

Echoes

by Michelle West

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[Kallandras has appeared in every novel that Michelle West has written, but his past, while acknowledged, has always been murky. There's never been much place to expand on it, until now, and while this probably doesn't answer every question that's been asked about him, it's a start...]

What does mercy mean?

Kallandras of Senniell College, the most famous bard that the most famous of bardic colleges had yet produced, stirred beneath the growing chill of desert sky. The Sea of Sorrows lay before him, sand dunes rippling out in endless ridges that seemed as solid as stone from a distance. But he knew that the wind would reclaim them, as they did all else in the South.

Seiuuel College, and the life he had led there, was very far away, ensconced in the heart of the Imperial Capital. The only physical evidence of his time there lay in her case, her strings still. He could not hear music at all, although he listened for it.

Music was the one thing he had found that spoke to him almost as strongly as past voices; that found its way beneath skin, beneath the serene face he presented to the world. But tonight it was absent. They were strong tonight, the old voices.

And he knew why. But he held on to ignorance for as long as he could—and despised himself for it, with an intensity that spoke of the youth where most of the old voices had their roots. Ignorance served no useful purpose; it changed no fact, it offered no shelter.

"Kallandras?"

He inclined his head in greeting as a figure resolved itself out of the shadows of distant wagons. The dyes applied to his hair for his brief sojourn in the capital of the Dominion of Annagar had been of reasonably quality; their temporary nature only now allowed the natural pale gold to peer through the brown-black so common among the clans.

The Serra Teresa di'Marano stood beside him, the grace of her form encumbered by the heavier clothing that the Voyani chose to wear during their forays into the Sea of Sorrows. Her eyes were dark, her hair the color by nature that his was by artifice.

She did not touch him. She lifted a hand as if she would. It hovered like a moth between them, but in the end, it was not drawn to fire.

She said, "I heard you speak."

He lifted a brow in surprise and turned away in the same instant to hide the expression, although in truth it was not genuine. In all things, he was as he had been trained to be.

What was a lie after all, when it was not offered to a brother? "I... was not aware... that I had spoken out loud." That was truth. He did not attempt to lie to the Serra Teresa in any way that she could hear—for she had his gift, and his curse. They were marked by their ability to hear all things that a voice could carry—to manipulate their own in such a way that it might beguile or force obedience.

"It is night," the Serra Teresa said softly. She raised her face to the moon's; the moon was waning slowly. A crescent of darkness grew across the perfect brightness of her face. "At night, we are forgiven our transgressions against strength." She bowed.

"I am not forgiven mine?" he replied gravely. He liked her bow because it was so unnatural a movement for a Serra, and yet it became her perfectly.

"Kallandras—"

"Your gift is strong," he told her; he did not look at her again. There were things that he did not wish to share with anyone.

But that had not always been the case.

He heard it because he could not longer prevent himself from hearing it; it was too loud.

Arkady.

His hands trembling a moment in the air, he reached for the only comfort he allowed himself, had ever allowed himself. He pulled, from a battered case, the lute that had been the gift of the Master of Senniel College—an act of faith on her part. And perhaps on his, to accept it. He spoke the lute's name into the still, cold air.

Salla.

But the darkness returned only *Arkady*.

It was over. It was over. He was gone.

His knees threatened to fail him, and with the grace that had seen him through decades, he acknowledged and accepted his own weakness. He sat, knees bent, the bowl of a lute in his lap, his hands, his shaking hands, palm up, as if he were begging for something that he could not even name.

Not beneath the Lady's face.

But beneath the Lord's, he had, so many years ago that if memory were weak—it was not, and it was not kind—he might have forgotten it. He sat in the streets of the Tor Leonne's poorest quarter. His father and mother were dead—or he assumed they were dead. He had escaped the slaughter of his family simply because he had been too far from home when it had happened. But he knew why it had happened. Because, across the distance that meant life for him, and death for them, he had heard their screams; they carried words, when words were allowed them.

And words *were* allowed them because the clansmen sought information. He could think of those killer, those deaths, without passion. He accepted what that said about him as he had accepted all things that might once have been considered atrocities.

They had spawned a child with demonic powers: the ability to use his voice to command men to unnatural actions. They wanted that child. He ran, leaving behind his youth in the Terrean of Mancorvo,

more than a lifetime away.

Would he have returned to it? No. Not that life. But he had lived more than one. He did not dwell on what happened between death and the Tor; but as he sat, with Salla in his lap, he remembered the shape of the begging, bowl in his lap, the pain of blistered skin, the stares his unusually pale hair received whenever someone paused for a moment to notice how much he stood out from the others whose profession it was to beg and plead for the crumbs of the clansmen.

He was careful. He did not use his curse except when the hunger made him weak. He merely sat, letting the advantage of his unusual appearance speak for him.

He had been in the Tor Leonne for three weeks when the old man found him. He had gone from a robust, hefty villager to a slender, gaunt wraith; he had watched his shadow thin with the passage of time. On the second day in which he had gone without food and with little water, he thought that when the shadow disappeared entirely, he would be gone with it, and he was... comforted. He hadn't the courage to take his own life—not then. The courage to destroy life would come later, when he had something to live for.

But his shadow and a taller shadow had converged, and when they remained, locked against the ground, he looked up to see who had cast it. An old man. Or a man he had thought old, from the vantage of youth and hunger.

"Why are you here, boy?"

He had started to speak, and the words had died.

He felt their echo in his throat, just as Salla echoed the bowl in his lap.

"This is not the place for you. Can you stand?"

"I... don't know. Yes."

"Good. Stand. Walk if you can." The old man smiled, and the smile was strange; it was... kind. It was not a smile he had thought to see again. It hurt him. He watched his shadow separate from the old man's and he hesitated a moment as light appeared between them., revealing the colors of dust, of dirt, of summer heat. As simply as that, shadows were transformed. He ran into darkness, his breath catching in his throat after only a dozen steps.

The old man turned. His smile was gone, but the look in his eyes had not changed. "I am old enough to have fathered you. But I am not, and will never be, your father." He held out a hand. "In time, if I am worthy of you, and you are worthy of me, I will be your brother.

"And between brothers, nothing is forbidden. No weakness and no strength. If you need help, I will help you. If I need help, you will help me."

