

The End of Days is almost upon them, and in the Sea of Sorrows the Voyani and their allies must face the consequences of an ancient pledge....

SEA OF SORROWS

The Sun Sword: Book Four

Michelle West



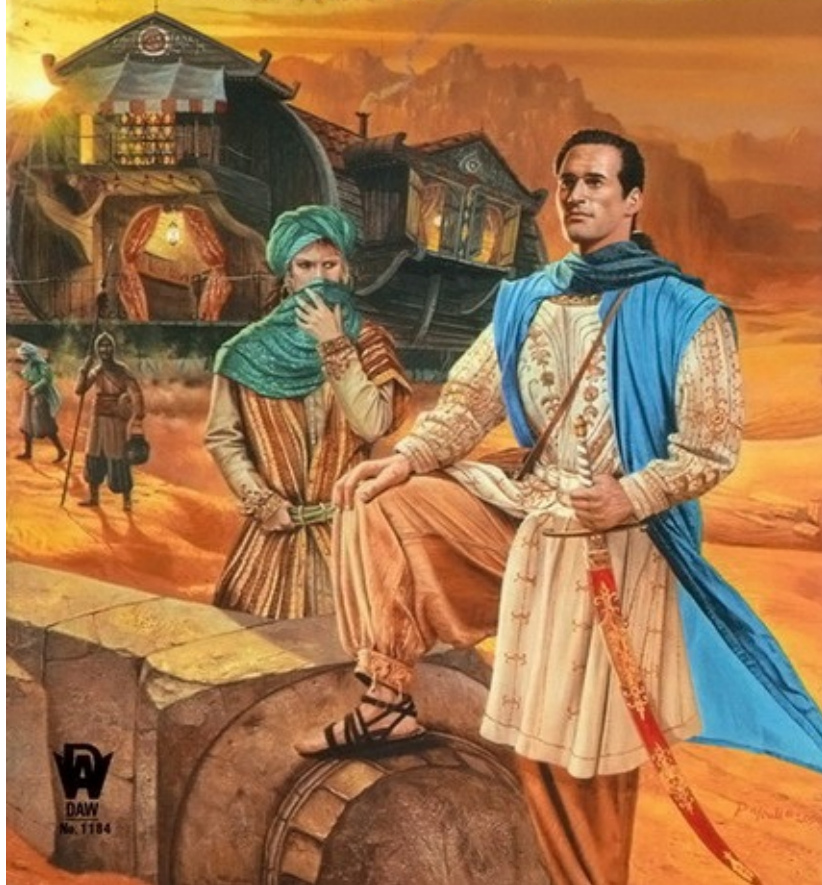
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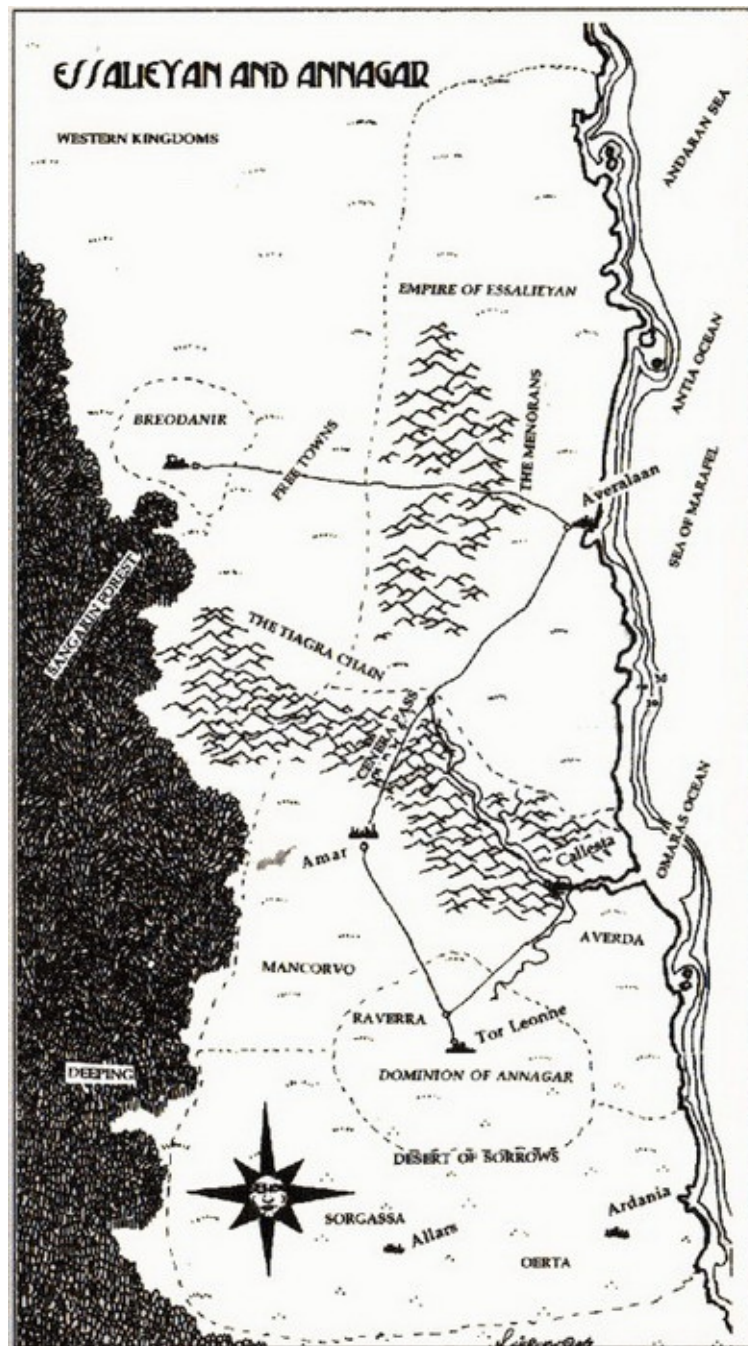
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The Voyani

In the Voyani clans, the men will often use their name and their clan's name as identifiers (i.e. Nicu would be Nicu of the Arkosan Voyani or Nicu Arkosa.)

