Dozens of maps, hastily unburied from whatever draws and cabinets the steward’s predecessor had filed them away in to molder, were scattered across the table with enthusiastic despair, as though sheer volume could replace accuracy. The steward, a prematurely balding man and perpetual worrier, shot another glance at his unwanted guess and worried away a few more hairs. She was young, her skin even darker than his, and dangerously built, like an onyx statue of an angel’s herald. She was idly spinning her emptied wine goblet on the tabletop, the supreme embodiment of boredom.

“I’m afraid the maps are out of date, my Lady,” he fussed, sweat beading on his naked scalp. “The last cartographer was commissioned a season before the Unification, and he never returned. The woman before him went out nearly fifty years ago, and I would swear she scribbled in half the rivers and valleys based off hearsay and just made the other half up to fill the space.”

The goblet stopped, mid spin. The sudden absence disquieted the steward who longed desperately to be in his chambers, drawing a hot bath, and soaking in bath salts and perfume. “Surely, your maps of the pass cannot be so,” she lingered on the syllable, letting another bead of sweat roll down the steward’s temple, “Dissatisfactory?” Her voice was calm, and smooth like a sheet of oil.

“No, my Lady!” he all but shouted, then regaining composure for fear that in his eagerness to refute the damnation he’d stumbled into a worse pitfall. “Those maps are quite accurate, and are updated once every three years.” He fumbled to retrieve them, proffering the crisp paper like an offering. She took them from him, languidly scanning their contents. He fidgeted, “It is only that from the direction they were headed, it seems likely that they might try to hide up in the Golemel spine.”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “They will not. There is only one route open to them, and that is through the pass. You will send outriders with messages to the garrisons at Kirch, Vanholm, and all minor towns in between telling them to detain any aged woman covering her face accompanied by a younger man.” For the first time, any emotion other than boredom had entered her voice. At the word “aged,” there had been just a flash, an opening of the furnace door, of a hatred that burned inside her. The steward flinched. “Their quarry is injured. I want patrols off the main roads as well. They will avoid roads if they can. She isn’t stupid.”

“As you command, my Lady. I shall instruct them to interrogate the farms if any grain or livestock go missing,” she nodded her approval and, emboldened, he pressed on, “and I shall send riders up to the villagers in the mountains as well.” He quailed as rapidly as her expression darkened.

“Oh, you will?” she said, in deliberate calm but her Vaicouric accent, so perfect in her composure before, had slipped.

“My Lady, I only meant to be thorough,” he babbled, “and if you were wrong about their route of escape.” Instantly, he knew what he had said was wrong. If the thunderclap of anger that flashed across her features hadn’t been enough the fury in her voice was.

“If I were wrong, steward? If I were wrong?” He closed his eyes. “If I were wrong, and that whore pretending to be a spinster from Arenholm and that besotted fool of a constable decided to flee into the mountains, then they are dead.” The steward nodded frantically, but there must have shown some uncertainty in his features, either that or she mistook his fear for doubt. “You’re from the delta, aren’t you?” This time her voice was amused. He nodded again, daring to open his eyes. She had gotten to her feet, and was leaning forward, her knuckles on the table. “I thought at much. Then you only know the winters of the plains. Tell me, what do you know of winter?”

The steward spoke carefully, like a hunted fox who knew its path was strewn with metal jaws and pit falls. “The winter here is chilly, but nothing harsh?” he hazarded. Displeasure contorted her face. He hadn’t fallen, and that could not be forgiven.

“A delta winter is a toothless kitten compared to the crags, you old woman. They are both fools who’ve never known real winter which drops without warning and without mercy.”

The steward was actually trembling. He tried to hide his hands and bleated out weakly, “What if they take shelter with the villagers? Or steal food?”

“The Golemel are a superstitious and barbaric lot but they know how to treat thieves and strangers. If they are fool enough to challenge the mountains, they will end up frozen or strung up for the birds as vendigore”

“Venda-gore?” he said, his tongue stumbling over the hard syllables.

“Their word for the monsters inside Azil.” If “aged” had cracked the furnace door, then “Azil” tore it from its hinges. The steward froze in his cowardly shoes, watching with horrified fascination as her long, elegant fingers, perfect for playing the harp, curled over the mouth of the goblet crushing the soft metal.

All he could think of saying was “You’ve been there before?”

“I… knew a girl who came from there. Now, convey my orders.” She gave a predatory grin, all white enamel and pink gums as though they were display pieces that had never encountered the taint of food. The steward smiled a sickly smile and all but fled to follow her dictum.