Kallandras took his hand.

"What is your name, boy?"

"It's—if's Kallatin." The first lie.

The man smiled as he heard it. "You will learn, in time, to be a much more accomplished liar; your life will depend on it. But you will also learn that there is no need to lie to a brother. Come. You are hungry, and I will have wasted much time if I allow you to perish in the street."

Kallatin. Kallandras. Two names, neither of them names he was born to; neither of them large enough to contain all parts of his life. He heard, at a distance, the song his fingers absently forced from the lute, and he grimaced. No small wonder the Serra Teresa had chosen to join him; he played the melody and harmony of a cradle song.

The old man led him to a small house. It was nestled between buildings that were larger, but although of modest size, it was clearly well defended, well appointed. There was a small gate around the house, and a door; beyond the door was a hanging in black, red, and white. The old man said, "We are a brotherhood that serves the Lady in Shadow; there is little sun in our world, and we have little use for the Lord's ways. If you are afraid of this, leave now, and no more will be said."

"I am not afraid of shadow," he replied. Firmly. Foolishly.

"We have many dwellings, but no home. Come." He did not say, *do not speak of what you see*. The boy passed between the doors as if the doors were sentient and paused in front of the hanging. It was of a flower at night; dark sky, white stars, red blossom. He lifted a hand to touch it; was surprised when his fingers felt linen, cotton, nubbled cloth.

"You are sensitive, Kallatin," the old man said quietly.

"If you know that's not my name, why do you use it?"

"None of us own our names," the man replied. "Kallatin is as useful a name as any." He pushed aside the hanging only when Kallandras' hand had fallen, and he led the way into the dwelling. The house itself was entirely ordinary; there were two serafs who tended rooms in which a man might sleep or eat or watch sunrise or moonrise. They bowed when they saw him, but they did not speak. The old man politely requested food for his visitor, and they disappeared, emerging only a few minutes later with fruit, rice, sweet water, all perfectly arranged.

He *knew* that there was no possible way they could have prepared such a meal in so short a time, but he was beyond caring. If the food were poisoned somehow, if he were to die here, or lose what freedom he had claim to, it was the Lady's will, the Lord's—hunger drove him. He ate beneath the watchful eyes of the old man.

Afterward, he slept.

And when he woke, he woke to a darkness that smelled of people, in a room that he was almost certain he had never seen before. The old man was standing in the doorway, as if he knew to a second when the newcomers would wake.

"Welcome," he said, his voice somehow deeper, "to the halls of the *Kovaschaii*. You will train here. But only a handful of your number—three perhaps—will survive the training to become brothers and servants of the Lady."

"What will happen to the rest?" someone asked, in the darkness.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," someone else said. It took a moment before Kallandras realized that it was his own voice.

"Why?"

"Because if we are to be brothers in all things, what we build here—at our beginning—will define us."

The old man bowed slightly. In the darkness, the subtle gesture was missed by several of the young men who snorted or snickered in derision. He did not know their names, that night. Or ever.

"Sleep well," the old man said, and Kallandras realized that he was, in fact, lying on a hard, flat mat.

In the morning—if morning existed in a world that was not ruled, or witnessed, by sky—the old man woke them. He carried a lamp and a torch, but both were unusual; neither flickered, and neither seemed to give off heat. "Please, follow me."

They did. They were nervous, these newcomers; they knew, as Kallandras did, that they had fallen in with the Dark Brothers who served the Lady's darkest face. To cross them was death. To serve them? He had never desired the life of a killer. It galled him. To live in obedience was one thing; to live at the expense of others, different again. But he was not afraid of either the killing or the dying; the shadows had taken the fear from him. He was afraid of failure.

Of loss.

The old man led them into a vast cavern, whose heights and farthest walls were lost beyond lamp and torch's reach. "You will not find this a comfortable room to begin with, but each time you return to it, you will see more clearly. You are now at the heart of the labyrinth. Each step you take from this day forth will bring you closer to freedom from its confines. You may misstep; you may take a wrong turn. These are not fatal.

"But if you do not walk the path, you will never be allowed to leave. You know who we are. You were not chosen because you were fools. Today, you will each be given the first of your many weapons; the most obvious weapon we will give you."

Something touched Kallandras' shoulder. He turned. His gaze grazed a strange forehead, and fell until he made eye contact with another boy.

"I'm Arkady," the boy said. His hair was as dark as Kallandras' was pale, and as straight as Kallandras' was curly. But it caught torchlight and lamplight in a way that reminded Kallandras of fine silk.

"I'm—I'm Kallatin."

"You arrived last night?"

He smiled. "If it *was* night. It... wasn't when I fell asleep."

"What do you think of this place?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen enough of it yet."

Light changed its fall across Arkady's hair as he shrugged. "Did you hear what he said last night? Maybe three of us would survive?"

Kallandras smiled. "I don't believe it. It's a test. It must be a test. If we work together—if we stand together—"

"It *was* you who spoke up." Arkady's smile broadened.

"Guilty."

"Well, if he didn't have you killed in your sleep, he couldn't have been offended." Arkady held out a hand; Kallandras took it. For a moment longer than necessary, their palms rested together.

The weapons were blades, of a sort, with guards unlike any that Kallandras had seen—they traveled from hilt halfway up the length of the blade on opposite sides, and were sharpened into points at their peak. Heavy and small compared to the graceful length of steel that Southern clansmen carried for all of then-adult life, they were straight, where swords curved. They were also deadly.

The first thing the *Kovaschaii* did, in the labyrinth, was to learn their weapons' use. In ones and twos they were taken first to a large, spare room, second to a small room, third to a room with a ceiling that was only barely taller than the tallest of their number. In each of these rooms, they were asked to test the use of their blades. The old man often came to watch them, or perhaps just to watch Kallandras; there were many old men who seemed to come from, and return to, the shadows during the long hours spent practicing nothing more than slicing air. They were allowed, in the end, to spar properly; it was a disaster.

"Kallatin," the man who had come to instruct them said. "You will never learn to wield your weapon if you do not practice."

Kallandras nodded. "I am not your equal, Master."

"That is not my name."

Kallandras bowed his head. "I am not your equal. I cannot use this weapon without causing injury, either to myself or another."