ARKOSA

Evallen of the Arkosa Voyani—The woman who ruled the Voyani clan. She is/was seerborn. Dark-haired, dark-eyed; died at Diora's hand, a mercy killing.

Margret of the Arkosa Voyani—The new, untested Matriarch of the Arkosan Voyani. Dark-haired and dark-eyed like her mother; she is not seerborn.

Adam—Evallen's boy, the light of her life, and much indulged. Charming, easily charmed, he is *also* very perceptive, very sharp of wit; he keeps it to himself, for the most part.

Nicu—Bearded, broad shouldered; cousin in his early twenties. Son of Evallen's cousin. Looks older.

Carmello—Darker in coloring than Nicu, dark-haired, dark-eyed, one year his senior. They're friends sword-mates.

Andreas—Shorter than either Nicu or Carmello, but dark as the Voyani are dark; stocky and barrel-chested; one of Carmello's and Nicu's supporters.

Donatella—Nicu's mother. Evallen's cousin once removed; Margret (and Elena's) second cousin.

Stavos—Margret's uncle, much loved and crusty; gray beard, broad belly, laughs like a bear.

Tatia—Stavos' wife. Wide as well, but hardened by the sun and wind. Hair gray and long, eyes cutting and dark.

Elena—Margret's cousin; the heir to the Matriarchy should Margret perish without a daughter. They are both close and rivals, Margret and Elena, and it is Elena that Nicu loves. Elena is a firebrand in most senses of the word; her hair is auburn red, her skin sun-bronzed, her eyes brown with green highlights.

Tamara—Margret's aunt. Bent at the back, older in appearance than her older (and now dead) sister, she is Margret's support and strength, although she nags rather a lot. Closer than kin. She is Elena's mother.

HAVALLA

Yollana of the Havalla Voyani—Peppered, dark curls, almost black eyes. She is in her forties, healthy wiry.

CORRONA

Elsarre of the Corrona Voyani—Long, straight hair, dark with streaks of white. She was, until the death of Evallen, the youngest of the matriarchs at the age of 36.

Dani—Slender, of medium height. His hair is long, thick and is always pulled back in a single braid. His beard is small, his face long, his eyes (as most Voyani eyes) are dark. He is Elsarre's Shadow; Elsarre has no brothers, and no cousins she chooses to trust with her life.

LYSERRA

Maria of the Lyserra Voyani—Hair white as northern snow, eyes blue as Lord's sky, she is slender and silent much of the time. She has the grace of gesture Serra Teresa possesses, and for this reason is less trusted than the other Matriarchs. Her husband is the kai of the clan Jedera; *Ser Tallos kai di'Jedera*. They have four children:

Mika—Mika is broad-shouldered, dark-haired, dark-eyed as all clansmen; clean-shaven, as the Voyani are not.

Jonni—Jonni is quiet; large-eyed, clear-skinned; he wears a beard.

Aviana—The Matriarch's heir; she shelters with, and lives with her mother's kin in preparation for her eventual role. She loves her brothers fiercely, even if they are of the clans.

Lorra—The family baby. Beautiful, but fair-skinned, she lives with her sister, and her mother's people.

PROLOGUE

I.

6th of Scaral, 427 AA

Averalaan Aramarelas, the Common

They were gone.

He had lost them.

His memory was perfect, precise; it was his comprehension that was flawed. He had seen them, standing beneath the splintered bower of fallen trees, framed on one side by the shattered street, and on the other by the buildings that, thin as dry wood, had failed to stand against the least direct of the magical attacks the *Kialli* brought to bear. Behind them lay bodies; ahead, bodies as well. None of the fallen were *Kialli*.

He had seen the expression transform the Warlord's face as the pathetic demeanor of mortality fell away; had experienced the sharp anticipation that comes before battle. He had even seen the signature of ancient power as it cut across the pale insignificance of unadorned day—the mark of the Warlord's magic.

What had happened?

Between that moment and this, the Warlord had glanced at the only mortal left standing in the square—an insignificant mortal woman—and then, between the falling of a stall and the rising of the earth, he had vanished.

The Warlord did not flee battle. He left the field—if he so chose—when he had broken the forces of his enemies; when they fled, or fell. He left the field when the field had no suitable challenge to offer when, among the fallen, the bodies of the *Kialli* could be counted before they were claimed by the elements. Or, on one or two occasions, he left the field when he destroyed it.

But he *had* fled.

A power such as his could not be concealed with ease if there were witnesses. Verdazan was not a seeker. Seekers were like mortal dogs—with the single exception of Lord Ishavriel, a lord Verdazan neither served nor crossed. But there was a seeker present. Verdazan growled his name, and he appeared, hands red with blood, eyes glistening.

"What have you been doing, you fool?"

"Hunting," the creature replied, all ability to dissemble gone.

"Hunt later. There is work for you to do."

"Hunt *later*." Black eyes were clear as day as Verdazan met them; the words were a hiss, like water

spread thinly over an unbanked flame. "When would that *later* be? The Lord has forbidden us all hunting; he has forbidden us all reaving. It is only when he feeds himself that we are permitted to see what we cannot touch."

