I think two were destroyed in Sarel, while we were fighting in Damar."

"Jay--"

"It's serious," she said. "Cities, demons, gods--I don't know why they bother with mortal soldiers at all; I don't know why they bother with armies and politics and pretense." She laughed. It was shaky. "But they do. And it means--it must mean--they're not certain yet, they're not ready. There something we can do. It's just so hard to see *what*, sometimes.

"I really wanted to be home. But I was afraid somehow I'd bring it with me. I still am."

There, Teller thought, it was said. "It's going to come anyway," he told her quietly. "And we'd rather have you here."

She looked across the table to Avandar. He said nothing, but she held his gaze for a beat too long before she looked away. "Avandar joined the battle," she said, her voice too light, too forced. "And he tipped the balance. He--he built a bridge across the river that divided us. The Winter King--with me still on his back--leapt across the river, avoiding the columns; he killed two of the lesser demons. His tines," she added, "are like a tree of swords, I swear.

"And we managed to hold on. If you can call that much injury and that much death winning, we won." She swallowed. "We won the first battle. But the forces of Ser Amando were divided; we defeated the men within Damar while the rest of the opposing cerdan that waited outside formed up and circled around." She closed her eyes again. Took two deep breaths. Eyes still closed, she said, "I hate it."

Avandar surprised them all: he left his post by the door, crossed the room, and placed a hand on her shoulder. Jay didn't even startle. "Jewel."

She opened here yes; they were red, but she was not openly weeping.

“Had you desired it, we could have lessened our losses.”

“No. We could have lessened Alessandro’s losses. I wasn’t willing to pay the price for that.”

“There may come a time when that is our only option.”

“Is it always going to be like this?” She asked it of Avandar. “Is it always going to be a choice between two different losses?”

“Not always. But not never.” He glanced at Teller. Averalaaan is not what the ancient cities were. It is not even close. If the Lord of the Hells walks past the demi-walls, he will destroy all but the Isle without effort. What will you sacrifice to prevent that?”

“It won’t be my decision.” Her words were so stark. “It’ll be up to the Kings.” She swallowed, straightening. Avandar’s hand was slow to leave her shoulder. “We were outnumbered. Celleriant had reached the end of his power in the struggle to contain the water and the wild air. That’s what he said,” she added, voice sinking. “But between Kallandras and Celleriant, we held the bridge. It was narrow. Celleriant fought standing on the rails,” she added, “and when he was overwhelmed, he’d jump off and return. The cerdan caught anyone who managed to make it past—but we weren’t going to be able to hold on two fronts, and the rest of Amando’s men were headed for the roads at our back.

“Alessandro was right: I’d never been on a battlefield before. But even I knew we couldn’t hold two fronts. We’d lost too many men, and in numbers, we were never Amando’s equals. I thought—” she shook her head. “I heard the horns. While we were fighting, while we were thinking out our last stand, I heard horns.

“The Tor’agar heard them as well. I watched him,” she added. “It wasn’t until they sounded for the second time that he—that he lifted his own horn. He turned toward the road, and as he did, I saw them. I don’t know most of the Southern standards. But I knew this one when it was unfurled. We were fighting in the Terrean of Mancorvo, in the lands ruled by Clemente. The standard featured the sun ascendant, with eight distinct rays.”

Teller glanced at Finch. Finch said, “Lamberto.”

“Lamberto,” Jewel replied. “I didn’t recognize it immediately. I didn’t understand

how the use the sun to define rank.”

“He’s not known for his love of Northerners.”

“He’s known for his raging hatred of all things Northern. But—Marakas par el’Sol rode at his side, and he rode to stand by ours. Well, by the Tor’agar of Clemente’s. I’m not sure he acknowledged our existence at all before, during, or after the battle. Given his other options, that was probably for the best. But—when they Clemente cerdan realized that Mareo kai di’Lamberto was *on* the field, for their Tor, it gave them something—hope, certainly, but...strength. He was a man.

“He was a man who clearly found us disgusting. But—a man. Not talent-born, that I could see. But he was a symbol. The cerdan shouted his clan’s name. They whispered his *horse’s* name. It changed the battle on our side—and it certainly demoralized our enemies.

“The Tor’agar, Alessandro, was injured. His cousin was dead—at his hands. The demons were destroyed. We returned to Sarel in triumph.” She flinched.

They watched her as if she were a bard. “You remember,” she said softly, “that Henden?”

No one could forget the Henden of 410. No one.

“There were bodies everywhere. The earth was broken in places; some of the corpses were wedged in the ground. Men had drowned. Men had lost limbs, or worse. Some were alive, but they didn’t make it to Sarel. They knew we’d won. They knew. But they knew they weren’t going home. When it was clear that Ser Amando’s forces had fully retreated, they had to clear the dead.