"And would you train with false weapons, the way the clansmen do?"

"I was born to a clan, a poor clan. I see no shame in it. Yes."

"Arkady?" The man turned to the boy that he had chosen to partner Kallandras.

For a moment there was long, thin silence; Arkady did not look at Kallandras, did not look at the master. Instead, his gaze fell to the poorly *lit* shape of his feet, and lingered there in doubt for what seemed a long time. At last, he said, "Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I—I think—I think he's right."

The master's pause was longer than Arkady's. Kallandras did not realize that he was not breathing until breath returned.

The master nodded. "If you do not feel comfortable with real weapons, you may have the practice ones. But we will keep the real until you require them."

The old man came in the mornings.

"You do not speak of your gift."

Kallandras did not speak at all. The moment stretched and thinned until the old man broke it by chuckling. It was not the sound he expected to hear.

"Let me speak of mine, then, boy."

Kallandras said nothing.

"I can speak in a way that forces men to listen." He paused. "I almost never do. But of all aspects of my gift, it is the one most feared, and with cause."

"Let me speak of the others. Do you sing, boy?"

"No. Singing is for girls," he added bitterly. His father's words. But bitter or no, angry or no, he missed that man; that man had died with the knowledge of his only son's location clenched between closed teeth.

"It is for brothers, not for girls. And no voice is as strong, no voice is as powerful, in either sweetness or sorrow, as the voice of one born with the gift." The old man paused. "I sing more frequently than I command. But I do not sing overmuch.

"But there is one thing that I always do; it is as natural *as* breathing or sleeping."

Kallandras did not want to hear the old man speak. He was tired. The need for sleep thinned his nerve, robbing him of the composure that he clung to in the face of the Labyrinth and its masters.

"I listen. I cannot help but listen. Every sentence, every word, every syllable, become lines of a map, and between those lines fall cities, if the speaker is careless. I hear a *lie* almost before it is finished; I hear truth in just the same way. I hear fear, angry, worry; I hear envy, desire, pain."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I am your mirror, Kallatin. I want you to learn."

He rose, then, and bowed. He did not speak again with the old man that day.

Four of the young men had chosen practice weapons; two pairs. The blades were unsharpened, the guards blunted; the weight however was almost the same. They were mocked for it; the other boys, fourteen in total, had chosen to brave the more deadly blades. After all, they were of an age, among their own, where they would have been expected to use blades that were far more deadly than these, and they had trained with swords, or the child's equivalent, when they had had the opportunity.

Unless, of course, they had come from slave stock. The sneer in the words were enough to keep silent any who might have been plucked from that life. It had seemed so important in that small world to appease, or at least slide beneath the notice of, the stronger boys.

During the first week, four of the students—if that's what they were—were taken away from the training grounds. All of them were bleeding profusely from the wounds they had received in training.

None of them returned.

The survivors of each team were paired together. Two of them chose to forsake their weapons, two did not.

During the second week, another four fell. Again, they were taken from the training rooms, and again, they failed to return. There were other injuries during this time, but the boys bore them in wary—or terrified—silence. If they could walk from the session, they walked; they struggled to avoid acknowledging damage done them because they knew that an injury severe enough to bring them to their feet was death.

But no one asked where the injured boys had gone.

In the end, of the ten boys who remained, only two chose to cling to their weapons. They were, in Kallan-dras' opinion, the best; they were confident, and at times savage, but they were dancing on the knife's edge, and they paid attention to every word their masters said. To watch them fight, to watch them *move*, was a bitter joy. The masters watched. They took notes.

What had they said? *Only three*. Eight had already been winnowed by poor luck or poor skill.

During that time, the old man would come to Kallandras. He watched as Arkady and Kallandras progressed, but he did not speak or comment on their style, except to point out gross lapses in their technique. If the practice blades were not sharp, they were dangerous nonetheless; they left bruises that were wide across as the span of two hands in a trail from shin to shoulder.

After the training masters had called the sessions to a halt for the day—or night—and the boys filed out to the three rooms in which their meals were prepared, the old man would speak.

"Do you regret your choice?"

"My choice? You mean, coming here?"

The older smile was wry. "The weapon."

"No."

"But you watch Mikal and Torval as if they possessed some magic, some secret, that you yourself would attain if you could."

Kallandras shrugged. "Envy is not the same as regret."

"No indeed, but you are a strange one, to know that so well at your age."

Kallandras looked at the old man for a long, long time. Then he said, "The others are not as careful as you are."

"Careful?"

"You know that I know when you lie."

He turned away; his slender profile was lit from beneath by the soft glow of a lamp that seemed to radiate no heat. "We are granted our gifts and our curses," the old man said at last. "But yes. I know it."

"How?"

"Does it matter? I know that you can hear me; I know that you can hear the things I have found no words for. If you pass the test, Kallatin, you will be without equal in the Lady's service."

"You say that?"

"Yes. Because I know what your curse is. It is seldom that a voice is so strong that it manifests useful power without appropriate training. But power alone is not what the Brotherhood desires. When you watch Mikal and Torval, remember this—lithe, graceful and beautiful as they are, I do not believe they will survive even this first stage of our testing."

Arkady. Arkady.

Old man.

The bard's voice was all that remained of his life in the Labyrinth. He did not use it tonight. Instead, he let Salla speak; hers was the only other voice he wanted. The night sky was clear and bright. The stars were cold.

What is mercy?

"What is mercy? Why are we hesitant to shun what remains of it within ourselves?"

Old man.

Kallandras did not think of him as one of the masters until the day he had come to lead them not to one of the three training rooms, but rather, to a large, round room with a domed room across which, glittering and cold, the night sky seemed to crawl.

Most of the boys didn't understand the question. Kallandras didn't.

The old man looked, momentarily, like any other harried teacher. The man who had been primarily responsible for their weapon training—a man who had never introduced himself, but who did not like to be called master—smiled and turned his face to the wall. Kallandras had the suspicion that he was stifling a laugh—and of all things he had seen in the Labyrinth, it was both most the welcome and the most surprising.

"Let me attempt this again. You," the old man said, pointing at a boy who stood in the back of the group. "Did you spend your childhood dreaming of the day when you would become an assassin? Did you daydream about taking the life of a stranger who has never done you any harm—and worse, by stealth, not by challenge?"