"And do you intend to live here, hunting? You will not live long. Either they will kill you—"

"*These?*"

"Or the Lord will."

But the light in *Kialli* eyes was there to stay. Verdazan knew that there was only one way to quench the flame. "Where is the Warlord?"

"The Warlord?"

"**Sargathan**," the *Kialli* lord growled, as another of the kin swept the roof off a quaint, fragile building.

Sargathan froze. His hands came up, curled into slender, slick fists. "L-lord." Dry word. Dry sound. He struggled against the binding of his name. Had he not been necessary, Verdazan would have killed him instantly for the insult.

And yet...

And yet, beyond them both, roof having been peeled from a nearby insubstantial building, the occupants were riven from their illusion of safety, and then from the illusion of life in all its brief and fierce vibrancy. Their screams were short and sweet. Too short. And too sweet by far. Had it been that long?

No. Surely not. They had lived in the Hells for millennia; they had lived on the surface of the world for mere decades. The world could not exert so strong an influence that the *Kialli* themselves could be driven like hungry, lumbering beasts to feed at random, to feed in the heart of their enemies' stronghold.

"*Where is the Warlord?*"

Sargathan's lips pulled back slowly, as if the skin were being shed, to reveal teeth the length of his hands. Battle, like storm, was building in the air; in the crackle of electricity gathered but not yet released. He wanted it.

He wanted what the others wanted.

Instead he forced himself to listen to Sargathan's reply. "The Warlord is... gone."

"Gone? Gone *where?*"

Sargathan's laugh was bitter, but the madness had momentarily left it. "Where does the Warlord go when he tires of battle? If any of the seekers in the history of our Lord's War could have answered the question, he would be ours now. Or dead."

"The legends say he cannot be killed."

"Yes. And when his god existed, perhaps they were even true." The teeth and lips blended in smile.
"Verdazan..."

A request. There were too many mortals here; too many *Kialli*. And no battle; no battle to sustain them.

"Our enemies will come."

"Yes."

"But your presence here has already been noted. Yes. Go."

The wild music was in the air. The smell of blood, the sharp tang of old wood that, when snapped, released the hidden scent of its pale center. Stone, dust, the fruits of the mortal market. And the trees towering, ancient.

The trees.

He smiled. Gave himself to the fight, or to the fight he thought might follow. There were so few mortals with power, and to that handful, word would travel slowly.

6th of Scaral, 427 AA

Averalaaan Aramarelas, Order of Knowledge

The city was burning.

Across the narrow stretch of bay, broken only by slender bridge, booth, and the guards chosen by the Kings' deputies, black smoke scudded like angry cloud through a flawless sky. Averalaaan in winter.

Light glinted off his silvered hair; he stood in the stillness above water and wave, a living statue, pale and clothed in the drab colors of the Order. He almost turned away from what he saw, but he found that he could not; the tower that contained him had a balcony of stone, and the stone rails had become attached to his hand in such a way that he was forced to bear witness.

He heard the screaming.

Meralonne APhaniel, member of the Order of Knowledge, had heard so many screams in his life they did not affect him as they did others; they were but some of many sounds, and each told its own story. But when the first of the ancient trees fell, motion returned to the tower.

Sigurne Mellifas stood in the parting of door and frame, her pale hair drawn back in a way that made her face reveal the truth that few accepted: she was aged, polite, politic— and ruthless in pursuit of

her chosen goals. Her principles were among those valued goals. Were they not, many men would lie dead who might present a danger to her. He was keenly aware that he was one. The awareness made him prize her more highly, not less, and he wondered, as he often did, why beauty was defined as youth in the eyes of so many. She was beautiful, scarred as she was by experience.

She was also angry.

His hand left the rail. He bowed, aware of the mollifying effect of manners.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out before you departed?"

He raised a brow. Then he turned briefly to the cloudless sky. She did not look at the fire that burned in the heart of the Common.

"No, Sigurne. You would never disappoint me in such a fashion."

"When you offer flattery in that grave a voice, I know I won't be happy with what you intend. You have summoned—your students."

"Yes."

She was silent.

"Understand that they share two traits. For the mageborn, they are young."

"And powerful," she said softly. Only Sigurne could make those words an accusation.

"We face old enemies, and we are older ourselves; we must train the next generation," he said, surprising himself by the softness of his tone. "And while we have never spoken openly of it, you know better than any what the extent of that danger is; what the cost of failure will be."

"I know better than any save yourself."

"Save perhaps myself; I am less certain that it is your knowledge that is the inferior. But we speak of the city, Sigurne."

"Yes."

"And if we are to prove our ability to wage this war, if we are indeed to stand against the *Kialli*, and the return of even worse danger, we must be prepared to wield power. We were not always so weak a people. The power is there if we are willing to use it." An old, old argument. No matter what their intent, they returned to it; it lay at the heart both of who they had once been and what it had made them.

"And at what cost? Were it not for the ambition of 'men of power', I am almost certain we would not need to train the young to death and death's arts."

"It is not to death's art that I train them," he said softly. "Men were the only mortal creatures who stood unbowed in the face of the gods, when they walked these lands. We have forgotten," he added

quietly, "but the potential still resides within us."

"You will turn them into weapons."

"I will turn them into men who are *capable* of wielding true weapons. It is not the same."

"And when we stood against the gods in these lands, when we stood shoulder to shoulder with the wild and ancient powers, what were we, Meralonne?" Her eyes were wide, unblinking, but the shadows cast by the door's frame robbed them of color. "Did the Twin Kings stand as well? Did they demand justice for those too weak, or too insignificant, to be counted among the great?"