“Alessandro called on the villagers then, and they came. They carried torches, they spoke to each other—but they didn’t speak a word to any of us. The kai Lamberto terrified them; he withdrew. His cerdan went ahead down the roads, as scouts, while the villagers worked to help gather the wounded. And the dead.

“It didn’t feel like triumph, to me. It was like the foyer the year we came to Terafain: so many dead. Triumph just meant none of the dead were mine.” She lifted her chin. Avandar stepped away, but he didn’t return to the wall that practically had his name written on it; he stood behind her, his arms by his side, looking down at the mass of her unruly, familiar hair. “They expect it,” she said, voice soft. “The Tors and the Tyrs. They expect the deaths. They surrender villages—or take them—knowing they’ll lose

men or citizens.

“I found it really hard. I know it’s war. I know the theory. I know people die, and how. But it’s different, to see it this way; these men have made the deaths *so* impersonal it’s a wonder there aren’t more of them. Deaths, I mean.”

Teller shook his head, and glanced at Angel, who winced, but remained silent. “It’s different,” Teller said quietly, “because you were there.”

“Seeing it’s not the same,” she agreed.

“It’s not the seeing, Jay. It’s seeing it and being able to *do nothing*. You don’t expect to be able to change it from behind a Terafin desk. It’s not happening in front of your face; it’s not in reach of you. But there, it is. And if you’re there, you always think there’s something you could, or should, be doing.”

“If we all did something, it wouldn’t be this bad, would it?”

Avandar winced behind her back, which was more expression than he usually showed. Finch reached across the table and caught one of Jay’s hands in her own. She said nothing, but after a moment, Jewel grimaced and nodded, retrieving her hand.

“Mareo kai di’Lamberto lost his son in the previous war between the Empire and the Dominion. His oldest son. He’s known across the Dominion for his sense of honor and duty. Lamberto is *not* a man who willingly cooperates with any Northerners. He knew Serra Diora was in Sarel. I think he could guess why. Alesso kept his end of our deal: he told the Tyr’agnate—the man he owes fealty to—that he intended to see the Serra Diora to her chosen destination.

“And her destination was Valedan, the boy Tyr raised in Northern courts. Lamberto made no immediate decision, so there was some tension; Alessandro made it publicly clear that Clemente’s honor was on the line. He’d lost so many men in Damar, he had *no hope* of standing against the kai Lamberto if the kai Lamberto chose to imprison or retain the Serra. Everyone knew it. Maybe he wouldn’t have made so public a stand if he weren’t dealing with Lamberto. I told you I didn’t care for Alessandro kai di’Clemente. I didn’t. But...I respected him.

“The situation was...dicey. But in the end, Mareo kai di’Lamberto chose to aid the Serra rather than imprison her. He hates the Northerners. The people of Damar, of Sarel—there’s not much they wouldn’t have done for us. Lamberto knew what we’d done in Damar, but he could only barely bring himself to acknowledge our existence.

We were from the North. Valedan travels with the Kings' Armies—the armies responsible for the death of his son. But the usurper employs the servants of the Lord of Night, which is worse.

“I'm not sure it was worse by *much*. But by enough. We traveled with the Lambertans, which made passage through Mancorvo much less complicated. The passage through Averda was...more complicated. Callesta and Lamberto have been at war since the end of the previous war between the Dominion and the Empire; it's mostly been border skirmishes.” She laughed. It was not a happy sound. “Mareo kai di'Lamberto took the Callestan villages we passed through. This wasn't a border skirmish; he'd entered Callesta with thousands of men.

“It was hard. They have rules for *everything*. How low you bow, how long you hold it for, how much you're allowed to say—if you're allowed to speak at all. Women are expected to wait upon permission *to* speak. The only women who seem to have any freedom at all are the Voyani, and that's mostly because they're terrifying. I tried very hard not to offend him, but we did have a few...discussions...about the people of in those villages.

“And during the long march through the Terrean, Serra Diora was almost invisible. We weren't certain where Valedan and the armies were; Mareo was. And he took us to the armies.”

“I knew when we'd reached our destination because Mareo kai di'Lamberto gave orders to camp. And I knew, while I waited, what I'd come—for the Serra's sake—to do: to see her to Valedan. To escort her *to* Valedan. Not more, not less. All the demons, the risen city, the serpent of the storm, the firstborn—all of it, to escort a mortal woman to a mortal man.” She shook her head. “The Southerners all ride. I rode the Winter King.

“Kallandras and Celleriant were with me when the Serra Diora, her aunt the Serra Teresa, and Yollana of the Havalla Voyani began to walk the road up to slope of the hill toward where the Tyrs were meeting face to face for the first time in possibly a decade. The Commanders were there,” she added, “and with them, the magi. Meralonne was there.”