Silence was an effective answer.

The old man did not press. "Let me answer the question for you. For *all of* you. No. Not a single one of you would have been chosen if that had been your desire." There were one or two nods. A whisper. Another. But stillness assumed its grip again when the old man started to speak.

"If the *Kovaschaii* were mountains, you would be standing in the foothills. You will, if you survive, become what we are. We kill. We accept the money of people who desire death, and if it is deemed a suitable death, or a suitable offering, one of our brothers will perform the assassination.

"Do we appear monstrous?"

Silence again, but that was wise.

"You will be killers. You will destroy lives. You know the cost of that firsthand, or you would not be among us. If you cannot find a way to accomplish this task with pride—with honor—you will never leave."

Kallandras listened carefully to each word. The pause between sentences was like a gap between walls that are close enough that a climber might scale them. The old man was worried.

Because he was telling the truth.

"What do you hear when you listen to your comrades speak?"

Kallandras tilted his head to one side for a moment and then said, "Exactly what you hear."

The old man's smile was slight. He was always less frazzled when they met one to one. "Diplomatic. I do not ask to gain information, or rather, information about the other students; I do not expect you to spy. I ask because I wish to confirm the level of your abilities."

Kallandras nodded, but he still did not answer the question; let these putative companions give

themselves away as they must; he would not do it for them. But he was concerned; they were afraid.

As if he could hear the thought, the fluid lines of the old man's expression changed direction; the smile was transformed into a dour stillness. "They're afraid. Fear will drive them in one of two directions."

"Which two?"

"It is not my test to pass," the old man said. He looked as if he would like to speak more, but as he hesitated, another of the masters came by, and the spell of isolation was broken.

But fifteen minutes after the two masters had left him alone, he heard a familiar voice.

"Watch yourself, Kallandras. Fear seeks a target if it has a weapon." He jumped up and ran to the mouth of the great room, but it was empty, and the jagged walls of empty, winding hall offered no answers.

The eating rooms had never been so quiet. There were usually minor squabbles about seating, food, the quality of food, water, water again, and who would be responsible for cleaning the dishes that were left.

"Hey, Kallatin?"

Kallandras chewed quickly, swallowed quickly, and then spoke. Across the remove of years, he remembered this. On that night, that significant night, he had clung to manners as if they mattered. They had all chosen to cling to their pasts.

"Yes?"

"Which three, do you think?"

"Three?"

"Which three will it be?"

"I think that more than three will go on. Or less."

"But they said—"

Kallandras closed his eyes. In the darkness and the silence, it was easy to recall the exact words. "*Only a handful of your number—three perhaps—will survive.*"

Arkady was clearly impressed. "You even sound like him."

"I sound like a tired old man? Thanks, Arkady. Tomorrow, you'll be the one with new bruises, I promise." That had taught him something, although he failed to appreciate the lesson until he was a decade older. Never promise something that cannot be delivered. But at that time, Arkady's snort, Arkady's laugh, was all that he required. They rose from the mats, their knees unfolding almost precisely at the same instant.

"Why are you two laughing?" Mikal rose as well. He carried his weapon with him at all times, and often allowed his hand to stray to its hilt. It did then.

Kallandras shrugged. "Laughter is better than strained silence."

"If you have something to laugh about."

"And if I do?"

Torval rose as well. They were not friends, these two, but they were allies. "Share it with the rest of us."

Kallandras' shrug was less graceful. He had not learned to dissemble, had not learned to flatter or lie; that came later, when death was more important than pride or privacy.

Arkady touched his shoulder.

Kallandras shook his friend's hand away. His own came to rest on the hilt of his practice weapon. Torval snorted in open derision. "Is that supposed to impress us?"

"No. Merely to show you how pretentious the strut looks when you do it yourself."

In the gray of rooms that were never touched by sunlight, color was suspect—but if the flush that stained Torval's cheeks was not glaringly obvious, it was there if one knew how to look.

"What are you planning, you pale-haired—"

Mikal caught Torval's elbow, silencing him. "We know that you talk to the master in private. He speaks to almost no one else. He isn't an armsmaster. What does he tell you, Kallatin? What has he offered you?"

"Nothing. Nothing except this life."

"Liar."

Kallandras' turn to flush. "I am not used to being called a liar."

"Get used to it if you are one."

"Kallatin—" Arkady's hand again.

He ignored it. "Or?"

"Or maybe we'll try different partners in the arena tomorrow."

"Fine."

"Kallatin."

Mikal laughed. "Looks like your partner doesn't think so." He sauntered toward the dormitory that housed them all in space that seemed increasingly... small.

"Life ends. Whether it ends by your hand, or no, it ends. The only ties that matter are those of loyalty and those of blood."

Kallandras looked at the old man. He was tired. It had been a restless night.

"We will accept any mission that... that we are ordered to accept. But the *Kovaschaii* are not interested in pain or pleasure; we are interested in *death*. You are not a child. You know the difference between a long death and a short one."

Kallandras did not reply. He did know the difference. If he was not careful, he would dwell on it, and the loss of his family would filter into his voice, where it would be easily snatched up by the old man.

"You have made progress with one weapon, Kallandras. I would have you learn another."

"And that?"

"Use what you were born to. Your brothers will not envy you the gift; they will bless you for it because it will be used in our service."

The young man was stony in silence. Stiff. To speak of the philosophy of death was one thing. To speak of its actuality, quite another. He said, after a long pause, "My family is dead because of my curse."

"No. Your family is dead because of the fear of a talentless, ambitious man. In a different land, you would have been valued for what the Lady chose to give you." There was bitterness in his words. Bitterness laced with humor. "And you are in a *very* different land."

Kallandras bowed as he had been taught to in his father's home. "Teach me, then. Teach me what you can teach me, and I will do what I can to live up to your expectations."

"Do I have expectations?"

"Everyone does."

The old man smiled. **Listen, then. What I say, only you can hear. Understand the texture of voice that makes this impossible. Understand that it is impossible. Learn.**

Do they bless me now, old man? Do you?

The master in charge of the first room was waiting for him. Although he was completely expressionless, and his words were smooth as Northern glass, his voice was shaded with disapproval and annoyance. Kallandras bowed as formally as he dared.