His smile was brittle. He did not answer.

"I would not see them turned from the path the Twin Kings have carved for the Empire. I will not see them judge worth by power alone. They *have* power, but I do not wish them to become that power, and nothing more."

"Then make a spell, Sigurne Mellifas, that will somehow ascertain ambition at birth and kill all those who possess it."

She did not move or flinch at the heat of his tone, and the anger deserted him. He was left with the knowledge that truth, like an oily merchant, had two faces, two edges. "But understand that some ambitions are born of fire." The streets were now burning with the fire of which he spoke. "What is forged in that fire will endure in a way that youthful intention seldom does. These men are not boys, Sigurne. They are not born of the streets; they have never struggled for their own survival above all else. That much you have taught them. And I..." His smile was odd, almost devoid of amusement. "Against my better judgment, I have chosen to uphold what *you* value."

"What I value, Member APhaniel? Surely you mean what *we* value."

"Indeed."

Her gaze broke. "I would not have chosen this life."

He understood exactly what she meant. "No one chooses the course of their life. You have risen from painful obscurity to the mastery of the First Circle of the Magi, yet I believe that if you had more faith in the competence of the Council of the Magi, you would return to obscurity. That is the miracle of you. Yet you have lived the life that you did not choose well, regardless." He raised his head to look beyond her shoulder. "They come."

She listened for the sound of footsteps; they were both distant and heavy. There was no mistaking their direction. "Have you ever questioned the value of what you've built?"

"I rarely question my decisions, once made."

She said, "They will die."

"Not all of them."

The first of the warrior-adepts came through the open arch. He marched past Sigurne Mellifas, hesitation marring the timing of his very military step. It was clear that he knew who she was; clear also that he knew that paying the respect due her station would compromise the efficiency of the unit's arrival; the tower was not designed for the comfortable gathering of large numbers of men. It had been one of the qualities Meralonne valued in a residence, and he was certain, circumstance aside, that it was a quality that he would continue to value.

The fledgling group of warrior-adepts assembled on this balcony would be winnowed; some would survive this first flight, and some would falter and perish.

In minutes.

Another tree fell.

"I have summoned you here," Meralonne said, into a calm he forced from the wind, "to fulfill your oath. Your sworn duty is to use the gifts granted you by the gods in defense of those less privileged. Across the bay, in the old city proper, the enemy waits, unaware of your existence. They destroy with ease those they feel cannot fight back.

"You have practiced and trained for this day; prove them wrong."

He turned his back, his simply robed back, upon them and lifted his arms. The men he had called students were silent, but one breath, short and sharp, was drawn; he did not look back; he knew whose. The elbows of his sleeves rippled; the edges of his cloak skittered above the stones. His hair was braided, but strands framed his face and rose, as if he had summoned lightning, and waited merely for its strike.

No lightning came.

Instead, infinitely more subtle, more dangerous, the elemental air, the wild wind.

"We cannot walk," he said, and added dryly, "and there are no horses within the Order's grounds that would carry us into that danger."

The few who had come from patrician homes chuckled. He let that noise ease those who had not before he spoke again.

"I have been your master and your teacher; I know your measure. I trust it. Now, I must ask a single question. You will know how to answer it.

"Do you trust me?" Without looking back, Meralonne APhaniel stepped up, onto the balcony's railing. The wind swept him off.

Now he heard their voices, the words muted and merged into a single noise. As they understood what they saw, the current driving those murmurs changed. Meralonne APhaniel stood, buffeted and untouched, a hundred feet—more—above the ground.

"Join me," he said.

They paused.

A hundred years ago, a thousand, in lands held by different men, that hesitation would have been their death. But he expected it; he waited, refusing to turn toward them; refusing to see their indecision. He was not so kind a teacher that it would not have angered him or insulted him; the words were not, and could not be construed as, request.

Gyrrick reached the rail first. The wind carried the familiar sound of his step, coveting the momentary silence of drawn and held breath that was particular to Gyrrick. He was the boldest of the students, but also the man who best understood consequences: seldom did such an alliance of traits sit so easily in one person. His hair was short; Meralonne suffered no man the foolish grace of lengthy hair save himself. His shoulders, though slender, were strong, and his jaw was not weak; he was attractive in the way that men who wield power as if it were breath so often are; naturally, without artifice.

He stepped into air, and the air held him.

There were two approaches to training men such as these; the first was to break their natural leader and replace him; the second, to co-opt that leader, to become that leader's lord. He had chosen the latter course, the former being almost certain to draw Sigurne's wrath, but he was surprised at how well it had worked. It took more patience than the first option; it left one vulnerable.

After Gyrrick, they followed. He counted them by the scrambling uncertainty of their steps.

Twenty-four.

Twenty-four men.

He turned only when the balcony was as it should be: occupied by one. He knelt, although the wind was howling in outrage at the burden he had placed upon it. "Magi," he said. "We are at your disposal."

What the students had not granted, the master did, in their full view: respect for the authority Sigurne Mellifas had chosen to accept; acknowledgment that she was the guild's ruler, inasmuch as an Order made of quirky men and women could have one.

She surveyed them all, the bowed man and his students. Then she nodded, grimly, accepting what he offered—both halves, the adepts and his respect—as the necessities they were. "Save our city," she said, her voice carrying without interference over the wind's current. "Only you can."

The words carried them, and they rose, the wind gathering behind and beneath them like a wild horse that would only—barely—tolerate what had been set upon its back.