She glanced at Avandar again. Teller wondered, again, what had passed between them in the months in the south, but didn't ask. “We didn't have to kill anyone. I wasn't certain we wouldn't have to,” her voice was softer now. She'd been speaking for well over an hour, possibly two; Avandar had brought water, but she hadn't touched hers.

“But we lead. No, that’s not the right word. We escorted them. Her. From the front.

“She carried a sword,” Jewel added. “She wore the most beautiful dress I’d ever seen. It wasn’t a dress for the road. I have no idea how or why she’d carried it with her —I wouldn’t have said it was possible, but it doesn’t matter: it was white, with a long train; she wore jade and gold and...she looked like a princess. Like the ideal of a princess. The sword didn’t suit her —and yet, at the same time, it did.

“She carried it to Valedan, and she walked slowly; I don’t think anyone spoke as she approached. They were all staring at her, and no wonder. I almost felt sorry for Valedan,” she added, with a wry smile. “He’s young. He stood there with his mouth half-open and his eyes the size of small fists.

“But the Tyrs —the two men who defined Averda and Mancorve —they didn’t gape. They watched her as intently as he did, but...they drew their swords, and they held them, edge out, parallel to their chests. They didn’t say a word. They didn’t nod or bow, that I could see: just held out the swords as if they were saluting her. I watched a lot of saluting, bowing and scraping on the trek through Mancorve and Averda to Valedan —but I didn’t see anything remotely close to that.”

“They paid her the respect she was due, in the South,” Avandar said softly. “She was not, and could not be, a warrior; she could not be the Lord’s man. But what she had achieved by bringing the sword to its bearer, no man could have achieved.”

Jewel nodded. “When she reached Valedan, she knelt, holding the scabbard before her. There, she told him that she was Diora en’Leonne. You could hear breath being held, I swear. And he took the sword she offered, and —he drew it. He drew it from the scabbard and it blazed; it was like the sun caught in steel.”

She pushed herself up from the table. No one followed; Avandar took a step back as she began to pace along an invisible line, hands behind her back, head bowed and shadowed.

“It was their moment of triumph,” she said, in the softest of voices she’d yet used. “I wanted —for just a minute —to enjoy it. But I—”

She turned to them, far enough from the lamp that her expression was muted. It was a kindness. Finch looked away. Teller, however, did not. “I knew. I *knew*. I sent Avander to find Celleriant just before Morretz arrived. He appeared without warning in the middle of the encampment.” Her gaze went to ceiling as she lifted her chin. “Meralonne —Meralonne reached him before I did. Meralonne identified him before

the Commanders could have him killed or imprisoned as an intruder.

“He carried him. He *had* to carry him. Morretz—” Silence for a long moment. She struggled to master her voice. “He couldn’t stand. He didn’t have the strength to stand. He barely had the strength to speak. I—I ran to him. I ran to his side.” She looked down, then, and met Teller’s steady gaze. “He was dying. He was—” She inhaled deeply. “He’s always had his magic. He’s used it, in her defense. I don’t think a *domicis* without magic could have served her.

“But there are only two mages I know who can do what he did without dying. I’m not a mage, and if I knew it, *he* knew it. He died to reach me,” she whispered. “He summoned me home. When Celleriant arrived, he gave Morretz to Celleriant, and he told me—he told me that he had, in his position, a legal writ from the Kings seconding my services to the army. He left to retrieve it.

“Avandar came with Ariel; I’d forgotten her. I’d forgotten everything but the Terafin. Morretz. I wanted—” She shook her head.

“Avandar brought us home.”

Teller’s hand froze in mid-word. “Avandar?”

She nodded.

“Avandar brought you *all* here?”

She nodded again. All of the den looked to Avandar, aware, utterly aware, that the transport of one person—himself—had killed Morretz.

“And then we were in the gallery,” she continued, “and racing down the hall to the Council Chamber.” She closed her eyes. Tears fell, as far from the lamps as they could. She did not sob or weep; she ignored them. “And it didn’t matter. We arrived as the demon attacked, and the Terafin died.

“She died. I wasn’t here—” she lifted a hand as Finch rose; her fingers fumbled over stiff den-sign. “I’m sorry.”

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“Jewel.” Avandar did not touch her; did not approach her. “It is late. Tomorrow, the House Council will be called. It is time, I think, to retire.”

She looked at her den, still seated around the kitchen table. “I’m not leaving again,”

she told them, voice low.

“If it’s a choice between leaving and dying,” Angel said, rising, “we’ll live with the leaving.” He didn’t tell her they didn’t blame her; the concern was beneath him. “But not happily. Avandar’s right. Sleep, if you can. There won’t be time in the morning; you could be dead on your feet and they’d carry you and drop you in your Council chair.” He walked to the door, opened it, and held it, waiting.

After a long moment, she nodded and made her way to the door. Teller wanted to say something, but words wouldn’t reach her; not yet. Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow.

But tomorrow the Terafin would still be dead.

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