"Did Constanso detain you?"

"Who?" For a moment, Kallandras thought he referred to a student; they were the only people in his twilight life who had names he could use. But when the master fell completely silent and his lips compressed into a dagger's edge, Kallandras knew who he meant. He nodded, but he did not speak the name again; it was not wise to remind a man who had the power to grant life or death on a whim that he had made a mistake.

"Mikal and Torval have a proposition that intrigues me. They have suggested that you wish to test your skills against opponents that you are not so familiar with. I see merit in this."

Kallandras said nothing.

"Your time here—in these rooms—is almost at an end. The basics, you now have. Anything else you will gain once you complete your passage. It is time." He walked toward the tall table upon which he had set the weapons the boys had originally been given. "Will you take these back?"

He shook his head.

The master nodded as if he was not overly surprised. "Arkady?"

Arkady was paralyzed.

The master took his silence as refusal. "I commend you both," he said softly. "Kallatin, please, join Mikal. Arkady, join Torval, but wait my word." He turned to Kallandras. "I would see the two of you spar."

When Kallandras joined Mikal, he felt as if he had stepped into a different room, onto a different floor.

He had spent months training with Arkady. He had received bruises, had left skin on the rough walls and ground of each of the training rooms, had won and lost time and again. He thought he understood the rhythm of the fight.

He was wrong. He understood the peculiar combination of Kallandras and Arkady. Kallandras and Mikal were entirely different.

Where Arkady took a moment to gather and center himself, to find his knees, Mikal was lunging. He used the points of the guards, and the edges of blade, as if they were lethal. They were. Kallandras leaped out of the way. Arkady was seldom that aggressive, and with reason; Mikal took the back of the hilt in the shoulder as Kallandras spun.

Mikal was tall, his shoulders broad; he had strength and stamina. Kallandras, slender, had stamina; his strength had never been tested in this fashion. He was curious; he had seen Mikal fight with Torval for months now, but none of that dance was in his step now; his rage—at what?—was unfettered, and it made him clumsy.

Or perhaps it wasn't rage. Perhaps it was simply lack of caution. He did not consider the practice blade a weapon. If it was not lethal, he could take risks he would otherwise never take.

Foolish.

Kallandras did not draw blood; he didn't need to. Mikal's knee touched the ground when he overbalanced in an attempt to take advantage of an illusory opening. In an attempt to draw blood. The master called the match and sent them both to the wall, calling Arkady and Torval to take their place. Before they began, he lifted a hand.

"The deadliest weapon does not make an opponent deadly. It may, however, make him foolish. A lesson should be taken from this; take the right one." He lowered his hand.

Torval and Arkady began to circle each other. Arkady was pale; his breath was too shallow. Kallandras wanted to shout at him; to correct him. *You know better than this!* But the master's grim expression was a command.

Torval was not Kallandras. Arkady was not Kallan-dras.

"Your friend won't last the round," Mikal said conversationally.

Kallandras said, equally tonelessly, "That arrogance has already failed you once. Learn from the failure."

Mikal's jaw snapped audibly shut. It was the last sound Kallandras allowed to distract him from the fight.

Arkady could not see past sharp blade, ground point. Torval struck once; grazed Arkady's slender thigh. Cloth parted; blood welled. It had not been a particularly graceful strike, but grace was not as useful as success.

Arkady, he thought. *Damn you, Torval is not playing a game. You're better than this—*

Another misstep. Torval drove Arkady back, and Arkady, mesmerized by blood and the glint of light across polished steel, let his guard slip again. But he did not fall to his knees. He faltered, righted himself, continued.

Kallandras reached for his practice blade, and a hand clenched his wrist when his fingers brushed the hilt.

The master's hand.

"Our purpose here is not to kill each other!" he snarled. He could not suppress the rage that broke between words to crawl to the surface.

"It is not for you to judge your purpose," the master answered. His tone was cold and dark, but something beneath it reached the pale-haired boy that Kallandras had once been. Pain. He bowed, then, in order to retrieve his wrist.

And heard the clash of weapons.

Arkady, you fool! Bend at the *knees*. He's not half the fighter I am, and you can beat me! The edge is illusion; the guard points are illusion; the only thing that counts is the block and the counter. See me if you must see his face at all; see my weapon if you must see anything.

The words died into stillness as they left him. He *felt* them go. But he had not felt his lips move. And the master's eyes were upon the fight. He offered no censure.

He didn't hear me.

No. For just a moment, fear came; fear of fire, of swords, of death. But behind that, satisfaction. Arkady had come to life. The stiffness of fear left his limbs; the fear of bleeding—of being carried away by masters, never to return—went with it.

Who's the old man now, Arkady?

"Damn you, Kallatin!" Arkady shouted back. It was not, strictly speaking, forbidden, but the master frowned. His glare traveled the distance between the two boys. Only Kallandras saw it.

But he didn't care. Arkady had heard him. Arkady was safe.

After the fight, the master nodded. He broke up the pairings of the others, but as Torval and Mikal were the only two who fought with true edges, the contests were even. Arkady ungraciously allowed Kallandras to tend the two wounds he'd received.

"Scars are attractive to the right people," he told Arkady, as he pulled the bandage taut around the thigh.

"And we see the right people down here?" Arkady laughed. "You saved me out there. You know? I—I heard you, I heard you speak."

"You're lucky that's all you heard," Kallandras said darkly. "If I were closer, I would have slapped you."

Arkady laughed. The laughter walked the edge of hysterical without falling off. "I owe you."

"There is no debt between brothers."

"You're too ugly to be my brother."

Kallandras laughed. "If we ever face each other again, you'll pay for that."

"Did you interfere in the fight today?"

They sat on either side of a low table in the midmeal eating room, but it was just after the meal had been cleared away. Kallandras looked away.

"The master was most specific."

"If you already know the question, old man, why do you ask me? I have no desire to walk into your traps."

The old man laughed. "But you walk into them nonetheless. I—am surprised. You should not have been able to do that, not so quickly."

"I had to."

"Did you?"

"Torval would have killed him." He was silent for a moment, and then he added, "Or he would have wounded him badly, and that isn't much different, is it?"

The old man bowed his head *a* moment. When he lifted it, his expression made steel look soft. "No."