Look, look there—the magi told it, and the wind, in fury, did as bid.

The wind saw *fire*.

Everything has its natural enemy.

Fire, earth, water, and air. Burn the world, bury it, drown it, tear it to pieces; each, in its natural

dominion.

The common wisdom—in this tame world where wilderness was a dream's dream, buried so far beneath mortal knowledge it never came to light—pitted fire against water, and earth against air. But it was not so: they were, each of the four, powers, and in any world, only one power could claim dominance.

Torn between rage at the indignity of being a beast of burden and rage at the indignity of the presence of its natural enemy, the wind balanced a moment before turning, like a great dragon, to make its way toward the Common where the hearts of trees were cracking.

Gyrrick could not speak; he could barely breathe. But the difficulty of gasping for breath did not bother him in any visible fashion. Following his first step into the insubstantial air from the height of a tower he might one day hope to occupy, he readied himself for his second. Meralonne expected no less... but he was old enough now that the fulfillment of expectation was its own peculiar joy. The mage rode the wind, inches above the ground; the students tumbled into the streets like flotsam carried by unnatural tide. They would right themselves, or they would not.

It had become immaterial.

The last thing the mage was peripherally aware of before he drew his blade and spoke its name to the wind was Gyrrick's long shadow across the broken ground.

That and the enemies who turned, as a single creature, to face blue fire and elemental air.

"They told us," one said, rising as if ground were illusion, "that you were here." Red fire seeped out of his fingertips in lazy circles, becoming brighter and darker as Meralonne approached. "But I hardly credited the reports as truth. I did call your name when I arrived, but perhaps you failed to hear it."

"Perhaps I considered it inconsequential."

"Judge, then," the creature replied, its lips spreading in a smile that split its slender face.

"You did not come here for me."

"No. You are considered less of a concern than the Warlord." Fire became sword; sword became the symbol of all battles, past and present. This battle would become one of many to the victor. The loser would become memory.

But he wanted the experience that would form that memory, be it insignificant or not. Because this creature was a creature he understood. He asked for no quarter; he offered none. He had spent his existence fighting for survival and supremacy, and clearer proof of his success could not be found than this: his sword was his own. Red light and fire, grace and death.

The clarity of combat was a joy Meralonne APhaniel had dutifully ordered his students to be wary of seeking. Proof, if needed, that observation was a substitute for personal experience in the classroom—and only there.

Sigurne's face wore the shadows well. She took comfort in them.

The city was burning.

She watched in silence as the light and the fire of Meralonne's students burned themselves into the unblinking field of her vision. The men who lay dead in the Common had done the demons no harm.

She wondered how many of her own would join them.

The demons were fast.

The mages expected speed. They had not been given leave to summon demons in order to hone their craft—

Sigurne would have had them all killed had they attempted it, and if rumors were true, slowly—and what they had been left to study did no justice to the truth of this first meeting.

But Meralonne had taught them. No summoned enemy? It mattered little. Their lack of knowledge was matched only by their pathetic skill. Had Sigurne taken sudden leave of her senses—or come into them, depending on who one asked—and allowed them the use of demonology, they would all be dead. Sigurne aside, they would all be dead when they eventually encountered the enemy in something other than song, story, or faded, crumbling book, and *that* would be an embarrassment that he would not tolerate; it had been costly to gain the Council's permission to create their small division within the Order's more peaceful fold.

Therefore, they would *learn*. And as there were no demons, they would have to content themselves with facing something superior: the master himself. Meralonne APhaniel made it clear that he would stop short of killing them. They discovered that he didn't differentiate between "short" and "just short"; the healers grew fat the first year.

Gyrrick had learned the hard way—they all had, and Meralonne was not a kind master—not to close with the magi. He bore three scars, one of which earned Meralonne the dubious distinction of being the first member of the Council of the Magi to be suspended in over a century.

But more important, that scar had taught them clearly— what Gyrrick learned, the rest learned—that to close with the master was death. Their reflexes always paled in comparison. They needed a stretch of ground—or air—in which to react to his power; to diminish that distance in any way led to injury. In the classroom.

Here, it was death.

And when will we be good enough? When can we stand and fight?

Not in this decade, Gyrrick.

And the Kialli?

You are skilled enough now that you should know on sight who presents a threat... and who is certain death. I am not Magi Mellifas; it is not my intent to rob you of the battles you can win. But my tenure within the Order depends on your ability to gauge danger and survive it. If I had discovered you as a child...

Gyrrick's hands trembled as he raised them.

The demons were closing, and not all of them were bound—as Gyrrick and his men were—to earth.

He barked out orders, reminding his men that distance was—for the moment—their best defense. But it was only that: defense. All of the stories that he had studied became fodder for children. He gazed upon the enemy, upon their numbers, upon the damage they had casually done to the Common, and he knew that what the master had taught—what had *never* been tested—would either save or damn them.

But his hands were shaking.

Hold any other weapon, he heard the master say, and you will perish if you close with the enemy. Do you understand? You do not have the fire, cold or hot, to best the Kialli in direct conflict. But in your long history—much of it forgotten—you had the power. And you still have it, if you are willing to take the risk of using it.

What risk?

Here, the sound of demons keening like rabid dogs, their language high and sharp and piercing as the wind rushed in like air filling vacuum, the master's answer returned.

Of death, of course.

Gyrrick had fought demons before. But not many, and not *Kialli*. The master had said he would know the difference, and as always, he had been correct. They were closing.

He could not afford to let them close unhindered.

Why do you not teach us all this?