Although Kallandras knew—they all did—what must have happened to the injured and the fallen, the bluntness of the single, cold word cut him; he took a moment to gather breath. He did not bother to hide what he felt. The old man would hear it in the words that needed to be said. "Why? If we are to be brothers—"

"If you cannot leave the scene of a battle of your own accord, you will die, and better so. The *Kovaschaii* are almost immune to torture, but they are not immune to magic. We guarantee our clients privacy, because in the end, we force them to reveal much about themselves. We cannot afford to risk exposure and destruction."

"But the scene of a battle is *not* the training ground."

"Kallandras, it is a test. You insisted on the practice blade. You endured mockery and scorn because you did not desire to injure your partner. He accepted this. The others did not."

"But they—"

"It doesn't matter why. Some mistakes are fatal. You of all people should understand this."

"This is a... harsh lesson."

For just a moment, the old man's face softened. "It is not the harshest you will learn." He reached across the table, and then let his hand fall to the left, unadorned surface. "I have spoken too much."

"You have said almost nothing."

"I have used few words," the old man countered. "Where you are concerned, they are not the same. When I first passed all tests—" He bowed his head a moment, and Kallandras heard small fissures in the surface of his voice; cracks that memory would widen, judging by the look on his face. He rose. "I envy you the chance to rediscover the brotherhood."

But not the cost. Not the cost.

Over the next few weeks, they moved from the three training rooms to others. Long, narrow rooms in which it was impossible to swing a weapon. Rooms where the floors were sloped from edge to center, like a giant, stone funnel. Rooms in which stairs started nowhere and ended in the height of the wall.

They also fought in the largest of the rooms, and honed their response to flight—both their own and their

target's.

To Kallandras' eye, they had improved—but the masters grew dour and silent.

"Soon," they said, in their own ways, "it will be all over. Soon."

But no matter how soon that was to be, the training continued; Kallandras forgot what daylight looked like because the reality of shadow was much more visceral.

"But they said only a few of us would—"

Kallandras lifted a hand. He was not an authority, but when he spoke, he could make people listen.

"They said probably. It's not as if they'll set a limit of two or three and kill the rest of us. It's a test."

"A test to see who is the fittest?" Mikal snapped.

"Perhaps. But I think—"

"No one cares what you think."

Arkady rose. "I do," he said.

"You are barely a separate person. He tells you what to eat, when to breathe, when to piss."

"He tells me everything I need to hear; he lets me decide the rest for myself," Arkady snapped back.

"Unlike the way you treat Torval, your seraf."

Torval rose as well. Hands touched the hilts of weapons, and an ugly silence robbed the room of everything but harsh breath.

The old man entered the room, and movement returned. But it was strained.

Kallandras bowed.

The old man said, almost against his will, "the weapons are not for use outside of the training room."

They nodded the way children nod when they're not listening.

Later, in the quiet of long, half-smooth halls, Arkady turned to Kallandras. "Aren't you afraid?" he demanded, his voice both low and urgent. It was clear to Kallandras that Arkady was; also clear that he felt no need to hide it.

"I am more afraid of being ordered to take my first life—to make my first kill." It was true.

"Kallandras—they're all so tense now. They don't even look at us as if we're going to be their so-called brothers. I wake up in the morning—every morning—and I thank the Lady that I'm not dead."

He did not point out that a dead person had no thanks to offer. Instead, he said, "What do you expect them to do?"

"Take us away," was the blunt reply. "Just like they did with the others."

"No," Kallandras said quietly.

"No?"

"If they do, they won't take us without a fight. There are three masters here. There are ten of us."

"They're *Kovaschii*, Kallandras."

"True. And maybe we stand no chance against them. But if we're to die anyway, without a word or a struggle, why not stand together instead of dying alone?"

Arkady's words were always full of the nuance of emotion. But *he* did not speak. He met Kallandras eyes in the poor light, and his own glimmered unnaturally bright.

The old man did not come the next morning. He did not come the morning after, or the morning after that. The masters spoke very little. In the absence of a familiar voice, Kallandras felt the tension that had infected Arkady and the others as if it were a disease. Something was going to happen.

"After dinner tonight, you will confine yourself to the sleeping chambers. On the morrow, we will come for you, and we will choose among you."

"C-choose?" Arkady said.

The master frowned. "That is what I said. Those who are chosen will leave the Labyrinth. Those who are not, will not. We have need of the Labyrinth for the newcomers."

Ah, memory. The voices of his brothers, bound to him by ceremony, oath, blood and his own desire—*to never be alone; to never have to face the world without someone trusted at one's side*—did change, subtly, with the passage of time. So did memories. As a young man, so much of what he had learned after being accepted by ritual and ceremony had loomed so large. Now, he remembered his beginnings. What he chose to remember ten years from now, if he lived, would be different again; he could not predict it.

But ten years from now, *Arkady* would not be dying.

Darkness. Always darkness. Everything began when the shadows were too dense.

Sound. Scuffling, the huff of breath that speaks of shock; silence. But something woke him as he lay across the mats in the dormitory. There was little light, but as the old man had promised that light had become enough to see clearly by with the passage of time.

There was blood on the floor. The mats were slick with it. It dripped from two blades, and as Kallandras rose, those two blades came round. He knew that he could not take his eyes off these two, but his gaze slid past them anyway, risking death for a glimpse of death; his own death. The deaths of his... brothers.

Mikal's hands were wet. Torval's chest, also wet.

Kallandras shook his head in denial—just as he had shaken his head when wind had carried the sounds of his family's death. He had thought that he would never have family again, and he had found the promise of something more. But that promise would never be fulfilled—not by the boys here. He reached for his blade, practice blade.

"You don't stand a chance against the two of us," Mikal said conversationally. But he did not look at his hands, or at the sleepers who would never wake. Their bodies were still—of the injured, they at least would not be carried off and put down.

Torval's eyes were glinting as well. His hands were shaking.

They were not, Kallandras realized, madmen. They were frightened, and they had chosen this way to appease their fear.

As if they could hear his judgment, they said, "But we don't have to fight. Help us, Kallatin, and there is room for you when the masters come tomorrow. They said three."