Because, idiot, not all of you are capable of learning. You may not have noticed, but I abhor wasting my time.

Gyrrick's compatriots knew almost as well as he did that to let the *Kialli* close meant death. Plumes of fire—of human fire—and lightning were coaxed from air and sky; walls of coruscating orange light—if one had the gift and knew how to look—sprang into shimmering life at the command of will and a few hasty words of focus. Meralonne would have failed them in their exercise had he heard those hasty words, because he loathed foci as much as he loathed stupidity. Possibly more. He considered them crutches, not necessities, and he reserved his harshest words for those who could not let go of the security of their use, for they telegraphed much to an enemy. It didn't matter; there was no classroom now; no reprimand to fear.

There was only death.

He shouted out orders; the words were short and harsh. If he hadn't felt the vibration of his throat, he wouldn't have known they were his. But his men knew, and they responded entirely by reflex, doing as they were ordered. No consensus, not here. No committees.

Just his judgment, forced into words as reflexive as his compatriots' response, while they could hear

Meralonne had given them that. Had humiliated them, time and again when they failed to respond as quickly as he wanted (~~which seemed~~—which *had been*—impossible), or with the precision he desired. He would not, Gyrrick thought, be satisfied with them now.

But now...

The fires cut through the lines of their defense as if orange light and enchantment were spider's gossamer. He saw three men bisected by something that looked like red light. And he heard the enemy laugh. Distorted as it was by long fangs and impossible, slender jaws, by lips that seemed things of leather or steel or jade, he knew contempt when he heard it.

In the air, in the sky above, there was no laughter; Meralonne had drawn sword, and his enemy had replied in kind—which was as much attention as Gyrrick could spare them. But in that brief glimpse, he understood that Meralonne was no object of contempt; he had somehow proved himself a danger, worthy foe, in a way the enemy could understand.

Two more men died. The others scattered, retreating carefully, defensively. None of the demons had even been singed, although Alain—he thought it was Alain's signature—had killed lesser demons with his firestrike before.

Gyrrick spoke to his men across the distance; they heard his words, acted on them, following a command that he had beaten, one way or another, into their subconscious.

The creatures looked up. One of them, tall and slender, with wings as supple as fine hide, said, "I will take the... leader." Gyrrick would remember the sneer for as long as he lived. However long that might be.

He summoned, not fire, because fire was not his element, but earth; sent a benediction, torturous and slow, as the enemy's fire lapped holes in the pathetic defenses Meralonne APhaniel had taught them to erect before they drew breath. The earth replied, ponderous, weighty.

The stones above it snapped in jagged, cobbled lines, throwing the creature off its feet.

Or it should have; the cost to Gyrrick was enormous, given the speed of the earth's breaking, the change of its shape. But the creature rose to air; smiled red fire, cast it with contempt and ease. Gyrrick's defenses were second only to Meralonne's. The creature's eyes widened slightly in surprise—even at this distance, surprise was evident—when they held.

Gyrrick struck again; lightning, something forced from the folds of the sky. The bolt passed by the creature, veering at the last moment as it lost shape and structure, as a liquid might. It struck something behind the creature's tall back; wall—brick or stone or clay or wood; something that shattered easily with the force of the blow. Gyrrick heard screaming, and something twisted inside him; not fear of his own death, but fear of the deaths the use of that much magic had just caused.

The cure, he could hear Sigurne say, must not be worse than the disease. There is no justification for our existence if the damage we do is as great as the damage we prevent.

It almost cost him his life.

But he was *fast*, and other voices crowded in on him as the cobbled stones hit his cheeks and the broken dirt provided a momentary cover against needles of sharp flame. When those needles struck, they struck hair, cut flesh, searing wound with heat and pain. Only Meralonne APhaniel was fast enough to wear armor without paying a price for its encumbrance.

The creature was grinning.

You have a weapon. Not fire, and not ice; it is not elemental, and not, in the end, magical, although it is through your mageborn talent that you will reach it. It is human. Manifest it.

Manifest it? How?

Summon it. Summon it from the same place you summon

the earth; bespeak the darkness and shadow that you carry within you.

And?

Must I spoonfeed you, Gyrrick? Tobacco, glowing like fire-touched wood, leaves crackling in memory and in reality: perfect harmony. I cannot tell you how to call upon your talent; it is the first lesson all magi learn. Assuming, of course, that you have learned it.

Yes, Master.

Power is power, and the cost of its expenditure is always the same. But the summoning? Unique. No two men will find their power in the same way. No two ever have, in all of your history.

But I—

Within you, the weapon resides, waiting. The master's sword met sword in the air; the clash of steel, something that was more than steel, rang out across the broken landscape.

Gyrrick dodged again, easily now, at home in the fissure his power had made; at home in the earth.

Burial was a thing that most men feared; not Gyrrick; cremation was his: that in the end, not even ashes remain. Let him be given to earth, instead.

The creature growled.

And when I find this weapon, if I can?

Take care. If it breaks, it is broken, but not as your arm, or your leg might be; it will not heal. To fix it requires an ability to forge that has not been seen in centuries, and if it is broken, every skill you now possess will be diminished.

Then why? Why risk it? This seems to be power made emblem, and emblem exposed.

Indeed. It is when we are exposed in our entirety that we have truly set aside all fear. The fearless are fools, but they have ruled this world throughout the millennia.

I'd rather be cautious. He had weathered the glare of Meralonne's contempt for many, many years. It stung, but it did not deter.

Fire did. The shields that Meralonne had spent years forcing upon him—upon them all—through tiresome, demanding exercise dissolved; he faced death, hands lifted and shaking. But the earth rose in response to something beneath the surface of his fear, and against the *earth*, fire had to work for its victim.

He felt, rather than saw, the buildings shattering like glass; heard screams that started—and worse, stopped, cut off from the air that fueled them. Here, in the trench, these things were muted. Earth. Defense. Meralonne would have scoffed, pipe in the crook made of lips dependent on its stem.

There is no weapon as effective against the Kialli—or any other immortal—as a weapon of this type.

And what will it cost?

His answer had been the making itself. No other. And that answer had nearly killed him, and nearly killed Meralonne when Sigurne Mellifas had—as she always did—discovered what had transpired between them.

He had been unable to face the master for three weeks while he convalesced. And he refused to draw what had been made by earth and blood and magic and will again.

Oh, he had dared the darkness. He had thought of fire. Of pain. Of sacrifice. He had been willing to die the noble death in a heroic attempt to do the right thing. Younger. He had been much younger.

But he had discovered that his darkness was a quiet, strong shadow, buried someplace between two things: Earth. Magic. He understood why the art of fashioning weapons such as this had died; most men who had tried it had probably taken their own lives shortly afterward. There were things about oneself that one should never have to face, but in order to reach the weapon, the killing force, one not only had to face them.

One had to become them.

Slumbering in a metaphysical shadow, beside the thing he defined as his power and the thing he denuded as himself—until that day—he had discovered things that he would have killed men for accusing him of. Sadism, desire, fascination with things too ugly to be human. But not too ugly to be *Kialli*.

Of course not; if he wished to fight the *Kialli*, could he fight them without becoming them, measure for measure? He had been naive, and the master delighted, coldly, in the destruction of naivete. Why wouldn't he? He *had* his own weapon. And he never hesitated to call the sword. It sang in his hands; it scored the field of vision if one was careless and watched it at play for too long. Meralonne APhaniel had faced his own demons.

But a man that arrogant probably thought anything demonic about himself was a matter of fact. A man that arrogant could not possibly be stopped by self-loathing, doubt, fear of—for the first time—one's own power. A man like the master was at home with his demons.

Gyrrick did not wish to wake his.

And today, he would have no choice. He *knew* as clearly as his body knew how to breathe, and just as consciously, that to be bereft of weapon here was death. The shattered bodies of trees lay just beyond his feet, pale, broken splinters, sharp enough to draw hearts' blood; the foremost of the creatures they faced picked up a splinter that was half Gyrrick's width and twice his length. With ease, he used it to break the magical defenses behind which a full quarter of the magi hid, preparing their enchantments in a grim silence.

"Come out, come out, little mortals. Come and *play*. We've been bored, killing trees and the squealing pathetic creatures that can't lift a hand in their own defense."

He had to go back. He had to go back.

Where does this weapon come from, Master?

That is something you will answer for yourself. For a moment, there was something akin to empathy on the cool, calm face of the Council's strangest mage. It didn't linger long.

Anger.

He did not close his eyes; he could not afford to. But he lifted his chin; put his hands up, over his shoulder. Gripped the air behind him as if it had a shape he could feel.

Desire.

The first of his men was pierced by the front of that splinter; riven in two as if his body offered no more resistance to wood than water would have. His blood was dark and bright against the dust and rubble; startlingly wet and new! The sky above him was deep and endless, blue. Perfect. The fires were burning low.

Power.

It came to hand, slender, bent; it came to hand strung, although he knew enough about bows now to know that a bow of value and quality was never carried that way for any length of time. The second of his men was screaming as fire took him—took him slowly; the others were retreating. Not a rout, not that, but they had fallen into a silence that spoke of fear. , *Hunger.*

And is that all?

No. But that is all I can tell you; we find our own reasons for what we create, and once created, we do not forget them.

He reached into air, and out of it, pulled arrow. He reached into air, and out of it, pulled bow. Both came as if the heart itself was pulled beating from his chest. He *felt* the drawing of string as if it were a muscle that someone had reached into his open chest cavity to pull.

And the moment the weapon was in his hands, he understood.

He could finally see.

The trees were luminescent as they lay across the broken ground; the earth more so, the dirt itself a rich and layered brown. The cobbled stones above it were so pale, if he hadn't known they were there they would have faded from sight.

As would most of his compatriots. One or two burned as the earth did, warmly. But for the most part they were like walking shadows, ghosts of themselves, things that didn't matter because in the end they weren't truly alive.

He saw the enemy.

Five on the ground, two in the air. Tall, these creatures, and defined not by their shapes—for their shapes varied greatly, although in the end they each had two arms and two legs—but by something that he had really only heard of when he was a child and his mother's lap was still a refuge open to him.

Names.

Demon names.

They were not... clear. They were not written, the way Weston is, in a script that comes easily to eye and from there to tongue. They were not, in fact, written at all, but he recognized them instantly for what they were. Just as a child might see a hand and know it for a hand, or a foot and know it as such or better, might note the absence of a foot or a hand and ask embarrassing questions about it because he has not learned the guile called tact. He knew what he saw in a way that defied explanation, and he accepted the lack of explanation in a way that no honest member of the Order of Knowledge otherwise would.

He joined combat.

"VERDAZAN!" he cried, and the creature who had killed two of his men with contempt and ease looked up.

Gyrrick was not a killer by birth; not a killer by avocation. But he wanted the moment to stretch on and on, for the creature's eyes grew wide and round; shock melting into surprise, surprise giving way to something like respect. Every moment that passed was measured in human life, and Gyrrick forced himself to value that life.

It was a struggle.