He said nothing. But with their words, the room's focus changed. If they wanted help, they had not yet finished their work. He saw them at a remove of years: inefficient. Emotional. But in the Labyrinth, he had also been both of those things.

When he spoke, his voice filled the room; there was no space that escaped the command he put into the words.

"WAKE!"

They did. Not a shred of sleep remained; they were on their feet in an instant. Some rolled, hands hunted for the blunted weight of practice blades. Some leaped.

They were quicker than he had been to take in the events that had occurred while they slept. There were cries of dismay, of anger, of outrage—but there was no room for fear.

Not theirs.

"You would have done the same!" Mikal shouted, as he backed toward a wall. "They're going to choose in the morning—they're going to pick who lives and who dies!"

"And you thought you'd help them?"

"I didn't come here to die!"

"None of us did," Kallandras said softly. He lifted his weapon. Blunt. Heavy. "You betrayed us."

"There is no us!"

Kallandras stepped forward. At his back, there were a handful of boys; he was not sure how many. More than two; probably four, judging from the way Mikal and Torval had chosen to stand.

"You have no right to judge us."

"You had no right to kill them."

Mikal's laugh was strained, terrible. "I had every right—all we're going to do for the rest of our lives is kill people."

Kallandras hesitated. Every word that Mikal spoke was true; every word struck home in a way that a simple weapon had failed to do in their earlier combat.

"If we can't kill here, when our lives depend on it, where can we kill?"

"Anywhere else," another voice said. A familiar voice. The old man. For the first time, Kallandras noted that the old man did not wear the robes of the heartlands; he wore black, night's color. He pushed the door of the sleeping rooms open and stepped into the room. The other masters followed them in. Kallandras spoke.

"To me," he said. And the four—there were four—obeyed instantly, although he had put no command in

the word. They held their practice blades, and if they were blunt and unblooded, they were not without danger.

Mikal and Torval turned to the door.

"You have failed us," the old man said quietly.

Mikal's voice contorted into a thing halfway between roar and scream. Torval had always been the more cautious of the two.

The old man gestured with both hands. Mikal charged, and the old man stepped out of his way; he ran into the hall and stumbled as he attempted to run. There was a thud and a crash, a clatter of steel against hard stone. In the torchlight, Kallandras could barely make out the toe of his boot. Torval did not run. He slumped. Fell.

The old man bowed to Kallandras. To the other four. "Welcome," he said softly, "to the brotherhood. There is much to be done before you are presented to the Lady, but you have earned the right to be presented."

But Kallandras shook his head.

The old man's brows rose until they were obscured by hair.

"I'm not ready to leave yet."

"The Lady is waiting."

Kallandras met the gaze of the old man and held it for several heartbeats before he turned away. He looked closely at the four who waited—and it was clear that they did wait—for his word. None of them were Arkady. He walked past them then, quickly.

His heartbeat was loud enough for two. Loud enough for two. "Arkady?" Silence.

One of the masters lifted a brow; the old man rifted a hand in response, although he had not looked back to see the slight shift in expression. "Kallatin," he said quietly. "The time has come to leave."

"Arkady, answer me."

The silence was broken by something like a cough. "K—Kail—"

"Enough. Shut up now." Kallandras knelt on the floor beside the pallet. It seemed impossible to him that Mikal could miss. But Mikal was not, then, a killer. Only another desperate person struggling to stay alive.

"W-what happened?"

"We have to go, Arkady."

"Kallatin," the old man said. His voice should have been harsh; it was surprisingly gentle. "What I said was true. If he cannot leave on his own, he cannot leave."

It was not the only time he would ignore Constanso, although it was the first time. He looped an arm beneath Arkady's arm and brought him to his feet.

"Kallatin," the old man spoke again. "You make this hard on yourself."

"That was not my intent. How far must he walk?"

"Pardon?"

"Are we never to seek medical aid? Are we never to recover from a wound if we evade capture?"

The four were brothers; whether or not the Lady accepted them, they had already accepted Kallandras. They looked to him, and he shook his head; they stepped between his exposed back and the masters of the Labyrinth, although they had all seen Mikal and Torval die.

The old man's smile was slight. "You remind me of my youth. Very well. He must walk from here to the center of the complex, where we first gathered. The Lady will decide—if he survives that long—whether or not she will accept him."

"Arkady, can you hear me? Don't speak. If you can walk down the long hall and through the doors, there will be help for you. I can—I can help you, but only with my words. Decide."

Arkady coughed. Blood spilled from his lips, like a black fountain in the poor light, but he managed to hold himself steady. "I'll... walk."

"Walk, Arkady. Step with your right leg. Yes. Now with your left."

The old man looked at him. But he said nothing as Arkady began his awkward, painfully slow stagger through stone corridors. Kallandras hated everything about the brotherhood at that moment. It was the last time such hatred or anger toward his own would even be conceivable.

Arkady fell twice. Both times, Kallandras forced him to his feet with use of a command that he was far, far too weak to fight. When Arkady stumbled a third time, Kallandras snarled and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Arkady," he said. "I won't do this without you. We are brothers before we are anything else. That's what *I* was promised. I will start here as I mean to continue. If you lie down and here, the masters will be forced to kill you, and I will be forced to kill them, or try."

Arkady coughed and then smiled weakly. "You are such a stubborn bastard."

But Kallandras could not smile in return. His heart was strong enough for two. It had to be. *Just a few more steps*. They were so close he could see the cascading wall of candles that glowed beyond the open doors. They had never been there before.

The room was full.

It was full of men in dark robes, of men in white robes, of light and the harsh shadow bright light casts. Across the floor, inlaid in gold, five points of a star. Without thinking—and even decades later, he could not understand why he did so—he caught Arkady under the shoulders and knees, and lifted him off his feet as if he weighed nothing. He heard the old man's voice as if it came from a great distance, heard other unfamiliar voices raised in whisper, raised in surprise. He passed them all, left them gaping, ran to the star's center, and carefully laid Arkady to rest upon it, ar-ranging his head in the uppermost point, his arms and legs to the sides. Arkady said, "Can I sleep now?"

Kallandras nodded.

And then he drew his dull, blunt weapon, and he held it high.

The old man came to stand beside him, and Kallandras saw that in the flicker of a thousand lights, his eyes were filmed with unshed tears. "That will do you little good," he said softly. "But take this. You have earned it." And he caught Kallandras' wrist in a grip that could not be broken. He pried his nerveless fingers from the hilt of the practice weapon and laid the hilt of real one into his palm instead.

The brothers were beginning to chant.

The floor, rather than growing darker or brighter, grew hazier as he watched.

"You must use the weapon," he said softly.

"Why?"

"You must offer her blood. Arkady is bleeding; you are not."

"But—"

"Do it now, Kallatin."

Kallandras dragged the knife across his left arm, biting into flesh, but not vein. He had no desire to bleed to death.

"Call her."

"Who?"

"The Lady."

"But I—"

"Call her before your friend dies, and you may be able to save him. The only mercy we know is the Lady's."

He heard no lie in the old man's voice, although he heard many other things. He lifted his chin, and trembling, he began to do the only thing he knew he could do better than any man present save perhaps the old man. He *sang*.

There, in the broken darkness, his eyes blurring, he accepted his curse as the gift it had always been. He sang to praise the Lady, to praise the Moon, to praise the shadows that had given him life when the sun was harsh and blinding. He sang to call her forth, although he told her that he was weak and insignificant by comparison to all of the others that had come before him to serve her. And he dared to sing, when he paused to draw breath, of his love for the brotherhood that served her, and of his desire to save one who belonged in that service, if she deemed him worthy.

He put all that he had learned into the singing of that song, and when the song was finished, he was on his knees, straddling Arkady's too-still form.

And she came. The mists had crept up from the ground to his shoulders on all sides—saving only where Arkady rested within the confines of gold.

Her hair trailed like liquid night down her back and joined the mist that rolled in on all sides, like a phantasm of the sea; her raven sat upon her shoulder, watching them all as if it was possessed of the spirit of a hawk. "You called me, young one. You called me very boldly."

He had never heard death in a voice so clearly. For a moment all breath was suspended as he absorbed

what he'd heard, and then he drew breath again as he looked at Arkady's still face. He had summoned death—he understood now, why the brotherhood who served this Lady performed the acts they did—to save

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life. But it didn't matter. He was finished running from what she offered.

"Your pardon, Lady."

"Perhaps. Let me see the one you guard, young one."

He bowed his head and gained his feet. Arkady was not cold, and he had not stopped breathing; there was nothing else that Kallandras could do for him.

She leaned down, and Kallandras stiffened, but her hands merely grazed Arkady's cheek. "Your song is sweet," she said, "even though you are not yet mine. Join me, and I will grant you what you desire."

He bowed. "What must I do to join you, Lady?"

"You will know," she said. "Come. The bowl is waiting for your blood. The others are already there."

He swallowed. "And Arkady?"

"Is that what he calls himself?"

"Yes, Lady."

She reached down and caught his limp hand. "Arkady," she said softly. "I have need of you here. I withhold the journey of death from you until such a time as you have earned it. Serve me well." She pulled him to his feet and he came, blinking as he met her gaze. His jaw fell, not in fear, but in wonder. He could not even speak.

Together, Arkady and Kallandras joined the old man before a basin carved in stone. It seemed a miracle that they could have failed to notice it the first time they were here; it was not large, but everything about it seemed to glow with a star white crispness. Kallandras saw that a thin layer of blood covered the basin; he added his own to it without hesitation—but he reached out to catch Arkady's hand after the blood had fallen. Arkady smiled.

"Give me your name," the Lady said, and he jumped back. "Give me your name, boy, and I will guard it against all use. Your truest identity will be within me, and only I will know of it. Not even death will find you when it is your time to die.

"I will find you," she continued, when none of the six spoke. "And I will return your name to you when I lead you in safety to the Halls of Mandaros. We may speak, then. We may rejoice, or cry, or laugh. But I cannot take your name if you have no desire to give it." She lifted a hand; dropped it through the air as if it were an executioners blade.

The six boys cried out in terror as they felt something jump *through* them. And then they cried out in shock and surprise as they felt what followed: The thoughts, the hopes, the fears, of the men who gathered in this room, watching.

What is this, what is this, Kallandras?

I—I do not know, Arkady.

Tell him, an unknown voice said. Tell him, Constanso.

He was afraid, and the fear was strong and cloying. But to the fear came comfort, a wordless offer of wisdom and knowledge that was not his own.

You are brothers, the old man said. You are our brothers. The Lady accepts you. He was crying, quietly. It has been four years since we have had new brothers emerge from the Labyrinth. Four years since we have found those whose understanding was stronger than their fear.

My name? From out of the darkness, her hands came to caress his cheeks; to draw his gaze up to meet hers. He saw all of the night sky, and he had never seen a night sky with such grandeur and such depth. He had forgotten just how much he missed the sky. He spoke his name into the night she brought with her, and she caught it, gently, as a movement of lips against her brief kiss.

You are the Lady's servant. We are the Lady's servants. And Kallatin, there is a joy that awaits us at the end of our lives that makes us fearless. You will never be alone again.

And when I die?

No matter where you are, no matter how dark or how isolated, you will not die alone; we will be with you, always, as we are tonight. We will hear your name, no matter how far away we are. In the green Deepings; in the heart of the Sea of Sorrows; in the ice of the Northern Wastes—there is no distance that can separate us or keep us from your side.

When you take your first life, we will be the hands that guide you; when you suffer your first doubts—or your hundredth—we will listen and offer comfort. You are one of us now, and nothing can remove that save the Lady herself should she so choose.

He felt a sharp and terrible pang, like a premonition. Has that ever happened?

The old man's laugh was rich and warm; it seemed to echo and linger long after it has passed. *It has never happened. Who could be one with us and betray us?*

He rose. *I could, old man. In all of the history of the Ko-vaschai, I could. I loved my brothers much, much more than I loved their Lady.* He bowed.

And then, although he knew it would not be welcome, he spoke a single word.

Arkady.

He lifted Salla as he rose. There were deaths in the desert that lay before them, and he had been given all the time he could expect for this singular act of mourning a loss that was three decades old.

He set his lute in her case; closed his eyes, and then lifted his shoulders, straightening them into a perfect line so that no one would see the burden he carried.

And he heard it, on the wind, free from fury, contempt, or loathing.

Kallatin.