The life wasn't his.

The arrow flew; he felt it travel through air, felt it strike the ridge of bone between the demon's wide eyes as if it were still attached to him; as if it were an extension of his hands, the sensitive tips of his fingers.

Bone shattered, just as human building had done; he recognized the sensation although he had never shattered bone with his hand before. Wondered what it would feel like to shatter rock with the weapon.

Had no question at all that he could.

One of the *Kialli* roared, and Gyrrick understood the language embedded in the thunder; understood it without capturing the sound in imperfect memory and dissecting it, painful syllable by syllable, under the disapproving eye of Sigurne Mellifas, who was always present for post-battle debriefings.

"Illaraphaniel! What have you done, you fool!"

And his master's voice, punctuated by the clash of blade that was not quite steel. *"What have I done?"* Laughter, carried by the wind as if it were sand in a desert storm.

"I have ushered in the End of Days."

The creature who had first spoken snarled, and Gyrrick found, for the first time, that there was a rough musicality to demonic voices that made each voice easily recognizable.

"The End of Days was ushered in long ago, and by better than you. Do you think that teaching your pathetic pets a dangerous trick will harm us?"

"Pets? They are hardly my pets, Lornanan, although I don't expect you to recognize the distinction between pet and mortal. You've never been perceptive. Not that it matters; you'll be ash and dust and the winds will write your epitaph."

All this time, they fought, their voices as loud as their swords, their words far less graceful.

Gyrrick found another arrow in his hand.

He fired.

Flesh parted, absorbing the arrow; denying it.

"These creatures are not a threat to us!"

"You have forgotten our history, without even the pathos of mortality as excuse. Remember: the Cities of Man were not destroyed; they were only barely humbled."

"On second thought, don't; remember other things instead. The wind in the abyss. The texture of the suffering of those you Chose to guard. You will not last out a single mortal day unless you retreat, and your last moments should be pleasant ones."

"And yours?" the creature countered. *"Will you think of failure among the squalor and be content?"*

"No. I shall think of your destruction and be content."

He could not speak their language.

He hoped he could not speak it. His throat closed over the attempt to make words, and his hands clutched arrows convulsively. He wondered, if they closed, what he would do; he had no sword, and he knew that a sword would not give him the preternatural speed the *Kialli* possessed.

Or at least, he *had* known it.

But now, he knew nothing; he was reborn in the world of man, and it was *not* the world he had left.

Faint as leaves' rustle, he heard the voices of his own: his men, his friends, his compatriots in the Order of Knowledge. They were shadows here, they were among the fallen.

Illaraphaniel.

The Cities of Man.

II.

23rd of Scaral, 427 AA

The Terrean of Raverra, the Sea of Sorrows

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 supplicant, 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 blind or deaf. He says, "Why did you have to leave?"... and he drags me to The Terafin's Chambers.

She's dead. There are three knives in her body and she lies across the council table. There is fighting of course. The war for succession.

The Terafin sits up. Her eyes are dead eyes. Her wounds don't bleed. And her voice—it's not her voice. She says, "Another lesson. The hardest. There will always be blood on your hands. Glory in it or weep at it as you choose, but when you choose who must die, choose wisely."

Jewel ATerafin woke.

In the heat of midday, at what the Voyani called desert's lee for reasons that were not obvious to her, sun cast shade that was more felt than seen. She wore a wide-brimmed hat, tied down beneath her chin by a thick silk; she wore something like a blanket, but with a lot more cloth. Avandar made certain—as if he were a domicis, even here, or worse, a seraf—that her skin was covered.

"I'm not fair-skinned," she snapped, hating the fussing that no other person in the caravan was subjected to.

His smile was unpleasant. "What you call dark is no proof against even this much sun. You will do, in this, as I tell you."

He readjusted her sash and straightened her hat, tucking her hair back beneath its brim and her ears. Only when his fingers actually brushed her earlobe did she shy away. But his expression was utterly impassive; she realized it was the neutral touch she had ignored for a decade, no more.

Everything with Avandar had become awkward, and she hated awkwardness.

"ATerafin?"

In her early years in House Terafin, she had quickly realized that a first meeting with anyone was often the most important meeting she would have, and she had allowed Avandar to choose clothing appropriate to the function she was to attend. That had been her first mistake.

Because it never ended with the clothing; he was determined to teach her the subtleties of interaction with the powerful, and lectured her endlessly. Much of these lectures involved the House ring, for she had come early into its possession by the standards of Terafin. He had made it clear when she was to wear the council ring openly by placing her hand in a certain position on the table, and when to let it fall into her lap, beneath view. He had decided when she would wear something drab to allow another member to stand out—usually to the detriment of that other member. He had carefully chosen her dresses in order to cultivate age, and therefore experience; conversely, he had also decided when she was to play on youth. He never asked her to simper; there were limits to the advice she was willing to follow.

He had notably never attempted to have her play on her beauty.

For some reason, that bothered her. She wasn't sure why, but she had a feeling she would be, and she didn't particularly like it.

"I don't see why you're fussing," she said, standing to put some distance between them. "It's not as if anyone else here is dressed any differently."

He raised a brow, but did not join that particular conversation; it had never been one of his favorites.

"We're leaving soon anyway."

"ATerafin—"

"Don't start. We avoided what—what would have happened. We averted a slaughter in the Tor Leonn. We *did* what the visions said we had to do."

"ATerafin."

"What?"

"Are you so certain that we have finished—that *you* have finished—playing a role in the South?"

"Yes."

His smile was thin. "You really should learn how to lie. It would make such transparent attempts less insulting."

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